

Written evidence submitted by Robert Gordon University (USC0012)

Introduction

1. Researchers from Robert Gordon University's (RGU) School of Applied Social Studies explored the pathways and influences that hindered and enabled current students from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education (HE) at the University.
2. Fieldwork was undertaken in June 2020 when universities continued to be locked down with many students furloughed from their part-time jobs.
3. The internally funded qualitative study focused on 48 students and the relationships, institutions and issues that shaped their decision and capacity to enrol and their subsequent experiences while at university.
4. Participants came from the most deprived 20% of postcodes (MD20), had experience of care and/or received an Access scholarship. The SFC definition of care experienced students is adopted as those who have any experience of being in care or are from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, no matter how short, including adopted children who were previously looked-after (SFC, 2020a). The SASS definition refers to estranged being 'permanently estranged from parents for at least 12 months before the start of the academic year we are assessing you for.' Students in our study were asked to self-identify as estranged, and many of the care experienced students said they were both care experienced and estranged.

Overview

5. This submission will focus primarily on the research findings into the enablers and obstacles encountered in routes into HE and the difficulties students have experienced since commencing their studies. Particular emphasis is placed upon financial matters that affect students both prior to, and during, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students' experiences of funding living costs

6. Students relied on a combination of student maintenance loans, bursaries from the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS), scholarships and part-time work to fund their living costs. Very few of the students received any regular financial contributions from their parents.
7. Part-time work was essential for most students, even those who received the maximum student loan and bursary. Some struggled to combine long part-time hours with their academic work creating difficulties in balancing work with studies.
8. Funding for living costs was a key barrier to progression and retention for all students. Financial matters influenced HEI decisions and was a source of worry for many students once they were at university.
9. There was a lack of knowledge and understanding of institutional and national forms of student support amongst the majority of interviewees.
10. RGU's support in the form of free/ discounted accommodation for first year halls of residence, Access scholarships, discretionary and hardship funding helped retain students, as did the Care Experienced Bursary (CEB) provided by SAAS. These helped to reduce the amount of part-time work required, allowing students to focus on their studies and spend time with families.

11. Care experienced students are entitled to the CEB and this can make a significant difference in reducing financial concerns. However, only about half the care experienced students had been able to access the CEB. Some older students were ineligible on the grounds of the previous age limit (removed in 2020-21), while some college entrants had been mistakenly encouraged to take on student loan debt when studying HNC/Ds at college, not realising they were eligible for the CEB.
12. Additionally, some students' reluctance to self-identify themselves as care experienced due to concerns about stigma meant they missed out on additional support they would have been entitled to.
13. Estranged students without experience of care or from non-MD20 postcodes faced considerable barriers to access, comparable to those of care experienced students. Students recalled the financial and emotional difficulties of being estranged whilst also having to tackle practical challenges to document their estrangement and support themselves with very little income. Ineligible for additional support targeted at care experienced students, the University's discretionary and hardship funds were vital.
14. Care experienced and estranged students recalled the difficulties of independent living at young ages, having to support themselves financially and set up home, often at the same time as sitting secondary school exams. They faced particular challenges negotiating utilities, finding guarantors for rental agreements, buying furniture etc.
15. Students with experiences of homelessness and being housed in temporary accommodation noted the difficulties this created for studying.
16. Issues relating to the wider UK finance system were mentioned by many of the care experienced/ estranged students who reported having been discouraged from entering HE for fear they would lose their benefits and may have to return any payments made to them. A number ended up in arrears with housing benefits this way, with some having lost tenancies.
17. Most student nurses said they had taken on part-time work out of necessity, noting they were ineligible for student loans and that the nurses' bursary did not cover all their living costs. Being paid for placements during the pandemic helped, particularly in making student nurses feel better valued.
18. Art school and architecture students noted that the costs for materials and studio space were an additional financial burden.

Covid related issues

19. Disadvantaged students' financial circumstances have worsened during the pandemic, with some having to rely on the university's Covid fund to help pay for their accommodation over the summer.
20. Students reported having fewer opportunities to raise income to fund living costs, reduced wages as a result of furlough, and greater competition for fewer part-time jobs. The lack of opportunities to accumulate summer savings is likely to impact on levels of financial hardship and retention, alongside increasing levels of poor mental health, in 2020/21.
21. The pandemic has exacerbated not just financial challenges for the students but also emotional and psychological ones. While some students were very happy to move home and see their families, others struggled to adjust to life back home, or had no home. It was particularly unsettling for first years who had only been in university a short time before the lockdown hit.

Research findings into access to university

22. The research highlighted different experiences and routes into university. Generally, those entering directly from school (all from S6) faced less pronounced obstacles, partly related to their higher attainment levels (vs those entering via college). The barriers they faced were more subtle, with issues around lower than expected attainment, subject choice (e.g. availability of Advanced Highers) and teaching practices impacting on degree subject and institution decisions.
23. Students who entered the university via college were notably more disadvantaged than those entering directly from school. College entrants had lower attainment, and more than half were early school leavers. They were more likely to live locally to the University and less likely to be from MD20 postcodes, despite their high levels of disadvantage. These included: disrupted education; adverse childhood experiences; (frequently undiagnosed) dyslexia; homelessness; parental addiction and mental health; bereavement; students' own mental health problems; bullying; truanting and involvement with Children's Hearings.
24. College entrants took a significant amount of time between leaving school and entering university. Being able to make multiple (often unsuccessful) attempts at FE and college-based HE courses was critical in their pathways, with students moving between courses and institutions, and in and out of education to care for families and build careers prior to entering RGU. Some women noted how pregnancy and childcare responsibilities had interrupted their college and university education, but said their children also motivated them to obtain a degree.
25. There was, however, evidence of duplication with some students undertaking multiple courses at the same qualification level. Low confidence levels impacted on rates of articulation with the majority of HNC students opting to enter first year rather than take direct entry.
26. Despite their precarious finances, few students raised the financial implications of taking longer to complete their degree, in terms of funding additional years of living costs, and in some cases having to pay tuition fees having used up their allotted SAAS funding.
27. Parental support and encouragement were key enablers of access among both school and college entrants, even though the majority of interviewees were the first in their family to go to university. Parents instilled in their children the value of education, with university and degree qualifications viewed as a route to a better life, a stable career and a secure income.
28. For participants without family to provide support, positive reinforcement and encouragement from school, college, work colleagues and other professionals were key in countering low confidence and self-esteem, combined with considerable determination to access university.
29. The additional costs of moving away from home to study were a key barrier for MD20 students relocating to another region. Younger students noted the financial and domestic benefits of remaining in the parental home, and of studying with friends. Several care experienced students expressed a desire to study further afield but were unable to due to financial barriers.
30. Adjusting to university life was more challenging for care experienced and estranged students, some of whom experienced social and academic difficulties, especially during

their first year at the University. Strong staff-student relationships with lecturers and personal tutors helped to counter this.

Obstacles and enablers for disadvantaged students

31. There are several themes that could be developed to enable more people from disadvantaged groups to study and complete degrees at HE institutions.
32. While students recognised the contribution of different funding schemes, they continued to face financial shortages resulting in a requirement to work in order to support living expenses. The subsequent work/study balance proved difficult to manage.
33. Disadvantaged students described a range of difficulties such as lack of self-confidence, paying for essentials such as food and housing, course materials and texts and wider financial concerns. These difficulties were exacerbated by the pandemic initially through furloughing and subsequent impact on local economies.
34. These financial impacts were increasing the reliance of students on university funding support.
35. Overall estranged students experienced the most severe challenges, in part as they frequently fall between funding gaps caused by the current restricted definitions surrounding funding eligibility. This issue ties into a sense that there should be wider eligibility for inclusion into widening access, and supporting funding, programmes.
36. Care experienced students mentioned personal difficulties in self-identifying as care experienced to access support, which highlighted the need for greater awareness of the Care Experienced Bursary among students, and college and university staff.
37. At local levels, students suggested a care experienced student network could provide valuable peer support.
38. Nationally, extending the Care Experienced Bursary to estranged students without experience of care would help tackle the significant financial challenges these students face, as would expanding accommodation discounts to include care experienced and estranged students from non-MD20 postcodes.
39. While some participants mentioned discouraging experiences within school, others referred to the help and support provided across the different educational levels. There was a sense that the different levels were working in isolation with guidance about HE and funding often inconsistent, contributing to HNC/D students taking out unnecessary loans or missing out on advanced entry opportunities.
40. A key theme raised by the research relates to the limitations of using SIMD as a proxy measurement for individual disadvantage. While the majority of interviewees came from MD20 postcodes, a significant minority were from less deprived postcodes and were some of the most disadvantaged in the sample. By contrast, a small number of MD20 students came from relatively privileged backgrounds.
41. The disproportionate involvement of participants studying caring professional and creative design programmes reflects wider patterns that highlight limited connections between people from disadvantaged backgrounds and STEM related professions that are considered to be more prestigious and exclusionary.

Conclusions

42. There are a number of concluding remarks drawn from the respondents' experiences.
43. The participating students were highly motivated, demonstrating great perseverance and resilience in the face of significant challenges including: adverse childhood experiences;

- care experience; estrangement; caring and parental responsibilities; financial hardship; early school leaving; additional support needs; bereavement and homelessness. These issues affected students from all backgrounds but were most pronounced among care experienced and estranged students. The diversity of experiences can be lost when disadvantaged students are considered within a generic category.
44. Pathways for students from less traditional backgrounds appear more complicated partly because the current articulation learning and financial pathways through education are not always clearly communicated to those facing the greatest obstacles. These participants were often not familiar with the terminology required to navigate through the application and funding processes.
 45. Finance was a major barrier to university for nearly all interviewees, both in terms of access and retention. The majority of interviewees received no regular financial support from parents, meaning that they relied on maintenance loans, scholarships, SAAS income assessed bursaries and nursing bursaries, and part-time work. Many respondents had struggled to access these funding arrangements and those who managed to do so often found them inadequate. Consequently, consideration should be given to appropriate targeting of resources to encourage greater participation of those from the most disadvantaged groups.
 46. The most disadvantaged students took the longest time between leaving school and entering university, often studying multiple FE and HE courses along the way. This meant the most financially disadvantaged students had to fund their living costs for longer.
 47. Interviewees frequently raised issues around the financial impact of the pandemic, including reductions in income as a result of furlough and a more challenging part-time jobs market. Unless additional funding is made available to these disadvantaged students, it is likely that there will be a surge in premature cessation of studies while potential applicants to university will be discouraged.
 48. Finally, the participants' backgrounds meant that the effects of ethnicity and gender on access, retention and subject preference were not considered within this project. Consequently, there is a need for further research to explore these intersectional impacts.

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