



WARWICK
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

**SOCIAL MOBILITY
STUDENT RESEARCH HUB**

CONFERENCE

11 SEPTEMBER 2024



✉ socialmobilityhub@warwick.ac.uk

🌐 <https://warwick.ac.uk/study/outreach/studentprojects/>

WELCOME!

We're excited to showcase the fantastic research our students have been doing around themes of widening participation, diversity, and inclusion. The Social Mobility Student Research Hub was created to open doors to research opportunities for students from groups that are currently underrepresented in higher education, including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

In this report, you'll find abstracts summarising the amazing work of our student researchers, offering a glimpse into the wide-ranging and impactful projects they've undertaken.

Thank you to all who have been part of this journey – your contributions are invaluable as we work together to make higher education more inclusive for everyone!

Conference organising committee

Dr Ellis Ryan
Dr Tammy Thiele

Dr Aicha Hadji-Sonni
Carys Hill
Youn Affejee



KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr Becky Morris is an Associate Professor in the School of Education, Learning and Communication Sciences. She is the Co-Director of Postgraduate Research and the Widening Participation Lead for the Education Studies Department. Becky's research interests include education and social policy, inequalities and social justice, the teaching workforce, widening participation, and English/literacy. Prior to her career in higher education, Becky was a secondary English teacher, and she continues to work closely with schools, colleges, teachers and young people through her research.

TIMETABLE

10:00	WELCOME
10:05	 KEYNOTE: Dr Rebecca Morris
10:20	SESSION 1 - Student Experience - Chair Youn Affejee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Capital and the Social Hierarchy: An Exploration of Student Experience. <i>Isabelle Topalli</i> • Autistic Widening Participation Medical Students: How do they get on? <i>Caitie Selwa</i> • Are trans and non-binary students excluded from sports at universities? If so, how can we combat this? <i>Jay Jones</i>
11:05	BREAK
11:15	SESSION 2 - Breaking Barriers - Chair Carys Hill <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Loans: A Barrier to Higher Education for Muslims. <i>Abidah Subhan</i> • How Imposter Syndrome Affects Students from Ethnic Minority and Low-income Backgrounds. <i>Aesha Abdalla</i> • Does AI bridge the Gap? A Study on How AI Supports Disadvantaged Students in Achieving Academic Excellence. <i>Kyla Nwachukwu</i> • The Hidden Cost of Disability. <i>Scarlett Timlett</i>
12:15	LUNCH + POSTERS
13:00	SESSION 3 - Journeys to Higher Education - Chair Dr Aicha Hadji-Sonni <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the Impact of Financial Constraints on the Academic Journey of Working-Class Students at Warwick University. <i>Amy Russell</i> • A Comprehensive Study on the Pathways and Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students in Higher Education. <i>Jessica He</i> • Why are PGT WP Students Withdrawing More, Attaining Less and Earning Less than UG WP Students? <i>Elliott Wooden</i> • Which establishments on the University of Warwick campus are safe spaces for students? <i>Sage Dunn</i>
13:55	FINAL DISCUSSION



COLLECTION OF ABSTRACTS

ABSTRACT LIST

ORAL PRESENTATIONS

- Cultural Capital and the Social Hierarchy: An Exploration of Student Experience. *Isabelle Topalli*
- Autistic Widening Participation Medical Students: How do they get on? *Caitie Selwa*
- Are trans and non-binary students excluded from sports at universities? If so, how can we combat this? *Jay Jones*
- Student Loans: A Barrier to Higher Education for Muslims. *Abidah Subhan*
- How Imposter Syndrome Affects Students from Ethnic Minority and Low-income Backgrounds. *Aaasha Abdalla*
- Does AI bridge the Gap? A Study on How AI Supports Disadvantaged Students in Achieving Academic Excellence. *Kyla Nwachukwu*
- The Hidden Cost of Disability. *Scarlett Timlett*
- Understanding the Impact of Financial Constraints on the Academic Journey of Working-Class Students at Warwick University. *Amy Russell*
- A Comprehensive Study on the Pathways and Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students in Higher Education. *Jessica He*
- Why are PGT WP Students Withdrawing More, Attaining Less and Earning Less than UG WP Students? *Elliott Wooden*
- Which establishments on the University of Warwick campus are safe spaces for students? *Sage Dunn*

POSTER PRESENTATIONS

- Understanding how undergraduate young adult carers are supported in higher education by comparing russell Group and non-russell Group universities. *Sandra Akyeampong-Asante*
- Does AI bridge the Gap? A Study on How AI Supports Disadvantaged Students in Achieving Academic Excellence. *Kyla Nwachukwu*

Cultural Capital and the Social Hierarchy: An Exploration of Student Experience

Isabelle Topalli, University of Warwick

This study considers the impact of prior cultural capital (lived experience) on students' social mobility and experience at the University of Warwick. Based on literature from the fields of sociology, psychology and education, this report highlights the importance of cultural capital in higher education. It is documented that widening participation (WP) students struggle to connect with students from other social classes due to the cultural differences offered by a privileged upbringing. Two semi-structured group interviews were conducted, with both WP and non-WP students, to investigate how they perceive the impact of their upbringing on their social connections. The research finds that students from less privileged backgrounds are likely to feel 'left behind' at university, as they feel that students with similar cultures tend to 'stick together' socially. A lack of cultural capital causes a divide between WP and non-WP students, creating a barrier to both social mobility and, ultimately, the further development of their cultural capital. The study undeniably finds that the British education system has a duty to reduce the impact of a privileged upbringing in the quality of university life, and that more resources should be dedicated to improving disadvantaged students' cultural capital in a variety of ways.

Autistic Widening Participation Medical Students: How do they get on?

A study exploring the experiences of autistic individuals from widening participation backgrounds when applying to, and when starting, the graduate-entry medicine degree at the University of Warwick.

Caitie Selwa, University of Warwick

Widening participation into medical school is a well-researched topic, there is little research into the experiences of neurodiverse medical students, and there is no published research combining the two. This study investigated both, with the research question of: What are the experiences of autistic individuals from widening-participation backgrounds when getting into the University of Warwick Medical School? Eleven participants completed an online survey which included both closed and open questions. The researcher used the survey platform (Qualtrics) to analyse the quantitative data, and the qualitative data was analysed by taking heed of Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis methodology criteria. One of the main findings within this study was the difficulty in researching finances for medical school. Another finding was that most prospective students lack support when applying and transitioning to study medicine. Although, between one and three students cited support from medical professionals during different parts of the application process. Lastly, two thirds of participants reported feeling 'overwhelmed' as well as 'excited' on their first day of medical school.

This study can be deemed a pilot study given the small sample size and time constraints. This study only included individuals who were successful in gaining entry to the degree, and it was also limited to graduate-entry students at one university. The researcher recommends that medical schools create a widening participation and disability group which reaches out to, and supports, prospective applicants and successful offer holders. The researcher also recommends that medical schools review their online content in relation to their medical degrees, and ensure that the content is comprehensive, clear, and easy to navigate.

Are Trans and Non-binary Students Excluded from Sports? If so, How can we Prevent this?

Jay Jones, University of Warwick

This study investigates whether or not transgender and non-binary students feel excluded within sports at their university, and how to improve the situation using the feedback and data gathered from a survey. The study builds on existing research regarding transgender sports participation and consolidates the idea that exclusion is a common problem. One of the original objectives was to organise an inclusive sports day, but this proved extremely difficult, and demonstrated the obstacles that can occur without the full practical and financial backing of the university or other institutions.

The study involved an online questionnaire where 19 participants gave feedback on their experiences, and the results show that although they want to participate in sports at university, transgender and non-binary students feel excluded and unsafe. The report makes recommendations for universities, such as ensuring the availability of gender-neutral changing facilities and offering training to sports clubs, and also highlights the importance of inclusive practice.

Student Loans: A Barrier to Higher Education for Muslims

Abidah Subhan, University of Warwick

The majority of students fund for university using interest-based government loans from Student Finance England (SFE). For many Muslims, this poses an issue as being involved in interest-based finances is prohibited in Islam. This has variable impacts on Muslims including having to find alternative funding or not being able to attend university altogether. Many do take out loans but experience distress whilst making this decision. This study involved researching Muslims in these positions to determine whether the interest-based Higher Education funding system conflicts with religious beliefs and impacts their accessibility to Higher Education. An online survey was shared with 15 participants and interviews were conducted with 2 participants. Results highlighted that most respondents felt some form of distress regarding funding for university due to feelings of conflict with religious beliefs. Of those who did not attend university, many felt their career and education goals were impacted. Some participants attended university but were not able to have a desired university experience due to limited financial situations, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Many felt appropriate solutions would include increased financial support from Higher Education institutes as well as support to move towards an alternative student finance system that does not involve interest.

Breaking Barriers: How Imposter Syndrome Affects Students from Ethnic Minority and Low-income Backgrounds

Aaasha Abdalla, University of Warwick

This paper will focus on ways imposter syndrome affects students from ethnic and low socioeconomic backgrounds' University experience and personal development. Imposter syndrome was first recognised amongst high achieving woman, in an article by Clance and Imes (1978, 1987) but was later adapted by Harvey in 1982 to include all genders in despite of their success. Imposter syndrome is not classified as a clinical condition, however, it can still have overlapping symptoms with other mental health symptoms. Some of these symptoms include psychological distress, anxiety, and dismissal of positive feedback (Bess, 2023). Imposter syndrome does not discriminate however it may affect marginalised groups more often due to systematic challenge as suggested by current research.

The research was conducted using an online questionnaire where participants self recruited using volunteered sampling. The questionnaire was advertised using an invitation email that was sent to relevant university bodies with a link that directed participants to the questionnaire. All participants were informed of the ways in which their data would be stored and collected via the participation information leaflet. Informed consent was given as one of the first questions in the questionnaire. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analysed. The research found that all participants have experienced at least one of the recognised themes of imposter syndrome and participants have mixed personal and academic experiences because of this. Some participants raised concerns about the understandability of the questionnaire and therefore this limits the validity of the findings. Universities should make a more conscious effort to support students from Widening participation backgrounds in settling into the prestige of university whilst maintaining their self esteem and personal experiences.

Does AI bridge the gap?

A Study on How AI Supports Disadvantaged Students in Achieving Academic Excellence

Kyla Nwachukwu , University of Warwick

This study explores whether using AI tools in academic work by students from low socio-economic backgrounds should be seen as cheating or as a legitimate support tool. Previous research, like Hlosta et al. (2021), shows that AI can help disadvantaged students improve their pass rates, but the overall impact on academic success and integrity hasn't been fully explored. We conducted a survey using Qualtrics, targeting Warwick Business School students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The survey, shared through the widening participation network alongside other networks, included questions about how students use AI tools and how these tools affect their academic performance. Out of 16 responses, 10 were valid and analysed. The results showed that ChatGPT and Grammarly are the most commonly used AI tools, especially for proofreading and organizing content. Students reported that these tools made their work more efficient and boosted their confidence, especially in writing and research. However, they also raised concerns about relying too much on AI, potential plagiarism, and academic integrity. The study suggests using AI as a supportive tool and aligning its use with trusted sources. While AI can improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged students, further research with larger samples and clear ethical guidelines is needed.

The Hidden Cost of Disability

Scarlett Timlett, University of Warwick

This project explores the lesser discussed costs and barriers for disabled students in higher education. Previous studies have explored the increased financial costs for disabled students and the gaps in support offered by university services. This study examines the hidden labour for disabled students including the time cost, mental health effects and extra energy involved in their university experience. Over the course of four semi-structured interviews and a survey, this study investigated the experiences of disabled people under the three broad areas of time and organisation, mental health, and financial costs.

Thematic analysis of responses has revealed common hidden costs for disabled students involving the effort of ensuring support and accessibility, the time taken organising day-to-day activities and the mental health impact of insufficient support and social isolation. The impact of these costs is exacerbated due to lack of understanding from peers and academics and by a culture of work that ignores the importance of rest. Going forward, this study provides recommendations focused on changing dehumanising aspects of applying for support, building understanding around extra work that goes into being a disabled student and addressing the isolation of inaccessibility.

Understanding how undergraduate young adult carers are supported in higher education by comparing russell group and non-russell group universities

Sandra Akyeampong-Asante, University of Warwick

This research poster examines the experiences of young adult carers at Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities through a case study. Various scholars found that young adult carers faced challenges balancing their academic and caring responsibilities, which impacts their wellbeing. A funding gap between Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities has been identified by researchers. However, there is a lack of literature on effective support universities can provide to young adult carers. To gain a better insight, two participants attending a Russell Group and non-Russell Group university were recruited from young adult carer charities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and three key codes were developed using NVivo coding. The codes focused on the participants' ability to balance their caring responsibilities alongside their education and obtain financial and wellbeing support. The findings indicate that young adult carers at Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities lacked specific financial or wellbeing resources and are often unaware of available services. The participants expressed differing perspectives on balancing their academic and caring responsibilities. Overall, Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities do not have an effective approach when distributing support to undergraduate young adult carers. Addressing this issue may involve an increased advertisement of services, statistical recognition, and providing bursaries specifically for young adult carers.

Understanding the Impact of Financial Constraints on the Academic Journey of Working-class Students Attending the University of Warwick

Amy Russell, University of Warwick

For many working-class students, university life encompasses far more than lectures and assignments: it involves a complex balancing act between financial survival and the pursuit of academic goals. This study examines the significant impact of financial constraints on students at the University of Warwick, highlighting how economic hardship affects every aspect of their academic experience. Based on six in-depth qualitative interviews, the research reveals the often-hidden sacrifices these students endure, from missing lectures to prioritise rent payments, to forgoing social gatherings and extracurricular activities due to financial constraints. Such pressures lead to notable mental health challenges, including elevated stress and feelings of isolation, as students navigate the constant struggle of meeting basic needs while striving for academic success. Yet, when asked whether they would trade their working-class background for a more privileged life, many students expressed a deep sense of pride in their identity, valuing the resilience they have developed over the relative ease of greater financial security. By illuminating these often-invisible challenges, this research provides a crucial perspective on the pervasive inequalities within higher education. The findings highlight the need for a more equitable and understanding academic environment that not only recognises but also celebrates these students' exceptional perseverance and commitment.

Breaking Barriers: A Comprehensive Study on the Pathways and Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students in Higher Education.

Jessica He, University of Warwick

This study explores the experiences of first-generation students at Warwick University, focusing on academic preparedness, financial barriers, social integration, and career aspirations. Existing literature highlights challenges faced by first-generation students, including deficiencies in academic preparation, financial constraints, and social isolation. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines survey data (N=30) with in-depth interviews (N=4) to provide a comprehensive understanding of these issues.

The findings reveal that both Warwick Scholars and non-scholars experience similar levels of under preparedness, despite pre-university interventions. Financial pressures significantly influence educational choices and contribute to family-driven stress. Social integration varies, with some students feeling isolated, while others find community through extracurricular activities. Career aspirations are hindered by limited networking opportunities, underscoring the need for tailored resources.

The study underscores the necessity for more inclusive and targeted support systems to address the multifaceted challenges faced by first-generation students. While the research provides valuable insights, limitations include a small sample size, suggesting the need for broader studies. Recommendations include enhancing visibility of support services, increasing mentorship opportunities, and providing tailored career resources to better support first-generation students.

Why are PGT WP Students Withdrawing More, Attaining Less and Earning Less than UG WP Students?

Elliott Wooden, University of Warwick

In 2014, it was announced student loans for those under 30 were to be available for those wishing to study at postgraduate level for the academic year 2016/17. Before this, there were no loan provisions and scholarships for postgraduate taught (PGT) courses were scarce. This project sought to investigate how the unique structure of PGT finance acts as a barrier to PGT study at Warwick. Building on pre-existing literature – which highlights the importance of funding in students' decision making regarding PGT study – this project analysed secondary data and based on this data, designed and piloted a survey (N=2) to investigate areas currently not captured by other data collection methods. Based on these responses, a small audit of information, advice and guidance was performed, which highlighted failures in the central scholarship page and inconsistencies within departments. This project recommends a PG strategy be formed as part of the Access and Participation Plan orientated towards success beyond enrolment and graduation and recommends a commitment to further data collection, both with admissions and cross sector partners. It concludes by identifying development of the survey to better identify undergraduate experiences which may indicate potential sites for targeted intervention, further ensuring PGT students with WP characteristics are able to achieve and succeed before and after graduation.

Which establishments on the Warwick University campus are safe spaces for students?

Sage Dunn, University of Warwick

This project aims to explore which establishments on Warwick University campus are safe spaces for students. I will discuss what criteria make a space safe or unsafe for different groups, and previous research into Warwick campuses safe spaces. The project explores how certain spaces on campus make students feel based on interviews with Warwick University students. The interviews asked these students questions to deduce what their opinions are on the businesses that Warwick has on its campus, based on pricing, clientele, ethos, utility etcetera. The project explores the option of changing businesses is that these students didn't feel comfortable into businesses that these students feel would be more useful, comfortable and beneficial for the campus. The project ends with these proposals, along with a visual project to see what this may look like on campus, and reasoning for these proposed changes. This project concludes that multiple businesses on Warwick's campus should undergo major changes or be replaced by other businesses in order to keep the campus more affordable, student centred, and accessible for students of all backgrounds and abilities.