

# ENSURING UK FIRST-IN-FAMILY STUDENTS GET FULL VALUE FROM HE DURING THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS



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## Executive Summary

Being the first in their family to go to university affects a student's perception of value for money in higher education (HE) and impacts their experience and graduate outcomes. The current cost-of-living crisis may further compound inequalities already prevalent in the system.

New approaches to the regulation of HE providers mean it is vital that the sector recognises the challenges for disadvantaged students in completing their degree and securing a graduate job. The cost-of-living crisis not only impacts the day-to-day student experience but could jeopardise the onward value of their time at university, and therefore how the regulator views institutions. Many students will choose to socialise less, be more selective about the academic work they do and therefore develop less social and cultural capital which will have a negative impact on their ability to secure graduate jobs. Universities should be mindful that many first-in-family students are not aware of the importance of making social connections at university or how to best utilise the academic resources available.

Student support practices need to be adapted to both help students through the current financial challenges and ensure that they still have access to the 'full' student experience. Government should reflect on the financial support available to students and offer more help to our poorest students who do not have savings and families to support them.

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## Introduction:

This brief shows how the cost-of-living crisis in the UK may further contribute to the inequalities of the student experience and the value derived from higher education. It centres on students who are first-in-family to attend university, and who are likely to be economically disadvantaged. Just before the pandemic, I collected data from first-in-family students from three providers in the north of England, to explore their perceptions of value for money for my PhD thesis. I use the learnings from this research to set out how the current cost-of-living crisis may further disadvantage these students.

I argue that due to the commodification of HE and mounting financial pressures, financially disadvantaged students are narrowing their focus solely on obtaining a degree, at the expense of engaging in the development of cultural and social capital that is part of the wider student experience. This is problematic as evidence shows it is not just the academic qualification that improves future job opportunities, but also the skills and networks you have, and your family background (Britton et al., 2016). Therefore, first in family students who are economically restricted may not get the most value out of their HE experiences. Furthermore, universities in England are experiencing a new approach to regulation which sets minimum requirements for student outcomes (retention, completion, graduate jobs). Universities, the regulator, and government must therefore work to understand and recognise the way in which living costs may impact the engagement in and the onward value of the student experience, whilst also providing more support to those most in financial need.

## Findings

Research has explored the way in which higher education has become marketised, and how the academic degree has become a societal commodity (Tomlinson, 2016). We can see it in practice by the way the UK government and the Office for Students define quality in terms of the economic benefits to individuals and the state, with "high quality" degrees being those that get graduates a highly paid and/or highly skilled job (DBIS, 2016; OfS, 2022). Students also regularly cite "getting a good job" as the primary reason for attending university. But seeing the value of the university experience only in terms of the academic qualification and its economic value is hugely problematic. Not only does it do a disservice to the wider benefits of a well-educated society, but it does not reflect the reality: it is not simply the qualification that unlocks job opportunities, but the social and cultural capital you have before and after your degree.

Analysis of the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data shows that social background and prior school attainment are as important as whether you went to university or not (Britton et al., 2016). With the substantial increase of people with degrees in the UK, employers are also expecting something else from the graduate - not just a 2:1 (IES and HECSU, 2015). Engagement in the wider student experience also leads to students being more likely to complete their studies and achieve better grades (Sims et al., 2017).

As with all aspects of education, beliefs about the purpose of higher education and what the student experience is or should be, are dominated by largely unspoken middle class values (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Therefore, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to recognise the hidden rules of the game and have a student experience which will help them secure the elusive "highly skilled, highly paid job". This is most acutely seen in how students in my study initially framed value for money - focusing on contact hours, academic support and learning facilities. The reasons for this were twofold - firstly they saw the university experience only as a route to a qualification, so instinctively responded to value for money questions in those terms. Secondly, they had no idea what their tuition fees paid for, whether it was just the teaching and learning or whether it was also the cleaners, buildings etc. It wasn't until this was made clearer that they became more aware that they were paying for the 'full' student experience, not just the means to obtain a degree. Tomlinson's 2016 study also showed that student debt refocused attention on the academic components of the student experience in contrast to the social aspects of university.

This focus is intensified when students must work during term-time to fund their expenses such as food and accommodation; they must de-prioritise social activities and extra-curricular learning (that which is not vital for attending lectures or for assessment) to have the time and resources to concentrate on their final grades.

More students will now become acutely aware of the cost of living, as inflation increases and bills soar. A recent NUS Survey (2022) found that after paying rent and bills, 1/3rd of students had less than £50 per month to live off. Only 25% were confident their maintenance loan covered academic study costs and 46% said they couldn't afford to study based on their current financial resources. Money and time pressures therefore further compound the issues of inequalities - these students do not have the luxury of focusing solely on being at university and enjoying all the wider university experience.

## Implications

By demystifying the full value of the HE experience, we empower students to better understand the transformational nature of university and how it can provide genuine social mobility to disadvantaged students. This is true at any time, but especially now financial hardship is putting additional restrictions on students' time and resources to study. Students' socioeconomic background is shown to have an impact on how they engage in their studies – which can be to the detriment of getting the full value of their experience.

We must also recognise that some students do not have additional financial resources such as savings or family support to fall back on and must work during term time to fund their studies, choosing between learning or earning whilst at university. Scholarships and university hardship funds will therefore become increasingly more important - but being mindful of the timetabling of the curriculum and communicating the importance of wider academic and social engagement may also improve outcomes for disadvantaged students.

## Recommendations

Government must:

- provide additional financial support for those who do not have alternative financial means to plug the gap in the cost of living
- consider reintroducing a maintenance grant for the poorest students

Universities should:

- promote the value of the full student experience to encourage more students to participate
- offer free extracurricular social and academic activities for students
- design ways of working that encourage collaboration between academic and professional services staff in widening participation, student support and careers

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