The Inclusive Student Pipeline

Supporting Student Success into and through HE

Final report

Eleanor Glanville Institute

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Executive Summary

LiNCHigher commissioned the Eleanor Glanville Institute (EGI), University of Lincoln, to investigate student success and experience within higher education (HE) beyond the school/further education-to-HE transition period. Drawing on a mixed-method approach, this project explores students' lived university experiences of barriers and facilitators around three themes that emerged from our previous project with LiNCHigher; these include *self-regulated learning, independent living, and sense of belonging*. The project involved three stages: a scoping review, a survey and follow-up qualitative interviews, and a series of co-created multi-media products portraying students' success stories.

Findings show a diversity of perspectives and the complexity of experiences from Lincolnshire students who are/were attending UK universities, providing rich and nuanced details about challenges experienced, skills essential to students' coping with transitioning challenges, and institutional support accessed or desired by students. Four recommendations are made for LiNCHigher and FE/HE institutions to consider and implement in seeking to better support the experience, resilience, and success of students transitioning through HE. These are to provide:

- accessible and strong communication about university support system
- tailored support for minoritised students to get prepared for HE
- regular student training to facilitate the development of key skills in self-regulated learning, independent living, finance management, workload management and social relation building
- high quality training to improve staff knowledge and capacity of inclusive practices in HE.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Project background and aim

LiNCHigher commissioned the Eleanor Glanville Institute (EGI), University of Lincoln, to investigate student success and experience within higher education (HE) beyond the school/further education-to-HE transition period. Building on our previous work with LiNCHigher entitled *The Inclusive Student Pipeline: Transitioning from statutory education through FE to HE*, the current project focused on facilitators and barriers influencing the resilience and success of students when they transit **through** HE. This project emphasises the importance of the lived experience of those from under-represented backgrounds in HE. In alignment with LiNCHigher's strategic priorities and the expertise of the EGI, seven student characteristics of interest were pre-identified. They included the following:

- Ethnicity
- Gypsy Roma Travellers (GRT)
- Disability
- Lower socio-economic status (SES)
- Young carers
- Armed Forces
- Care leavers

A vital part of this project was challenging the 'deficit' model where the student, rather than HE institutions (e.g., structures, policy, support system) is problematised for explaining differential HE experiences and educational outcomes that are well-documented in literature. When it comes to inequality gaps around attainment in HE, the model emphasises minoritised students' backgrounds and lack of skills compared to their non-minoritised peers as a result of their cultures, family backgrounds, and/or minority identities (Wong et al., 2021).

This project recognised that it is crucial to share the success achieved by minoritised students throughout all stages of HE, to improve our understanding of how those students overcame barriers and adapted to the HE environment, as well as to identify strategies they adopted to facilitate learning, wellbeing, relationship building, and sense of belonging at universities. With these considerations in mind, this project addressed the research question (RQ) as follows.

RQ: *What are the key facilitators and barriers influencing students from those pre-identified characteristic groups to achieve success through HE (e.g., student retention, attainment, and progression in HE)?*

1.2   Methodology

Design

Drawing on a mixed-methods design, this project contained three sequential phases: a scoping review, primary data collection and creation of multi-media outputs. Descriptions of each phase are outlined below. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of this project's methodological design.

- Scoping review (Phase 1): involved *a)* a desk-based review of a snapshot sample of peer-reviewed systematic review papers; and *b)* a mapping exercise of all LiNCHigher's resources published on their Future Focus website. Drawing on the report (Zhu et al., 2023) on minoritised students' transition into HE institutions, three themes that are well known to positively influence how well students do in HE has structured and guided the reviewing process. These themes include *self*-regulated learning, sense of belonging, and independent skills. Results of phase 1 were delivered in the interim report for this project. A summary of the literature review is presented in Table 2. An overview of LiNCHigher resources mapped in relation to the three themes is provided in Table 1; further details are available in Appendix A.
- Mixed-method design (Phase 2): collected primary data through an online survey containing quantitative and open-ended items, followed by individual interviews with a subgroup of survey participants. The design of the survey and interviews was informed by findings from Phase 1 and constructive communications with LiNCHigher. The aim of Phase 2 was to explore the lived experience of current or recently graduated university students who received school education in Lincolnshire regarding stressors, challenges, coping strategies, and support accessed while they are/were transitioning through different stages within HE.
- Multi-media outputs (Phase 3): co-produced with students with the aim to promote successful stories about minoritised students who resiliently overcame barriers during the transition through HE, and those who effectively made use of the support offered at universities (e.g., student services; digital learning resources or tools; student networks; tutorials) to do well.
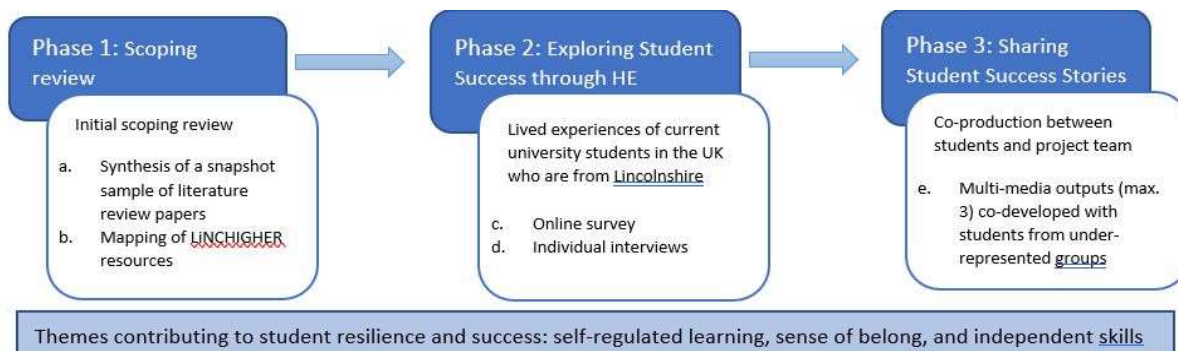
Figure 1 Overall Project Methodological Design

Table 1 Overview of LiNCHigher Resources against Project Focus and Themes

	SELF-REGULATED LEARNING	INDEPENDENT SKILLS	SENSE OF BELONGING	TOTAL
Armed Forces Community	4	4	1	9
Gypsy Roma Travellers	0	0	0	0
Students with Disabilities	0	4	2	6
BAME Students	0	0	0	0
Care Leavers	2	3	1	6
Young Carers	0	0	1	1
General student population	5	9	4	18
Total	11	20	9	40

Table 2 Summary of Academic Literature Reviewed at Phase 1

ITEM	PAPER	FOCUS	RELATED THEMES
1	Allen et al. (2021)	Proposing an integrated framework to conceptualise, assess, and support 'belonging' based on four interconnected components: *competency* for belonging (e.g., social skills; cultural skills), *opportunities* to belong (e.g., enablers afforded by networks, people, places, times and spaces; removal of barriers), *motivations* to belonging (i.e., inner drive or need to connect with others), and *perceptions* of belonging (perceptions about one's previous experiences, self-efficacy)	Sense of belonging
2	Anthonysamy et al. (2020)	A systematic review of 14 papers to explore how non-academic outcomes in higher education (e.g., student engagement, satisfaction) within a blended learning environment are impacted by different domains of self-regulated learning strategies including the domains of cognitive engagement, metacognitive knowledge, resource management, and motivation beliefs	Self-regulated learning
3	Araka et al. (2020)	A systematic review of 30 papers to explore methods and instruments that are used to measure and promote students' self-regulated learning (SRL) skills in face-to-face learning environments, the implications for e-learning environments, and the role played by Educational Data Mining techniques in supporting SRL in e-learning environments	Self-regulated learning

ITEM	PAPER	FOCUS	RELATED THEMES
4	Broadben & Poon (2015)	A systematic review assessing and synthesising empirical evidence from the last decade to examine how self-regulated strategies (e.g., effort regulation, time management, peer-supported learning) correlate with academic outcomes and how students could best use these strategies to achieve success in e-learning environments	Self-regulated learning; independent skills
5	Cenka et al. (2022)	A systematic review to explore students can be best supported to be independent learners facing rapid digital transformation during and after COVID-19, and how Personal Learning Environment (PLE) could be utilised to support the development and application of self-regulated skills for students	Self-regulated learning; independent skill
6	Cureton & Gravestock (2019)	Synthesising results from two empirical studies to explore differential belonging experiences associated with ethnicity through examining how belonging is understood by diverse groups of students and barriers to maintaining belonging in higher education	Sense of belonging
7	Dost & Smith (2023)	Synthesising 19 qualitative studies exploring students' sense of belonging experiences in higher education and conceptualising university belonging as a multidimensional experience with four components including social capital, ethic group fit and cohesion, social exclusion	Sense of belonging

ITEM	PAPER	FOCUS	RELATED THEMES
		(i.e., barriers or situations in which students are excluded from social groups), and connections with campus and faculty (face-to-face/digital)	
8	Hockings et al. (2018)	A co-produced study with student peer-researchers to explore student understanding of independent learning in higher education and their approaches and experience of independent learning	Independent skills; self-regulated learning; sense of belonging
9	Hooshyar et al. (2020)	A systematic review of 64 studies to explore how the self-regulated skills and process are supported by use of digital tools in higher education that enable visualisation of leaners' knowledge and current skill levels	Self-regulated learning
10	Mckendry & Boyd (2012)	Comparing staff expectations of 'independent learner' among further education and higher education staff, and exploring gaps between staff expectation and students' perspective and experience	Independent skills; self-regulated learning

ITEM	PAPER	FOCUS	RELATED THEMES
11	Thompson et al. (2021)	Exploring stressors and challenges students experienced during transitions into and through higher education and sources of social support that were deemed important for coping with challenges	Independent skills; self-regulated learning; sense of belonging
12	Wong et al. (2019)	A systematic review of 35 papers to determine the effectiveness of different approaches to developing self-regulated skills (e.g., providing prompts, feedback, enabling use of self-monitoring strategies) in online learning environments such as Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs) and influences of individual characteristics (e.g., gender, prior educational experiences)	Self-regulated learning; independent skills
13	Zimmerman (2002)	Conceptualising self-regulatory learning as a process containing three cyclical phases (i.e., forethought phase, performance phase, and self-reflection phase, and emphasising what *students* need to know about themselves to facilitate learning and what *teachers* need to know to support student use of self-regulated learning strategies	Self-regulated learning; independent skills

Data collection procedure

The survey was administrated through a university-approved online platform QuestionPro. To maximise participation, the survey was promoted across the UK using multiple recruitment strategies including: *a)* contacting the top 10 UK universities that host the largest Lincolnshire student population (based on HESA data); *b)* contacting all colleges within Lincolnshire for access; and *c)* using social media including Facebook and Twitter to reach Lincolnshire students. At end of the survey, participants were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview with the project team to further discuss their lived experiences and perspectives about HE transitions. Two interviews were conducted online, with the duration ranging from 40 minutes to 1 hour. The survey collected 18 responses, out of which only 10 were considered complete responses. To ensure wider representation in the findings, incomplete survey cases were still included in our analyses, in particular when qualitative data was analysed.

Participants profile

Half of the 18 participants had completed a Bachelor's degree from a UK university in the last two years (i.e., 2022 or 2023), 33.3% were current undergraduate students at a UK university, and the rest (16.7%) reported 'other status'. In terms of UK institutions where respondents are/were studying for a higher education (HE) qualification, 15 respondents provided such information. These institutions included: four respondents are/were studying at a Russell group university [1], seven at a post-1992 university [2], and four at another kind of higher education institution or further education institution. A total of 15 respondents answered the question on the subject area of their course: the majority were/are studying Arts and Humanities (53.3%), 13.3% respectively for STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering,

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[1] *Russell group universities are a self-selected association of 24 of the most research-intensive universities in the UK. For this reason, they are often perceived as being the best and most prestigious universities. See https://russellgroup.ac.uk/ for more information.*

[2] *Post-1992 universities are UK institutions that were given university status in 1992 or since 1992. These universities are often perceived to have a greater focus on teaching and the student experience compared to the Russell group universities.*

Mathematics, and Medicine), Social Sciences, and other disciplines, and one respondent (6.7%) from Business Studies.

Detailed profiles of the 10 participants who provided complete survey responses are summarized in box 1. In terms of the two interviewees we engaged, one identified as a man graduated from a post-1992 institution and the other identified as a woman who attended a Russell Group institution.

Box 1 Survey sample characteristics

Student survey   **Complete responses: 10**

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS[3]

Free school meal eligibility: A small proportion of respondents (22.22%) have received free school meals during their school years.

First generation: About one third of respondents were first-generation HE students, i.e., neither of their parents attended university and gained a degree by the time they were at the age of 18.

Gender: The majority of respondents were women (90%), null for non-binary or prefer not to say).

Sexual orientation: The largest proportion of respondents reported their sextual orientation as heterosexual/straight (60%), following by Bisexual (30%), and Queer (10%).

Ethnicity: The largest proportion of respondents described their ethnicity as White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (60%), following by any other White background (20%), Mixed/multiple 10% and Asian/Asian British 10%.

Disability[4]: 20% of respondents said they had a long-term impairment, health condition or learning difference. Among these respondents, different types of disabilities were disclosed including learning difference such as dyslexia, ADHD; mental health condition, challenge, or disorder; and other long-term health conditions.

Age: 90% of respondents were between 18-24 years old, with 10% were between 35-44 years old.

EDUCATION EXPERIENCE DETAILS

Type of school attended: The majority of respondents (66.67%) attended a grammar school in Lincolnshire between the ages of 11 and 16, followed by state school (33.33%). No respondents attended independent or private schools.

Year of study in HE: Half of respondents were third year students, followed by first year (33.3%), or other (16.67%).

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[3] *Percentages may not total 100 due to missing data; some survey respondents did not respond to all the questions about their demographic characteristics*

[4] *Disability is here defined as anyone with an impairment, health condition or learning difference that has a substantial or long-term impact on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities.*

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted by an interdisciplinary project team offering a range of expertise and insights to minimise researcher bias. Survey responses were coded into categorical variables producing quantitative data based on a 5-point Likert scale, managed using Microsoft Excel. Given the small sample size, only descriptive statistics were conducted to explore the quantitative data. The qualitative data (i.e., survey open-ended responses and interviews) were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method with the aid of NVivo 12. The first round of coding was conducted in relation to the project focus and three key themes. The evolvement of codes was iterative and grounded within the data, aiming to capture rich, nuanced accounts of each theme. Where relevant, anonymized quotes are included to illustrate the points made in the findings as presented in Section 2.

2. Findings

The findings presented in this section provide a detailed description of students' lived experiences within HE in relation to the three core themes including *self-regulated learning*, *independent living,* and *sense of belonging.* Our reporting of findings in this section was structured around these themes, covering challenges, coping strategies, and university/faculty support experienced by students during transitions through HE.

2.1   Self-regulated learning

The importance of self-regulated learning to successfully transitioning to and throughout HE, goal achievement, and other forms of attainment in education is well documented in the literature. The framework of self-regulated learning highlights students knowing when, how, and where to use different strategies to regulate their own learning, focusing on the way students proactively and effectively manage their thoughts, feelings, and actions to attain their own academic and personal goals (Zimmerman, 2002). This perspective invites universities, educators, and researchers to explore how students achieve positive outcomes through the development and use of self-regulated strategies and how effective those strategies are in different contexts. For this project, our focus on self-regulated learning also allows a deeper insight into the enablers and barriers to students' transitions through HE,

and how they influence student success. This section presents how participants' experiences of self-regulated learning dynamically interact with individual (e.g., student motivation) and institutional factors (e.g., online learning environment during the Covid-19 pandemic, guidance and support from academic staff, and wider support from central services), providing nuanced accounts of the role of these factors as catalysers or constraints for how students manage learning in HE.

One of the main influencers of self-regulated learning appears to be the motivation students felt to carry on with their study. According to the survey responses, one third of participants considered dropping out of their university courses for different reasons. When trying to decide whether to continue or not, students' motivation to stay was driven by their strategic regulation of time. This meant that the motivation for continuing their studies came from a self-regulatory process in which they regarded the time already spent on their course as an investment. They were worried that dropping out of the course would render such investment into a loss.

> *"I figured that I had already done 2 years so I may as well stick it out and complete the 3 years of study and hoped that my 3rd year was going to be an improvement…it very much was actually my favourite year of the 3 I had studied."* (Participant A, survey)

However, such drivers of motivation are not homogeneous; they are closely connected with other dimensions of student characteristics such as socio-economic status that impact individual values about certain forms of capital such as time (Rubin and Wright, 2015). For example, gender or culture will assign different values to what is expected from a university degree (Ryan et al., 2011), such as a good grade, a job in a specific sector, a salary band, or the experience of learning something exciting. The evidence from this project suggests that in order to attain expected outcomes in HE, students require the development of different skills to make self-regulated learning possible and productive. An illustrative example would be time-management skills, as mentioned by a number of participants. This finding aligns with the previous work by Grunschel et al. (2008) where the researchers demonstrated the success of student training interventions focusing on time management and recommended that institutional support should be in place to help students address skill gaps and improve motivation to learn.

It was also found that motivation is closely related with students' perceptions of their own level of skills for managing capitals and educational resources available, and their previous successful experiences of

attaining expected outcomes (Yamada et al., 2016). Survey participant B deemed the lack of time management skills as a significant barrier to their self-regulated learning and the development of intrinsic motivation (e.g., for improving subject knowledge), suggesting that extrinsic motivation (e.g., to catch up with deadlines) played a main role close to the completion of coursework because of "putting things off".

> *"Procrastination!!! This was a biggy. Putting things off till the last minute and having to work super hard to meet deadlines...I could have applied the (time-management) skills they taught and had more self-discipline" (Participant B, survey)*

While self-regulated learning is often portrayed as an individual trait, the role of institutional support should not be neglected. Butler and Winne (1995) argue that self-regulated learning is more than an individualistic trait; it is a complex process in which universities and the wider learning environment play a role. Participants emphasised the importance of academic support and guidance from staff to help them understand how to improve academically, particularly regarding feedback, essay writing, disability support, and note taking. For example, survey participant A shared her negative feedback experience as a barrier to self-regulated learning:

> *"I very much appreciate honest feedback but sometimes it felt like the feedback wasn't constructive at all and was just asked questions which to me felt quite belittling."* (Participant A, survey)

For students who studied more practical courses in HE such as graphic design, learning and feedback experiences were negatively impacted by Covid-19, which have brought extra challenges to their first-year transitions:

> *"Just getting that feedback in general. Because during that second year and third year, we were able to just go and see the lecturers whenever they were free or we were free. But obviously in first year it was a bit... having face-to-face feedback was much better than like online because you can obviously show them (lecturers and tutors) and go through the feedback you received."* (Participant C, focus group)

The quote above shows the challenge arising from a lack of in-person opportunities to discuss feedback with academics; this suggests that modes of feedback provision and accessible guidance from staff to

deconstruct feedback matter to students' understanding and use of feedback, which ultimately matter to their self-regulated learning.

Poor access to support and guidance from universities emerged as another barrier to self-regulated learning during Covid-19. The swift move to online learning was challenging to most participants. Those who were in their first year of study at universities felt particularly unprepared for the academic workload for their course in addition to adapting to online learning. The quote from Participant D suggests an overwhelming sense of lack of guidance from universities and staff to support self-regulated learning in a fast-response situation.

> *"It felt quite sink or swim at times."* (Participant D, survey).

For students from marginalised backgrounds, learning was further impeded by inequalities of digital access. Naudé and Vinuesa (2021) argue the Covid-19 pandemic has widened the digital divide in different ways; for example, students from different backgrounds have unequal access to digital resources, and/or possess different levels of literacy on how to use digital resources and where to get them. These have put those who are from marginalised backgrounds into a more disadvantaged position. Survey participant D shared how limited access to digitalised learning materials has slowed their academic work: *"Covid sometimes made accessing materials difficult, particularly as my department was archaic and had (until forced by lockdown) not digitised most resources".*

Alongside the lack of digitalised learning materials during the Covid-19 pandemic, reduced or limited access to digital textbooks from university libraries forced some participants to buy books to get through module reading lists. The affordability of books that are essential to courses was raised as a particular concern by focus group participants:

> *"And doing English… like obviously there's so many books and you can get a lot of stuff second hand and it's always an expensive course to do because of that. But then like there's obviously reference books and stuff as well that you're expected to buy".* (Participant E, focus group)

> *"You had to buy everything because you couldn't because there were limited copies in the library and we weren't allowed to access the library, and very often they did not digitise the resource yet because they'd not done it in previous years".* (Participant C, focus group)

When it comes to facilitators to learning, the role of university support services was highlighted. Specifically, participants stressed the importance of accessibility of support services including clarity on what can be offered and how to access them. In practice, university support services operate separately from academic teams, but they were unanimously deemed as an integral part of student learning and academic achievement. In particular, mental health and wellbeing support gained prominence. Participants expressed a desire for more accessible wellbeing services within their institutions, so that they could have been utilised more: *"Better emotional/mental health support. It is easy to feel lonely and not know how to contact university"* (Participant F, survey). Students also wished that institutions could be more proactive in supporting student mental health: "*Even though I was not regularly attending seminars because of my mental health, nobody checked up on me*" (Participant B, survey).

These findings indicate that self-regulated learning at university can be hindered if there is inadequate or inaccessible support from the institution's student support services. However, participants explained that in such cases they actively sought similar support from their peers; this supports the findings of Swell and Goings (2020) that many students from minoritised groups demonstrate a high level of agency and resilience in a new educational environment (e.g., university), where they proactively and resiliently seek opportunities from cultural and social environments to try to convert challenges into thriving HE experiences.

In summary, this section presents the nuances about students' lived experiences of self-regulated learning at universities. It was found that motivation and self-perceived skill competence play an important role, although influencing factors vary and involve variables at individual and university levels. The importance of several influencing factors has been discussed in their role of facilitating self-regulated learning and student success in HE. These included the improvement of time management skills, equal and better access to educational resources (e.g., digital books), constructive academic guidance and support from lecturers, and accessible student service support, in particular mental health support.

2.2   Independent Skills

One significant challenge many students face while transiting through HE is taking responsibilities for academic, social, financial, emotional, and personal aspects of university life (Zhu et al., 2023). The

acquisition of independent skills as such is not required in pre-university educational settings where there is usually a high level of school and family guidance (Christie et al., 2013). Research has found that adapting to the level of independency as expected by universities alongside moving from home, gives rise to multi-layered challenges that could become a hurdle for HE transitions and attainment if not addressed early, particularly for minoritised students (Thompson et al., 2021). Data from this project shows the transition challenges experienced by participants were closely related to mental health and workload at universities (e.g., study, part-time work for independent living); this has affected the extent of their meaningful engagement with their course.

> *"It was very stressful, and the workload was huge. I was struggling with my mental health too...My anxiety was over attending seminars/lectures. Emotional overwhelm when deadlines approach."* (Participant F, survey)

> *"Very now and again cause, yeah I struggled with that (mental health) a little bit during my time because I'm having to stress about different things like deadlines and stuff was a bit kind of overwhelming at times."* (Participant C, focus group)

Both quotes above stress the important role of mental health support from universities in learning and the wider university experience as established in Section 2.1. Furthermore, they suggest how students struggled to balance time, wellbeing, and workload – a key independent skill to master to achieve success in HE and beyond. Research argues that helping students develop a sense of 'having time' can boost student engagement and therefore should be implemented as part of the creation of an inclusive learning environment (Kyndt et al., 2013).

The development of independent skills should be considered holistically to include a broad range of factors within and beyond HE institutions. Benckendorff et al. (2009) propose to pay attention to student factors (e.g., specific needs, individual characteristics), institutional factors (e.g., support services) and any other factors external to HE institutions (e.g., sectoral factors). Data from this project shows that non-academic duties that are an essential part of independent living impacted student engagement with their courses, which ultimately affected their mental health. For example, Participant A talked about how their caring responsibilities had influenced their time management and course engagement, expecting to receive more appreciation from staff. The quote below also indicates students with non-academic duties can feel misunderstood if being treated exclusively rather than

inclusively, which may lead to poor integration into the course and added pressure on wellbeing and mental health. It is safe to infer that this has intersectional effects, putting students from disadvantaged backgrounds into a more difficult position.

> "*Maybe just to be a bit more understanding that some people aren't just bad at timekeeping/planning and have other responsibilities outside of university, so they aren't as harsh*". (Participant A, survey)

Another example of sense of exclusion and struggling with workload was shared by those who needed to do part-time jobs for subsistence through their studies.

> '*Having to have a part time job whilst at uni to be able to pay for things but then it sometimes getting overworked and not feeling very comfortable about speaking up about it to my workplace*'. (Participant B, survey)

For all the participants, making ends meet was an important component of independent skills. It was found that financial guidance is the most important support students expect to receive from universities. It is worth noting that this does not only apply to those who identified themselves as from low socio-economic backgrounds. This finding reflects the wider education landscape in the UK in recent years in which the majority of students worry that rising costs of living may affect how they perform at university (Lewis, 2022). The impact of cost of living is however heterogeneous and unequal, disproportionally affecting students who are from low socio-economic status backgrounds (Lokshin, 2023). Participant D stressed that financial support should be offered to all students regardless of their socio-economic status.
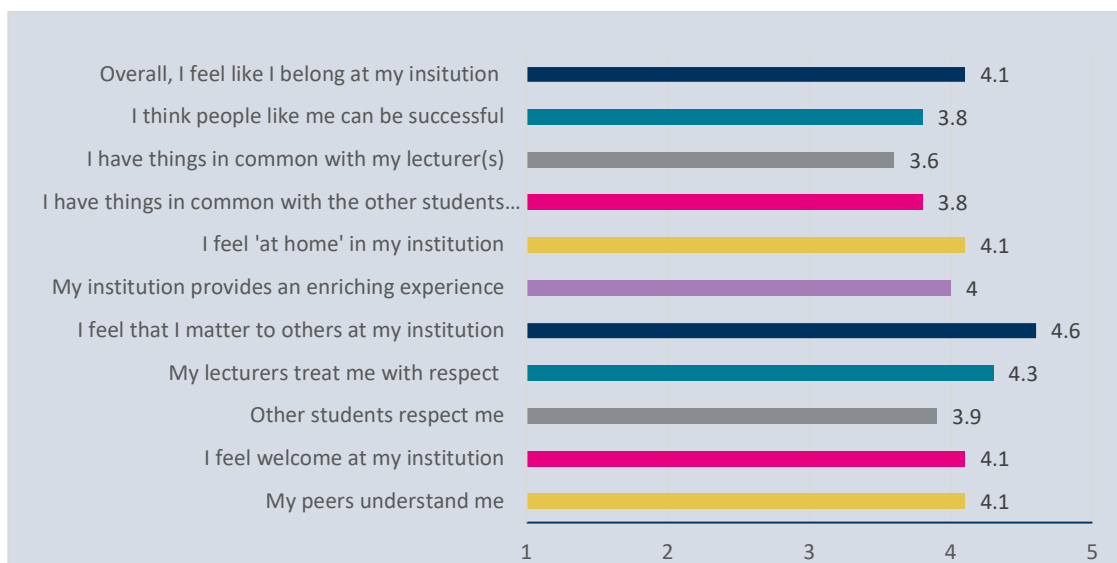
> "*More financial support for the 'squeezed middle'. Rightly, Durham provides a substantial grant on top of the government loan to students from low-income households. However, there is essentially no support for state school student who have higher household incomes – where parents cannot or will not 'cough up' these students are highly disadvantaged.*" (Participant D, survey)

In summary, findings included in section 2.2 highlight the experiences of students in respect of independent skills such as making their own lives at university and workload balance between academic and non-academic commitments. The evidence shows the challenges students experienced might be

perceived by HE institutions as disengagement with course which may lead to student sense of exclusion. Furthermore, such perception comes from low awareness and lack of recognition of staff and HEIs about intersectional differences and diverse needs among their student cohorts. Finally, participants also expressed that extra support in helping them tackle independent living challenges (such as finance support) would be a welcomed addition.

2.3   Sense of belonging

Previous research confirms that students' sense of belonging is associated with various educational and relational outcomes such as successful transitions to HE, retention rates, relationships with peers and academics, and academic achievement (e.g., Briggs et al., 2012; MacFarlan, 2018; Turner and Tobbell, 2018). The survey for this project included items capturing participants' perception of their own belonging at universities. Using 5-points Likert scale, participants tended to agree they felt they belonged at their university (mean=4.1). Specially, 90% of the 10 participants who completed the survey reported either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' for their overall feeling of sense of belonging at HE institutions. Looking at individual factors contributing to sense of belonging, participants' rating was the lowest for 'I have things in common with lecturers' (mean=3.6), whilst highest for 'I feel that I matter to others at my institution' (mean=4.6). Results about each of the questions related to sense of belonging are visualised in Box. 2, highlighting the significance of the social network and peer support for the feeling of belonging. However, it also makes evident the need for HEIs to improve the diversity of their staff as well as academic content, allowing for students to identify themselves in the content and classroom dynamic.

Item	Mean
Overall, I feel like I belong at my insitution	4.1
I think people like me can be successful	3.8
I have things in common with my lecturer(s)	3.6
I have things in common with the other students...	3.8
I feel 'at home' in my institution	4.1
My institution provides an enriching experience	4
I feel that I matter to others at my institution	4.6
My lecturers treat me with respect	4.3
Other students respect me	3.9
I feel welcome at my institution	4.1
My peers understand me	4.1

Box 2 Sense of Belonging: Items and Means

The importance of peer networks is closely related to self-regulated learning (e.g., co-regulated learning such as group tasks) and the development of independent skills (e.g., balance between part-time shifts and socialisation with peers. A detailed example comes from the qualitative data, where socio-economic status became a defining factor in close relation to finance management for everyday life, affecting how participants were perceived by their peers.

> "*Socially, students in this group [low income] are rejected from the cliques of the privately educated, while also demonised by many first gen/working class students for being 'posh', when in fact, they are struggling to make ends meet.*" (Participant F, survey)

The association between socio-economic status and inequality in education is well established in research. Interacting factors producing such inequalities include economic, cultural and educational backgrounds (Lynch and O'riordan, 1998). In alignment with the findings presented in section 2.2, some students need to undertake work shifts which inevitably prevent them from fully participating in social and extracurricular activities at universities (Rubin and Wright, 2015); this can bring in a knock-on impact on sense of belonging and attainment.

Our data supports the effects of social backgrounds on the sense of belonging at course level, particularly for Russell Group university students who went to state funded schools in Lincolnshire. The quote from Participant E provides an illustrative example:

> *"I didn't get it as much in lectures because you aren't talking, so you don't really know that the content that you're coming across for the first time. These students have been reading it since they were twelve. But yeah, in tutorials and seminars that have this massive. Just, a sense that's everyone knew more than me, because they'd been exposed to this literature that I didn't even know existed." (Participant E, focus group)*

The quote above describes the difference students were feeling on their course and how they made a connection between that difference and socio-economic status and previous educational experiences. It suggests that more school-centred information, support, and guidance should be provided to students from disadvantaged backgrounds before starting university. Furthermore, it indicates that universities should take an anticipatory and reflective approach to acknowledge student diversity in everything they do, such as making pedagogy and curriculum inclusive for all learners.

Another dimension of sense of belonging that emerged from the data is the importance of getting involved in social settings to develop peer networks. Having strong peer relations is related to a better adjustment to university life and significant attachment to the institution (Maunder, 2017). As such, it is arguable that peer networks could mitigate the impact of dissonant integration mentioned earlier. For some participants whose HE experiences were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, building peer networks had been particularly imperative for their feeling of staying connected with peers and staff:

> *"I did start to find myself engaging more with people I wouldn't normally during the third year because I guess being around them a lot kind of help with confidence and meeting new people and stuff." (Participant C, focus group)*

However Participant C's comments show that social opportunities available at universities such as sports and societies are not equally accessible to students from different backgrounds. To help students gain a sense of belonging and feel able to lean on their peers for support, clear signposting around what institutions can provide must be clear and meaningful. Such support is important to help students know what they don't know about HE.

> *"In terms of like sports, maybe like getting involved with the teams and stuff because I never really understood how to like get into it. I've just heard from other people rather from the actual university." (Participant C, focus group)*

The findings reported in this section are closely related to the two previous themes, meaning the acquisition and development of independent skills and self-regulated learning skills are key to student sense of belonging. For underrepresented and disadvantaged students, early access to support, information and guidance from universities (e.g., through outreach programmes, foundation courses, collaborations with schools) are particularly important for them to get prepared for HE. Universities also play a key role in improving the accessibility and diversity of social and extracurricular opportunities to ensure students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from those opportunities, to build peer networks, and to develop a sense of belonging.

2.4   Further findings and summary

Beyond the three main themes of this project, other themes appeared consistently throughout our analysis. One of them has been already highlighted across the previous sections of the report, which is the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the generic university experience, wellbeing, and learning of participants in this project. Our data shows that the impact of the Covid-19 was complex and differential, disproportionately influencing those from disadvantaged backgrounds and deepening educational inequalities. While online learning throughout the course of Covid-19 presented many challenges, Participant E felt that transitions back to face-to-face learning after Covid-19 presented new challenges, such as self-efficacy and stigmatisation.

> "*So it was a bit of a learning curve and I look back at myself now and I'm like I didn't even realise that people might have looked down on me a little bit.*" (Participant E, focus group)

Another recurrent topic was the importance of support and services in helping students overcome challenges or integrate better into university life. This report has stressed the active role institutions should play in providing such support and improving access and accessibility. Some participants also highlighted that it is also a matter of communicating the scope of university support with clarity.

> "*I think they were more aimed at international students... I wasn't sure that, maybe I should have used them (university support)."* (Participant E, focus group)

Similar things happen with other forms of support or guidance Lincolnshire students have access to, such as LiNCHigher. In the survey, 6% of participants were aware of and participated in LiNCHigher activities and initiatives. 46% of participants did not engage and another 46% were unaware of what LiNCHigher is. However, through interviews, it was made evident that students may have engaged with LiNCHigher activities but due to the time when they first engaged, they may have forgotten that the activities were attributed to LiNCHigher. It is also plausible that students felt that they did not need to engage with certain LiNCHigher activities at the time they were promoted. This is similar at university level. Many respondents stated that while there were support services available to them at university to help with self-regulated learning, sense of belonging and independent living, they did not feel the need to access them or know how to access them.

3. Summary of key findings and recommendations

The challenges experienced by students from Lincolnshire transitioning through HE vary according to their specific course, discipline of study and type of university they attend. A common element identified from the findings of this project is the need for universities to improve the access and accessibility of institutional support for students, particularly for the development of independent skills. This report highlights how self-regulated learning, a desirable skillset for HE students to master to achieve goals and success, can only be developed when students receive appropriate and sufficient support from the HE institution and staff, and if they are able to balance their needs and motivations to study. The most salient struggle appearing from our data is that in order to make ends meet, many students need to undertake a part-time job alongside managing the workload of their course. Students often felt disadvantaged and excluded, with a sense of having less social, cultural, and economic capital (e.g., time, energy, money) to effectively participate in academic and social activities offered by universities. HEIs play a central role in helping students cope with such challenges, not only by providing guidance and student services support, but also by investing in staff training on student inclusion to raise staff awareness of the different reality students from different backgrounds are dealing with, the diverse student needs and different learning styles.

Beyond independent skills and self-regulated learning skills, our findings support the importance of social skills for the creation of social networks which contributes to university student sense of belonging. During the COVID-19 pandemic when teaching and learning was mostly conducted online,

students who reported weak social networks at universities struggled with their mental health; this in turn also had a significant effect on their course engagement and academic attainment. While mental health support has been reinforced in many HEIs, overwhelming workloads (academic and non-academic) and the feeling of being misunderstood can present challenges that make students feel outside of the remit of such support systems. These findings suggest that HEIs should pay more attention to the provision of training opportunities and awareness-raising activities to improve staff knowledge and capacity of intersectional challenges that each student can face throughout different stages of their HE journey.

Another key finding is that social and cultural backgrounds are key factors influencing how students manage their university life such as learning to work and live independently or balance academic and non-academic commitments. Differentials emerge when considering the type of HE courses and institutions they attend. For example, a few participants studying at Russell Group or research-intensive universities reported low skills to cope with different workloads or lack of 'fit' in the learning environment that other students were already familiar with; such experiences of lack of confidence and sense of belonging made them feel isolated or discriminated at their universities. These findings suggest that beyond institutional support and pedagogical strategies, more attention should be paid to building an inclusive and effective pipeline from statutory schools/FE to HE. Research-informed provisions tailored to the needs of students from minoritised backgrounds are in particular required so that they feel prepared for going to university and have equal opportunities to succeed in HE.

Finally, another critical finding emerged from students' lived HE experiences is the pressing need for strong communication channels. Students shared the feeling of not receiving consistent information on where and how to access support or activities available at universities, and that sometimes the communication from their university was confusing. A similar situation emerged when participants discussed their experiences related to LiNCHigher: many involved in this project were aware of its existence or had previous contact with the LiNCHigher team, but they seemed less familiar with the scope of LiNCHigher' offerings or how those would benefit them.

Based on the findings we make four recommendations as the following for LiNChigher and FE/HE institutions to consider and implement in seeking to better support the experience, resilience, and success of students transitioning through HE:

1. Universities and LiNCHigher must review and streamline their communication strategies, particularly regarding the access and accessibility of support systems and social activities available at universities. It is vital to ensure such communication are accessible to all students and does not get lost in multiple communications students receive.

2. Strategies for levelling-up students from underrepresented backgrounds need to be implemented and coordinated. This must ensure all students are prepared for HE with a sufficient level of knowledge and skills that are essential to university life.

3. The design of training and support regarding key topics such as independent living, finance management, and workload management appears to be of importance for all students, not only those from underrepresented backgrounds. Therefore, it is recommended that such student support is mainstreamed with equal access for all students irrespective of backgrounds.

4. Quality and regular training should be provided to university staff, in particular to academic staff, to enable the design and implementation of inclusive pedagogic strategies that do not assume all students being in the same circumstances, and recognize the implications of intersectional challenges experienced by students from minoritised backgrounds.

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Appendix A: Mapping results of LiNCHigher resources against Project Focus and Themes

	Student Group	Resource Title	Stakeholder	Link
Self Regulated Learning	Care Leavers	UCAS - Studying at University or College FAQ	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/y34gpwwq/supporting-care-leavers-studying-uni-or-college.pdf
	All students	Teacher Resources to Support Students Make the Transition to HE	Teachers/ Parents and guardians	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/teacher-resources-to-support-students-make-the-transition-to-he/
	Care Leavers	LiNCHigher Care Leavers Guide to Higher Education	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/00mjj05c/care-leaver-guide.pdf
	Armed Forces Students	LiNCHigher students from Armed Forces Families Guide to Higher Education	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/rz5pnluf/armed-forces-guide.pdf
	Armed Forces Students	UCAS information for teacher, advisers and referees of service children	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/4zmfrmml/ucas-tips_service-childrenyour-ucas-personal-statement.pdf
	All students	Student Minds: Exam stress	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/nkdfdn2g/exam_stress_print.pdf
	All students	Top 10 Revision Tips	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/top-10-revision-tips/

	Student Group	Resource Title	Stakeholder	Link
	All students	From A-level to Uni	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/from-a-level-to-uni-student-tips/
	All students	PwC employability skills toolkit	Teachers	https://www.pwc.co.uk/who-we-are/our-purpose/empowered-people-communities/social-mobility/employability-skills-toolkit.html#curriculum
	Armed Forces Students	British Army: employability skills	Students	https://jobs.army.mod.uk/base/lessons/employability-skills/?cid=part9780465320
	Armed Forces Students	British Army: Managing change	Students	https://jobs.army.mod.uk/base/lessons/managing-change/?cid=part2202550321
Independent Skills	**Student Group**	**Resource Title**	**Stakeholder**	**Link**
	Care Leavers	UCAS - Studying at University or College FAQ	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/y34gpwwq/supporting-care-leavers-studying-uni-or-college.pdf
	All students	Teacher resources to support students make the transition to HE	Teachers/ Parents and guardians	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/teacher-resources-to-support-students-make-the-transition-to-he/
	Students suffering with anxiety and anger	Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust Online Workshops	Parents and Children aged 10 and over	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/lincolnshire-partnership-nhs-foundation-trust-online-workshops/

	All students	The Future Focus Magazine for Students	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/the-future-focus-magazine-for-students/
	All students - but would be particularly useful for Care Leavers and those from a lower socio-economic background	Money Guides for Children	Parents and students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/money-guides-for-children/
	Care Leavers	LiNCHigher Care Leavers Guide to Higher Education	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/00mjj05c/care-leaver-guide.pdf
	Armed Forces Students	LiNCHigher Students from Armed Forces Families Guide to Higher Education	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/rz5pnluf/armed-forces-guide.pdf
	Students with issues of mental health	Teacher Guide to Mental Health	Teachers/Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/n33lp1my/teachers-guide.pdf
	Care Leavers	The Facts about Starting University or College	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/5ouglbmt/student_care-leavers-fact-sheet-advisers-faqs-toolkit.pdf
	All students - but would be particularly useful for Care Leavers and those from a lower socio-economic background	Year 13 HE Toolkit - Finance and Budgeting	Students and Teachers	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/dz2b0npl/linchigher-student-finance-and-budgeting-1.pdf

	Students with disabilities	Disability Rights UK into HE Guide for Disabled Students	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/media/5q2iie2b/intohe2019_disabilityguide.pdf
	All students	Coming to Uni - Fresher Take Podcast	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/coming-to-uni-fresher-take-podcast-university-of-lincoln/
	All students	Tips for Starting University	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/tips-for-starting-university-student-tips/
	Students with disabilities (ASD)	Surviving School on the Spectrum	Students/Parents/Teachers	https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/blog/surviving-school-on-the-spectrum/
	All students	PwC Employability Skills Toolkit	Teachers	https://www.pwc.co.uk/who-we-are/our-purpose/empowered-people-communities/social-mobility/employability-skills-toolkit.html#curriculum
	Armed Forces Students	British Army: Employability Skills	Students	https://jobs.army.mod.uk/base/lessons/employability-skills/?cid=part9780465320
	Armed Forces Students	British Army: Managing change	Students	https://jobs.army.mod.uk/base/lessons/managing-change/?cid=part2202550321
	All students	Independent Living	Students	Independent Living (thefuturefocus.co.uk)

	Group	Resource Title	Stakeholder	Link
	Armed Forces Students	Lewis Douglas - Growing up in AFF	Students	Lewis Douglas - Growing up in an Armed Forces Family (thefuturefocus.co.uk)
	All students - but would be particularly useful for Care Leavers and those from a lower socio-economic background	Independent Living	Students	Independent Living (thefuturefocus.co.uk)
Sense of Belonging	**Group**	**Resource Title**	**Stakeholder**	**Link**
	All students	Teacher Resources to Support Students Make the Transition to HE	Teachers/ Parents and guardians	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/teacher-resources-to-support-students-make-the-transition-to-he/
	All students	Moving to University	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/moving-to-university/
	All students	Tips for Starting University	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/tips-for-starting-university-student-tips/
	All students	Living at University	Students	
	Students with disabilities	Discover Uni with Anna	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/discover-uni-with-anna/

	Young Carers	Discover Uni with Reko	Students	https://www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/resources/discover-uni-with-reko/
	Armed Forces Students	Lewis Douglas - Growing Up in AFF	Students	Lewis Douglas - Growing up in an Armed Forces Family (thefuturefocus.co.uk)
	Care Leavers	Leaving Care - Journey to HE	Students	Leaving Care - A Journey to HE (thefuturefocus.co.uk)
	Students with disabilities	Inspirational Stories - Jake Coles	Students	Inspirational Stories - Jake Coles (thefuturefocus.co.uk)