

# IMPROVING THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Responding to the needs of a post-Covid generation of students



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**UNITE  
STUDENTS**

## About this Report

This report summarises insights into the experiences of young people transitioning into higher education, offering recommendations for policymakers, higher education providers, schools and colleges and wider public services. It shares insights from three expert roundtables convened in August and September 2023 by Professor Edward Peck, the Government's Higher Education Student Support Champion for England. It also draws extensively on evidence from:

- Unite Students Applicant Index (2023): A weighted, representative survey of 2141 higher education applicants carried out by Unite Students in May 2023 via the Savanta student panel.
- A nationwide survey of 219 teachers and two in-depth focus groups with teachers in Bristol, carried out by We Are Futures for Unite Students in 2022.
- Research and analysis carried out by Dr Michelle Morgan, Dean of Students at UEL.

Other sources cited are noted in footnotes throughout the report.

The transition to higher education is a very broad topic and this report, by necessity, has a limited scope. It focuses exclusively on UK domiciled students transitioning to UK universities having recently left school, sixth form or further education. Within this, it tends to focus more strongly on schools and sixth forms than on further education.

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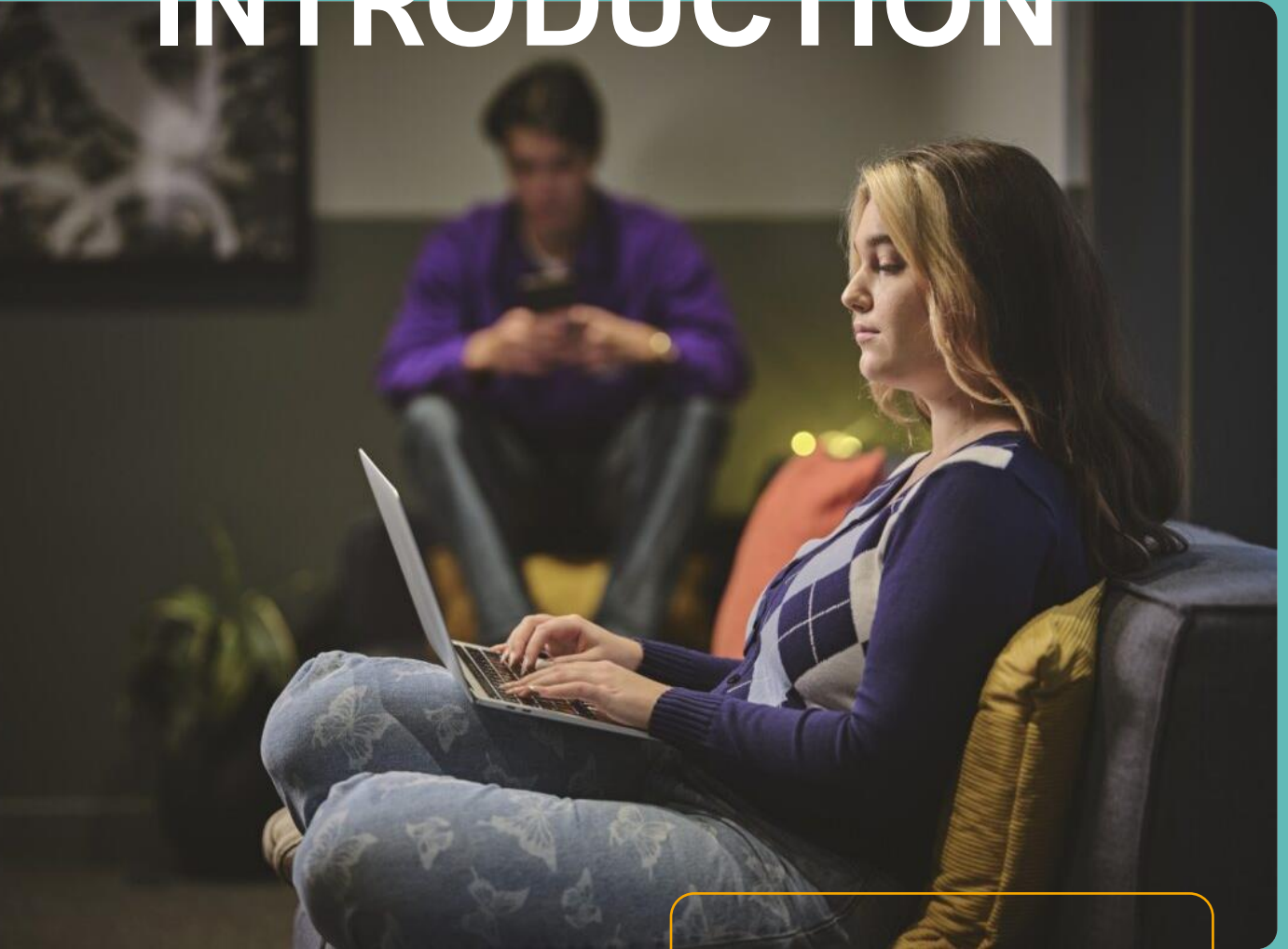
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# INTRODUCTION



The report is informed and **enriched** by institutional and individual student case studies which are included throughout.

## Introduction

School and college students studying full time at Level 3 (A-levels, T-levels, Scottish Highers etc.) are often well known to their educational institutions. This institutional knowledge extends beyond data and the application of formal processes; it can include broad and contextual insights about their circumstances known to individual teaching and support staff. For those with additional needs, and especially those with complex needs, this knowledge feeds into and augments the formal plans that schools and colleges are required or expected to compile. These document students' personalised support, offering structured arrangements in addition to accessing specialist services.

It is this level of personalisation - this rounded view of the student - that is often lost in the transition to higher education. The reasons for this are understandable. Universities operate on a much larger scale than most schools and colleges and, moreover, most university students are young adults who are learning to take more responsibility for enhancing their own wellbeing and seeking of support. Furthermore, large numbers of these students not only leave home but move considerable distances to universities, disrupting many of their family, social and professional networks. In addition to the impact this relocation may have on students, it also disrupts continuity of support, making it challenging for many higher education providers to build the depth of relationships with their wide range of feeder schools and colleges that would facilitate routine exchange of information.

The very real challenges around schools and colleges sharing the intelligence, both formal and informal, that they hold on their students are explored in this report. They can all too often lead to missed opportunities for higher education providers to tailor support to each student, in particular in the first few months after enrolment. Chances to anticipate and intervene, to optimise their potential and, more broadly, to create coherent pathways through which students can gradually acquire the skills needed for independent learning and living, may be lost.

The first two sections of this report summarise the challenges faced by students and their universities, with a focus on changes observed in cohorts starting university after the Covid pandemic. The final two sections collate recommendations in two areas: data sharing; and transition support. Both are considered systemically as well as examining the implications for individual schools, colleges, and higher education providers, policy makers and students themselves. The report is also informed and enriched by institutional and individual student case studies.

# CHALLENGES



**42%**

of 12-15 year olds  
experienced a decline in their  
social and emotional  
development during the  
pandemic.

## Learning and Independence Skills

**“My current students don’t know what it means to live independently. I have more concerns about them than I have ever had about other year groups. They just need so much support.” Secondary school teacher<sup>1</sup>**

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The Covid pandemic isolated many young people from friends and peer support networks leading, in some cases, to reduced opportunities to socialise and increased social anxiety.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence of new behavioural challenges since the pandemic, with some school and college students displaying less mature behaviour than would normally be expected at their age. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, this impact was particularly prevalent in the 2021 cohorts of Year 7 and 8 students.<sup>3</sup> A 2023 study by the Institute of Education (IOE) and Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that 42% of 12-15 year olds experienced a decline in their social and emotional development during the pandemic, some of which was related to changes and instability in parents’ employment.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, about 100,000 young people are missing from education since schools returned,<sup>5</sup> heightening many safeguarding risks.

Inequalities that existed before the pandemic appear to have widened since. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience symptoms such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression with increased severity because they did not have the same access to support as their peers.<sup>6</sup> Recent analysis by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) showed that there was a persistent attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged young people, and that this has widened since 2019 across all phases of education, including the 16-19 age group.<sup>7</sup>

It is likely that these consequences of the pandemic will have an impact on both the academic and social skills of those preparing to go onto higher education for years to come. Indeed, roundtable participants reported:

- more parental involvement in students’ higher education experience;
- less preparation for the pressures of living and studying independently;
- less engagement with in-person activities; and
- more disruptive and reckless adolescent behaviour.

However, it should not be assumed that all of the underlying issues faced by pre-university students have been solely driven by the pandemic. Contributors from schools, sixth forms and colleges provided information and examples of the strong role that traumatic lived experiences plays in underpinning mental health issues. Trauma can arise from experiences affecting young people such as unemployment, racism, family estrangement, poverty, violence and bereavement, some of which may have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

## Key Issues

### **Building positive connections with other people is a key concern for university applicants:**

A high proportion of undergraduates starting a course in 2022 reported concerns about interpersonal relationships. 41% were concerned about fitting in with new classmates and 30% about getting on with fellow students.<sup>8</sup> Applicants also report low levels of confidence when it comes to interpersonal conflict, with just under two thirds (64%) saying they would feel confident to manage a conflict with a housemate.<sup>9</sup> A 2022 study found that over half of students at Key Stage 2 reported lower self-efficacy, feeling less able to achieve their goals and manage their emotions and relationships.<sup>10</sup>

### **The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated young people's fears about living independently at university:**

Students are more focused than ever on the costs of studying and the impact on their future employment prospects.<sup>1</sup> Undergraduates starting a new course in 2022 reported a range of worries related to their finances. Nearly a third (30%) were concerned about the cost of living, with one in five (21%) reporting concerns around securing sufficient funding for their course and the same proportion being concerned about getting into debt. Similar proportions were concerned about fitting study around work commitments (20%) and the cost of travel to university (17%).<sup>8</sup> Some roundtable participants have seen an increasing social divide in student accommodation based on price, leading to feelings of marginalisation.

**More students have paid jobs and are working longer hours:** The proportion of students who take on paid employment unrelated to their course during term time has risen from 39% in 2019 to 55% in 2023. The mean hours worked per week have also risen from 4.8 to 7.5 during this time,<sup>11</sup> leaving less time to build social networks.

### **Schools and colleges use different language than higher education providers, and advice given may not represent current practice in higher education:**

Roundtable participants reported that schools, colleges, and higher education providers use different language around interventions to support student wellbeing. For example, secondary school teachers reported a move away from using the term 'resilience' which young people can perceive as them being left to manage problems without support. Instead, more schools are moving towards the language of 'coping strategies'.<sup>1</sup> A lack of alignment on terminology has the potential to confuse students when they first move to university, potentially acting as a barrier to accessing the right support. It was also acknowledged that it is a challenge for schools and colleges to stay up to date with the type, level, and description of support offered to students in higher education, which may lead to students feeling less confident about the transition.



**Coping with the level of study is one of the biggest challenges for students:**

There are also some major concerns for new undergraduates around coping with the level of study (43%), deficit of information about how to study at university (42%), and lack of confidence about their ability to study (32%). In addition, more than one in five (22%) of students reported that they were concerned about knowledge gaps in their prior learning.<sup>8</sup>

**The pandemic has led to learning loss:** There is evidence of significant learning loss over the course of the pandemic, with young people losing more than a third of their in-person learning time over the course of a year.<sup>12</sup> Roundtable participants feared that the impact of this learning loss will be felt unequally, with students from more disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing greater barriers to studying throughout the pandemic and lacking access to catch-up support. Indeed, a recent study has predicted that the consequences of the pandemic will have a longer term negative affect on GCSE attainment into the 2030s with a widening socio-economic gap in attainment.<sup>13</sup>

**There is uncertainty over which are the predominant drivers of these issues:** It is challenging for higher education providers to plan mitigations for these trends when their longevity – and the ways in which they may affect successive cohorts – are unclear and evidence of what works is still emerging.

**Students need support to adjust to different learning methods:** Roundtable participants reported that there is not always enough support for students to transition from the learning methods they were used to at school or college, where they were familiar with learning from textbooks and basic virtual learning environments but had limited contact with direct reference material. Learning in schools tends to be more scaffolded, with support to consolidate key learning points and more varied forms of feedback. Participants also noted that the closure of libraries and other community facilities have reduced students' opportunities to develop independent study skills.

**Higher education institutions are concerned about meeting the needs of neurodivergent learners:** In 2023, one in twenty higher education applicants (5%) reported a specific learning difficulty, nearly one in ten (8%) had ADHD and the same proportion were on the autism spectrum.<sup>9</sup> However, roundtable participants reported that academic staff can sometimes have limited awareness about how to meet the needs of neurodivergent students. Alongside students with mental health problems, neurodivergent students were less likely than their peers to disclose a health condition or disability to their higher education institution.<sup>5</sup>

**Many students move away from area of origin to study:** The UK is unusual in seeing – and to some extent encouraging – significant numbers of young adults relocating away from their family, social and professional networks of support when they start at university. Less than two thirds of applicants (63%) felt confident about registering with a GP at university and a similar proportion (60%) were confident about dealing with a medical emergency. LGBTQ+ applicants were less confident in each of these areas than their peers.<sup>5</sup>

This tradition also means that it is challenging for most higher education providers to build relationships with the range of schools and colleges from which they recruit students, meaning that direct sharing of information is rare. This reduces further the ability of schools, colleges, and higher education providers to create comprehension of and confidence in the specific support - type, level, and description – that will be available when they enrol at a particular institution. It also limits the information that universities receive about individual students that would enable them to put place the individual support that students may need, in particular in their early weeks.

**There are constraints on information sharing:** The wide dispersal of a majority of new students across the UK when they arrive at university is one part of the problem. Data protection legislation prohibits schools from routinely sharing information with higher education providers unless they have consent or they are sharing the information for a specific lawful purpose (including to prevent harm to a student). Nonetheless, nearly four in five (79%) of applicants would consent for at least some information to be shared with their higher education institution. This included information about health, disability, reasonable adjustments, status as a care experienced person and safeguarding information. 42% would give consent for any of this information to be shared, and 37% would give consent for some of it to be shared. However, more than one in ten (12%) would not consent for any information to be shared, and some groups of students are more reluctant for their data to be shared. LGBTQ+ students and students from mixed race and Asian backgrounds were less likely to give blanket consent to their information being shared.<sup>5</sup>

**Some students have concerns about disclosing sensitive information:** In a 2023 survey, over half (56%) of applicants with a disability or health condition had disclosed this to their university. One in four (26%) had not disclosed their health condition but planned to; one in five (18%) stated they had no plans to disclose. Applicants with mental health conditions and neurodivergent applicants were more likely to say they had no plans to disclose, with reasons including not wanting their family to know, not believing it would make a difference, or not believing they needed – or were entitled – to disclose because their condition was not formally diagnosed.<sup>5</sup> In some cases there may also be cultural implications and sensitivities which can disrupt disclosure.

However, there is some local evidence emerging that students who disclose their vulnerabilities and access specialist support through their higher education providers are more likely to continue and gain a higher degree classification than those who do not, and this would benefit from further study.

## Mental Health

**“It’s important that universities know about the measures put in place for students [with significant mental health issues]. There’s really tight wraparound care in schools and sixth forms. University students are adults, but the fact is that many of them are going to need some form of formalised support.”**

**Director of Sixth Form**

The Covid pandemic has had an impact on many young people’s development, but data from the NHS and other sources suggest that issues related to young people’s mental health are also being driven by an underlying longer-term trend. There has been a steady increase in self-reported mental health disorders in the past decade,<sup>14</sup> and pre and post Covid rates reflect this. In 2017, 12.5% of children aged 8-16 had a ‘probable mental health disorder’. This rose to rapidly between 2017 and 2020 and continued to climb slowly in the following year. In 2023 the prevalence was 20.3%.<sup>15</sup> Among young people aged 17-19, rates rose from 10% in 2017 to 17% in 2020; rates stabilised at 17.4% in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

Based on these figures, it can be assumed that the quantum of poor mental health amongst young people entering higher education seen at present is unlikely to decrease and may still grow. The pressures causing these trends appear to go well beyond Covid 19 and the current cost of living crisis - encompassing social media, academic pressures, international conflict and climate change - and may not abate in the foreseeable future. It will be some time before we understand fully the psychological and developmental impact of the pandemic on these generations and how it interplays with these underlying trends.

Initiatives to help schools and colleges respond to these mental health needs include: provision of guidance on a whole school approach to mental health; grants to establish senior mental health leads; establishing Mental Health Support Teams that work within schools and colleges<sup>16</sup>; and published resources<sup>17</sup> to support young people to look after their own mental health. Additionally, more than a million children and young people have been given access to NHS mental health support at school as part of the NHS Long Term Plan.

An early evaluation of Mental Health Support Teams in schools and colleges showed that these interventions were working well to support students with mild to moderate mental health support needs, but the challenges remained in supporting and referring students with more complex needs.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, these interventions may create additional expectations of the level of support they can expect as students move into higher education.

## Key Issues

**The prevalence of mental health problems among young people leaving school and college is rising:** One in five (19%) higher education applicants reported having a mental health condition in the context of a standard disability question.<sup>9</sup> However, when asked whether they had experienced any mental health issues in the past year the proportion was significantly higher. Nearly two in five (38%) reported experiencing anxiety, and 23% reported experiencing depression.<sup>5</sup> Secondary school teachers report that mental health is the most common concern that their students raise, followed by general anxiety about the future.<sup>1</sup>

**Exam related anxiety among school-age students is becoming more severe and has impacts for overall student mental health:** In the 2019/20 academic year, 35% of a sample of secondary school students showed a level of exam anxiety severe enough to meet the risk threshold for generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder.<sup>19</sup> A 2022/23 academic year sample by the same research group found that 42% to 63% showed a level of exam anxiety severe enough to meet risk thresholds for generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder and depression.<sup>20</sup>

**Poor mental health has contributed to disruption in students' learning and achievement:** Almost a third (30%) of 2023 applicants reported missing school or college during the last two years because of their mental health, with 7% missing more than four weeks.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it has been established that mental health difficulties between the ages of 11-14 negatively affect attainment at age 16.<sup>21</sup> As well as being a cause for concern in its own right, this effect may further exacerbate socioeconomic disadvantage, which already has a strong negative association with educational attainment.<sup>22</sup>



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE



Students often start higher education with an expectation that they will be able to access the same kind of support that they could draw on at school or college, **feeling disillusioned** when that help is not routinely available.

# Data Continuity and Data Sharing

**“If universities were given the information I’m given [about students] as head of sixth form, and there was someone designated at the university who could access the file of a student seeking support in great detail, I think that would be an ideal extension of what we do.” Director of Sixth Form**

## Case Study 1: Jamie

Jamie, a student with a history of attempting suicide, secured a place at a prestigious university. After Jamie had left the school, the sixth form lead contacted the parent to ask how they were finding university life and whether any further support was needed. The parent did not respond, but Jamie later shared their experience about dropping out of university with a national newspaper, citing a lack of support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The school - and Jamie - would have been happy to share data with the university if there had been an opportunity to do so, but they did not know how to go about it.

## Case Study 2: Graysine Academy School

During a single school year, Graysine Academy School lost two students in the same year group to knife crime, which understandably had an impact on the mental health of their peers. It took a long time for many of the affected students to seek support through the school’s access to local counselling services. However, the school expressed concern that if they shared this information with UCAS through the extenuating circumstances section of the application form, universities may assume the students were connected to knife crime despite this not being the case.

As a result of this concern, students who had been affected by the death of their peers were not able to have their extenuating circumstances taken into account, and had to re-negotiate their counselling support on their own when they arrived at university.

## Case Study 3: Morgan

Having experienced prolonged abuse from a family member and suffering severe mental health repercussions as a result, Morgan missed the majority of lessons at GCSE level and had a history of self-harm. Despite this, they were able to obtain good grades. Their secondary school was able to hand over their case file to their sixth form college, including information about their history and mental health condition. As a result, the sixth form put a plan in place to respond when the student was absent from lessons. This system worked well, keeping Morgan safe and supported throughout sixth form.

In this case, the sixth form college was able to support Morgan’s UCAS application by sharing the student’s extenuating circumstances, and the impact this had had on their academic performance. Morgan was accepted to a Russell Group university and thrived in a university environment.

### Case Study 4: Niki

Niki applied to university in 2021. They lived with their grandparents, who had not been to university and were unfamiliar with the support options available in a university environment. In light of their neurodiversity, and being the first in their family to attend university, Niki's school requested that the university keep them in the same accommodation for the whole three-year duration of the course. This request was underpinned by the school sharing the relevant data with the university. The university accepted this request and additionally gave Niki the opportunity to visit the accommodation in advance of moving in, to become more familiar with new surroundings prior to the busy and often overwhelming move-in period.

This section of the report is ostensibly about data sharing approaches, but it is equally about individual students and the need to respond to the breadth and complexity of their circumstances and requirements. The following student case studies are offered as a balance to the important work of considering standardised solutions for data sharing, and as a lens for the evaluation of different approaches. Ultimately, data sharing solutions can only be truly effective if they lead to an improved experience for these students and others like them.

The current position on data sharing between schools, colleges, and higher education is fragmented, with no one approach providing a full solution and with some significant gaps.

Roundtable participants noted that students often start higher education with an expectation that they will be able to access the same kind of support that they could draw on at school or college, feeling disillusioned when that help is not routinely available. Teachers reported that some students are concerned about what will happen to their support structures when they move into higher education. While there is a need to manage expectations among students, there are further opportunities to optimise the support that can be provided through better sharing of data, as the student case studies above illustrate.

The UCAS application is usually the first point at which a university or college receives information about a student. In addition to education, employment background and equality monitoring information, it provides an opportunity for students to disclose information about a disability or additional need. Students can also tell the university about certain personal circumstances, such as care experience.

For the 2023 entry cycle, UCAS added seven new questions to the application providing applicants with the opportunity to declare if they have parental responsibilities, are estranged, or have been in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM). UCAS also offers a contextual data service which provides data about an applicant's school or college and local area, such as the proportion of students in receipt of FSM and average GCSE attainment.

More recently, UCAS has launched its modernised contextual data service to provide a more rounded understanding of a student's background. However, the UCAS application does not currently offer the opportunity for the school or college to share, with the student's permission, the full breadth of their data with the student's confirmed higher education provider, albeit school and college references may cover some of this ground if it represents a mitigating circumstance. Moreover, there is no standard approach to sharing relevant safeguarding data, including experience of trauma.

UCAS declarations are crucial for linking prospective students with support services in higher education, but they often need to be supplemented by targeted pre-enrolment surveys administered by higher education providers. Discussions are currently being facilitated with UCAS, HE providers, FE colleges and schools to understand what additional information might be collected, the means to do so, and how this might be shared in the transition to higher education; the contents of these surveys will be instructive here. Of course, there is no guarantee that applicants will disclose more in them than in their UCAS application.

Jisc is currently exploring the feasibility of a single student identifier (SSI) to help bring together datasets related to individual learners, providers, and government to manage transition points more effectively. This may solve the problem, but not in the short to medium term.

However, neither of these processes easily support the sharing of detailed mental health and other relevant data, nor do they give students full control over the process. There may be a case for a data passporting approach that includes data on:

- a student's support network: trusted contact, mental health services used and other support contacts;
- mental health issues/neurodiversity, including triggers and symptoms; and
- wellbeing issues: areas of life impacting wellbeing and strategies to support wellbeing.

Such passport approaches are being developed currently by IT providers and some may be available soon. If adopted, the challenge here may be having a standard specification which means that information can be shared regardless of the provider platform. There may be a role for the one agency - UCAS, Jisc, or the DfE - holding the ring here as the technology develops.



## Recommendations

**Develop and evaluate new ways to draw on schools' contextual knowledge of students when considering student support and adjustments:** Current methods of sharing data work well in some circumstances - for example, sharing diagnosed conditions. However, broader factors which may compound these conditions, such as family circumstances or traumatic events, are more difficult to capture and share in a systematic way. There is also limited opportunity for schools and colleges to share information about successful strategies and interventions that have benefitted the student. Further work is underway, in collaboration between the Higher Education and Further Education Student Support Champions, to develop and evaluate solutions to these challenges, taking into account the potential offered by existing documents such as Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Individual Learning Plans (ILPs).

**Focus on continuity of support:** Data shared through the UCAS application is routinely used in admissions, but there is no standard approach to the way it is used by higher education providers once the student has enrolled. There may be further opportunities to optimise the use of UCAS data, supplemented by additional data sharing approaches such as Single Student Identifiers and Data Passporting as outlined above. In each of these cases, continuity of support across the transition to university should be a core consideration.

**Provide further guidance for students and teachers regarding the sharing of data:** Evidence from teachers, including student case studies, reveal that common myths and misconceptions are constraining the sharing of important data. This may be a particular concern when sharing data via UCAS due to (misplaced) fears that it will affect the likelihood of students receiving an offer. New guidance that is communicated widely within schools and colleges would help to mitigate these concerns and encourage the appropriate sharing of data. Furthermore, these data about vulnerabilities could be shared only after an offer has been accepted.

**Consider whether schools, sixth forms and colleges could flag further available information in the application process:** In some cases, further information may be available that is not directly relevant to the application process but which would be useful when the student enrolls. It may be useful to explore the feasibility and usefulness of such a flagging system.

**Consider a more widespread use of standardised pre-arrival questionnaires:** Many higher education providers build their own pre-arrival questionnaires into their enrolment process, and some make ongoing use of student-led development plans as a learning tool. There is already work underway across the sector to encourage greater standardisation of the pre-arrival information collected.<sup>23</sup> This can include standard questionnaires that relate to formal assessment of anxiety, for example the Multidimensional Test Anxiety Scale, although there are mixed views on the efficacy of doing so. Further standardisation of these questionnaires would allow for clearer understanding of students' needs at a national level.

Moreover, it opens up opportunities for students themselves to be more active in their development by encouraging the ongoing use of personal development planning, as illustrated in Case Study 5.

### **Case Study 5: London South Bank University: Personal Development Plans**

London South Bank University (LSBU) has introduced a personal development plan designed to help students take a proactive approach to their academic success and to share holistic information about their support needs and circumstances. The PDP is an interactive platform that provides embedded signposting, with a specific focus on students from underrepresented backgrounds who may lack confidence, awareness or permission to access academic and support services. Students' responses to the PDP questions actively link them with the wide range of services and support available and provide deep understanding of student need, progress and the impact of university interventions.

Completion of the PDP is a valuable and important educational activity in its own right, encouraging students to reflect on their own development needs and track their progress over time. The initiative is associated with an 8.8% higher continuation rate from Level 4 to Level 5 between the 21/22 and 22/23 academic years. In the first half of the 23/24 academic year, the PDP tool identified 414 students declaring an undisclosed disability and 616 students reporting experiences of care or estrangement.

If students choose, the contents of the PDP can be shared with personal tutors as well as support services, offering an opportunity for students to be understood by their higher education provider in a more personalised way which complements standard data categories. This provides a better sense of what a student actually needs at any point in time, and supports a move from a reactive to a proactive student support model. Moreover, it yields valuable insights on the student body as a whole, allowing services to keep pace with rapidly changing needs.

## Improving Transition Support

**"They've got used to the safety net of home and school, and they don't want to lose it – especially those with mental health issues and anxiety. Not having support is a real fear. They also have concerns about their social wellbeing. They want a community and to feel like they belong." Secondary school teacher<sup>1</sup>**

Insight collected through the roundtables suggested that the UK higher education sector has not yet fully responded to the rapid changes in learning, social, and independence skills among school leavers. There is still a tendency to concentrate on the first few weeks of the first year when considering transition activities and support. Development of academic skills, social integration, and the challenges of independent living are too often addressed in silos, leading to a complex offer for students to navigate, potentially overwhelming them such that they do not absorb key aspects. This complexity can be particularly challenging for disabled students.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, increasing student diversity, more complex support needs, and widening gaps in terms of disadvantage are not always fully considered when planning transition support. It may be that for many students the initial induction period should focus not on intensive information giving but on building affiliation between the student and the higher education provider; creating a sense of belonging may be central here. Schools and college can support these efforts by preparing students for higher education, but this will only be fully effective if they are up to date with higher education practices and, in particular, student support approaches.

## Recommendations

**Develop better understanding between the sectors and more standardised approaches in higher education:** Greater standardisation within each sector, and more collaboration between sectors, would help to underpin better transition support by making it easier for all parties to co-ordinate their approach. In practice this may involve: higher education providers offering regular briefings to local schools and colleges; sharing insights and practices in both directions through national organisations; and extending the remit of widening access partnerships to focus more strongly on the transition to university.

Sector-wide agreement on best practices - and terminology - in supporting the transition to university should also be considered. This would help schools and colleges to work more closely with higher education on transition activities and would offer enhanced clarity for new students.

**Focus first on engagement and belonging:** Higher education courses typically include introductory content to support independent study skills. However, this is often delivered over a relatively short period of time and at the same time as students are adjusting to the demands of settling in, making new friends and, in many cases, living independently for the first time. It is difficult for students to learn new skills when they are going through such a profound change and may be feeling anxious and alienated.

Noting the increased challenges that new students now face in terms of social skills and adapting to independent living raised in Section 1, it would be beneficial to focus more strongly on belonging and affiliation at first before introducing extensive content on study and other skills. Without this revised early emphasis, there is a risk that students become socially isolated, leading to poor mental health and, in some cases, to withdrawal from their studies.

**Work collaboratively to support the social aspects of transition to higher education:** Given the loss of socialisation and higher levels of social anxiety resulting from the pandemic, a more collaborative approach could help new students to integrate into the student community. This may include accommodation teams and private accommodation providers as well as student unions and academic departments, enabling higher education providers to offer more holistic approaches to community building.

**Co-ordinate induction activities across the institution:** Students can become overwhelmed by the competing demands of different services and departments in the first few weeks of their course. This can be a particular challenge for neurodivergent students<sup>25</sup> and disabled students more generally.<sup>24</sup> Further co-ordination of activities between different departments would benefit new students, especially in larger or more devolved universities. This co-ordination should also extend to the way in which these activities are communicated.

**Optimise pathways for students who chose to study close to their place of origin:** As noted above, the UK higher education sector is an outlier, compared to other countries, in expecting the majority of new school-leaver students to move away from their previous place of residence. This is likely to remain a feature of the UK system for the foreseeable future, albeit the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) may further increase the number of so-called 'commuter students'. For these students who choose to study close to where they were brought up, provision of more guidance should be possible to help them navigate their transition. Moreover, in areas where local progression is more common, higher education providers may wish to develop a more planned and structured approach to transition that starts during Level 3 study (or earlier) and extends further into the first year of higher education.



**Consider creative and targeted approaches to mitigate cost-of-living concerns:**

Financial issues can represent a significant barrier for some students in the transition to university, both in developing their independent study skills and in acquiring social networks. Concerns about financial matters can negatively affect students' mental health both before and during higher education study. Innovative and targeted approaches to meeting these needs can be very effective in supporting the transition to student life, as Case Study 6 illustrates.

**Ensure that approach to transitions keeps pace with the diversity of the student body:**

A culturally competent and inclusive approach is essential to ensure that international students, and other groups of students at risk of marginalisation, are able to feel a sense of belonging<sup>26</sup> as illustrated by Case Study 7.

**Case Study 6: Anglia Ruskin University: Books Plus**

Anglia Ruskin University ran a scheme called Books Plus to provide all home and EU undergraduates £400 in credit per year to spend on study resources, participation in the university experience through sports, clubs and societies, and bikes to help with commuting. This was undertaken in partnership with JS Group, who run student shops on campus and online, enabling students to use their ID card to spend their credit. Evaluation showed that:

- 96% of students said it relieved financial worries
- 90% said they got more out of their university experience
- 81% said it helped them complete their course
- 79% said it freed up money for other purposes.

The initiative supported retention and continuation as well as the sense of belonging reported by students.

**Case Study 7: University of Kent: Living Black at Kent**

The University of Kent established a 'Living Black at Kent' working group to address the findings of the Living Black at University report. One of the aims of this group, which included several different departments and the students' union, was to diversify acclimatisation activities and to ensure culturally relevant services were available for UK and international Black students. Activities included a well-received food tasting event that led to the launch of a West Indian micro-brand, 'Three Little Birds'. A welcome booklet was developed, offering advice from current students on culturally relevant local resources and societies.

# CONCLUSION AND REFERENCES



**Three key priorities** arise from the recommendations: taking a multi-sector approach, maintaining a holistic view of students, and learning from good practice.

## Conclusion

It is inevitable that a report with such a broad scope should generate so many and such varied recommendations. Most of the issues these recommendations seek to address have been precipitated or exacerbated by the Covid pandemic and, like the pandemic itself, these legacy effects will require a sustained and a collaborative effort to address.

Three key priorities arise from the recommendations: taking a multi-sector approach, maintaining a holistic view of students, and learning from good practice. In addition to the specific recommendations of this report, a wider adoption of these priorities will serve us - and our students - well over the coming years.

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