

# Widening Access Student Transitions



2015/16

An investigation of issues  
facing undergraduate  
Widening Access students  
within the History  
department at the  
University of Strathclyde.

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## Background

Widening Access is a strategic priority for the University of Strathclyde, the Scottish Government, and the wider HE sector as a whole. There is a growing recognition that effective access and inclusion work does not stop at the point of entry to university; as Les Ebdon, the Director of the Office for Fair Access to Higher Education, noted in his 2014 annual report, *“Disadvantage can follow you like a shadow down the years, affecting the degree you end up with and your ensuing postgraduate study or search for a job.”* In the same year, the Quality Assurance Agency instituted the current Enhancement Theme of ‘Student Transitions’. As part of the University of Strathclyde’s work on this Enhancement Theme the University’s History department, Careers Service, and Widening Access team decided to collaboratively commission a project investigating transition issues for undergraduate History students. Two student interns were recruited to carry out the project, the culmination of which is this report. This report examines some of the experiences and views of both Widening Access and non-Widening Access students, drawing upon evidence gathered from a literature review, a survey, and interviews. Following an analysis of the findings, this report will offer recommendations on how to enhance the support provision for undergraduate Widening Access students at Strathclyde. Although the research primarily focused on History students there are lessons and recommendations of relevance to the wider student community.

## Literature Review

The concept of ‘student transitions’ has been a key area of interest for a number of years and as such there is a wealth of literature available on the topic. Some key themes emerge from research in this field, much of which has been influenced by Tinto’s 1975 work which focussed on the link between student commitment to a given topic and subsequent retention and success (Sheridan and Dunne 2012).

With such emphasis being placed upon the students’ own ‘commitment’, later research has examined psychological wellbeing of students involved in various transitions. Bewick et al. (2010) conducted a study at a UK university which found *“university to be a time of heightened distress”* and that throughout the course of the study, *“at no time did levels of distress fall to pre-registration levels”*. This highlights that student transitions are a longitudinal process, which the wider literature agrees with.

Chester et al. (2013) note the importance of Lizzio’s (2006) five senses of student success model, which emphasises that in order for a student to be successful at university they must develop key capacities categorised as: capability; connectedness; purpose; resourcefulness; and culture. Due to the range of areas referenced by the model and the complexity of each key point, Chester et al. (2013) note that successful navigation of the model is *“unlikely to be accomplished by a single initiative or indeed confined to the first year of the programme”*. One of the capacities of the model in particular – ‘connectedness’ – seems prevalent in much of the literature, although it is not always directly referred to as such. ‘Connectedness’ is the notion that in order for a student to succeed at university, they must feel a sense of belonging and form meaningful relationships with peers and staff (Chester et al., 2013).

In 2012, Maunder et al. conducted a study which utilised undergraduate student researchers investigating the transition experiences of their peers – similar in many ways to the research in this paper conducted by students at the University of Strathclyde. Their research stresses the importance of transitions beyond purely the academic and examines students’ expectations of university prior to joining versus the real life situation. Interestingly, their work displays some key Widening Access themes, such as one participant in the study referring to her decision to progress to university as “*I come from a family of academics and Uni was always going to happen....it’s just in the family that we all go*”[sic]. This demonstrates the relationship between socioeconomic background and progression to university, which is a factor which also directly affects many student transitions. Students who come from backgrounds which are not as socioeconomically privileged, or who lack a familial tradition of participation in Higher Education, may be more vulnerable through transitions and require particular support. The range of experiences and strengths which students bring to university should be recognised. As Ng et al. (2015) note, there is a “*need to acknowledge dimensions of cultural capital*” – in their recent study, they found a link between the social integration of students and their ability to reflect upon their own transitions; it appeared that as students became more socially integrated within a peer group, their perceived challenges at university reduced. This also helps to reinforce the notion that transitions are a longitudinal process and not something which ends at the end of week one of semester one of first year.

## Methodology

As part of a collaborative initiative between the University of Strathclyde’s Careers Service, History department, and Widening Access team, two interns were appointed to commence the research project in August 2015, on a part-time basis. The interns were current undergraduate students at the University of Strathclyde who operated from within the Widening Access office as a base, supervised by the Widening Access Support Coordinator and the Widening Access Manager.

At the beginning of the project the interns met with various student support services’ staff to enhance their understanding of what support is available for Widening Access students. The interns met with staff from the Student Financial Support Team, librarians at the University of Strathclyde Library, and staff within the Careers Service.

Parallel to the series of meetings a literature review was also conducted, looking at current Widening Access issues to help develop the interns’ knowledge of key issues and hurdles. This allowed the interns to begin to develop ideas about what areas of Widening Access they would look to target and who they would like to target.

Afterwards the interns attended various meetings with the Widening Access Team and decided on whom the project would target and what methods would be used to carry out the project. It was decided that the interns would create a survey targeted at all undergraduate students at the University of Strathclyde who were studying History in academic year 2015/16 and this survey would form the basis of the data for the report. The survey captured various indicators which allowed for identification of Widening Access students. For the purposes of this research, a student was regarded as ‘Widening Access’ if they met one or more of the following criteria:

- First generation of their immediate family to go to university

- Attended a low progression to Higher Education school<sup>1</sup>
- Attended a SHEP<sup>2</sup> school
- Had a home postcode at point of application which was classed as Quintile 1 or Quintile 2 according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)
- Had spent any time in local authority care
- Were a mature student (aged 21 or over on the first day of their course at the University of Strathclyde)

To determine whether a student attended a SHEP school or not, it was decided to use a snapshot of the current (August 2015) list of SHEP schools as a proxy, instead of determining precisely which years each student attended their high school and the SHEP status of that school at that time. The list of SHEP schools changes every few years based upon contemporary progression to Higher Education rates, but for the purposes of this report it was decided that a proxy list would be sufficient. Similarly, the dataset used to calculate SIMD for all students covered by this report, regardless of year of entry, was the 2016 SFC population-weighted quintile version.

The questions in the survey covered a wide breadth of experiences – such as how confident students felt with regards to specific skills and attributes, their financial situation, whether they found any elements of the University to cause them stress, and their experiences on the History course. The survey was structured to provide a mainly quantitative analysis, although some questions were designed to allow free-text responses, which provide scope for qualitative evaluation.

A commentary of the findings is provided later in this report. Preliminary observations from the data were also used to inform the questions that would be asked during interviews with four current History students.

Each intern interviewed two History students and asked the same questions, for both Widening Access and non-Widening Access students. However the questions were slightly adjusted depending on course entry point and year group. Three of the four History students exhibited at least one Widening Access indicator.

The interviews were then transcribed and similar points were grouped together to be analysed and commented upon. Finally, following all analysis the findings were considered and recommendations have been noted within this report. ‘Key Message’ call out boxes appear throughout this report, to draw attention to information which the authors consider to be of particular importance.

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<sup>1</sup> As identified by the University of Strathclyde’s use of Contextual Data in Admissions Policy, September 2013

<sup>2</sup> Schools for Higher Education Programme

## Analysis of the Survey Data

There were 145 respondents to the survey, 95 of whom exhibited at least one Widening Access indicator and are therefore referred to as 'Widening Access', or 'WA' students within this section. The remaining 50 respondents are referred to as 'non-Widening Access' or 'non-WA'. Results from questions with similar themes have been grouped together under the headings below.

### Academic self-perception

Widening Access students seem to have a lower level of confidence in their academic abilities than their non-WA peers. In response to the question, '*How confident are you in your ability to write academically?*' 70% of WA students supplied positive responses of 'Confident' or 'Very Confident', compared to 80% of non-WA students.

However, in response to the similar question of, '*How confident are you in your ability to write and think critically?*', the gap is narrower. 73% of WA students responded positively to this, compared to 78% of non-WA students. This suggests that non-WA students viewed the questions in a very similar way; whereas perhaps WA students are less confident of the term 'academically' than they are 'critically'.

### Literacy, numeracy, and IT

There appears to be little difference in the overall confidence rates of WA and non-WA students in relation to their self-perception of basic literacy and numeracy; in fact, 94% of WA respondents to the question, '*How confident are you with basic literacy and use of English?*' returned answers of either 'Very Confident' or 'Confident', compared to 90% of Non-WA participants. However, non-WA students were more likely to have responded 'Very Confident', with 66% indicating this whilst only 56% of WA respondents chose the highest level of confidence.

#### Key Message:

The literacy, numeracy, and IT standards of students cause no immediate concern.

Overall confidence in numeracy is comparable between the two groups, with 74% of WA students returning a positive response to the question, '*How confident are you with basic numeracy skills?*', a response rate which is just 2% lower than their non-WA peers.

WA students overall are more confident in their ability to construct emails (86%) than non-WA students (78%); but again, non-WA students were far more likely to have indicated the highest level of confidence (30%) than their WA peers (19%).

Interestingly, in terms of internet literacy, WA students seem to be more confident than non-WA students, with 52% indicating that they are 'Very Confident' compared to 46%. This trend continues into self-perception of broader IT skills: in response to the question, '*How confident are you in the use of IT?*' 84% of WA students provided positive responses compared with 76% of non-WA students. Furthermore, 34% of WA students selected the highest rating of 'Very Confident' compared with just 22% of non-WA students.

## Communication skills plus international awareness

There is a difference in self-confidence with regards to communication skills. 86% of non-WA students indicated that they were either 'Confident' or 'Very Confident' in their communication skills, contrasting with 77% of WA students. This skill is of great importance for various reasons. Robinson-Easley (2013) states that communication is one of the most important skills that employers look for in graduates. This highlights that the majority of History students feel equipped with one of the most actively sought skills in the graduate market. However more work will need to be done to ensure that WA students reach the same confidence levels as all non-WA students.

### Key Message:

Employers note communication as a key skill – work is required to improve WA students' confidence in this area.

In addition, whilst most students overall were unlikely to have confidence in foreign language skills, 22% of non-WA students displayed positive thoughts towards their linguistic capabilities compared to just 9% of Widening Access students. This shows an area of potential development for the majority of History students, particularly those who may possess Widening Access characteristics. There are various benefits to having foreign language skills. CBI (2015), refers to common graduate attributes that employers look for; it states foreign language skills as one of these. Furthermore CBI (2015) carried out a survey which found that 54% of employers were not satisfied with graduates' foreign language skills. This highlights that students' foreign language skills should be developed to ensure that students are able to meet potential employers' needs in the graduate market.

However, the gap in awareness levels of other cultures between these groups was much narrower – the WA students had a slight edge with 71% responding that they were either 'Aware' or 'Very Aware' of other cultures, compared with 68% of non-WA students. This trend seemed to persist into awareness of international exchange opportunities, with 73% of WA students reporting awareness compared to 66% of non-WA students. However, WA students were more likely to view family commitments, confidence, and finance as potential barriers to international study than their non-WA peers; whereas both groups indicated similar levels of attitude towards work commitments, language, and disability as potential barriers:

### Key Message:

The benefits of an international exchange are well known, but there are three clear barriers for WA students: finance, confidence, and family commitments. The University should recognise these distinct barriers and develop measures to address them.

### What barriers do you perceive there being to international exchange for you? (multiple responses possible)

	Financial	Work Commitments	Confidence	Family Commitments	Language	Disability
<b>WA</b>	81%	33%	31%	28%	41%	4%
<b>Non-WA</b>	60%	32%	22%	18%	42%	4%
<b>Total</b>	74%	32%	28%	25%	41%	4%



## Work experience and career awareness

The majority of respondents have not yet used the University of Strathclyde Careers Service; only 17% of WA students and 20% of non-WA students indicated that they have taken advantage of the support available.

### Key Message:

The Careers Service is under-utilised by History students in general; but those who do use it respond positively.

42% of WA respondents indicated that they are in part-time employment, slightly less than their non-WA peers (46%). Ford et al. (1995) highlights a survey which found that the majority of students working part-time, during term-time, encountered academic consequences. Ford et al. (1995) goes on to further argue that this included reduced time for academic study, missing course deadlines and having a negative impact on social life. However, when asked '*If you are employed do you work more than 12 hours per week?*' 38% of non-WA students responded affirmatively compared to 30% of WA students. Curtis and Shani (2002) note that the more hours a student works, the less time they would have for studying. Another drawback is revealed for working during full-time study. Curtis and Shani (2002) found that 46% of students surveyed stated that they felt they could get better grade marks on assignments if they had not been working. This reveals that students who have employment may face hurdles as a direct result of working during term-time. Interestingly despite working more hours non-WA students were less confident that they had 'relevant' work experience with 30% responding either 'Very Confident' or 'Confident', fewer than the 43% of WA students. Similarly, WA students were more confident in their knowledge of their chosen career (42%) than non-WA respondents (36%). This trend continued in response to the question '*How confident are you of the job market and the opportunities available for History graduates?*', where 17% of WA respondents selected 'Very Confident' or 'Confident' compared with 12% of non-WA students. This backs up the idea that the University should provide more information on employment options so that History students can develop confidence in their future career goals and paths. This is backed up by employers, as Purcell et al. (2002) state that employers see many students as not being ready for the selection procedures that graduate employers carry out. In terms of career goals, in response to the question, '*What field of employment do you want to enter upon graduation?*', the majority of both groups selected 'Teaching and Education' although WA students (46%) were more likely to select this than non-WA students (30%). This difference is potentially explained by Redmond (2006) who argues that Widening Access students fall into teaching because it alleviates their social positioning and cultural standing, whilst also allowing them to make a difference; this is a key point for many entering the profession.

81% of WA respondents stated that a work placement could improve their employability; this was slightly less than non-WA respondents (84%). This highlights that both groups are able to identify certain areas of development. It can be argued that providing work placements for these students would be beneficial for them, as it is an area they lack experience in and would provide many benefits both during university and following graduation. The importance of relevant work experience is highlighted by CBI (2015), who state that one in five businesses view this as among the top three considerations for when recruiting.

The question '*How confident are you in your business and customer awareness?*' elicited a different response, with 66% of non-WA students responding positively, contrasting with 49% of WA students.

This may be linked to WA students as a whole being more drawn to teaching professions and perhaps not viewing education as a 'business' with 'customers'.

When asked 'What initiatives do you think the University should provide that would make History students more employable?' more non-WA respondents (38%) stated that a work placement would make them more employable, compared to 30% for WA students. However this still highlights that many students have identified an area of their university experience that could be enhanced. This area identified is one that employers and researchers argue the value of, particularly for Widening Access students. A report by the ARC Network (2013) states that work experience is a key enabler of success for those seeking a graduate job.

Therefore this shows the importance of allowing students to access work placements and gain relevant work experience.

The responses to this open-ended question are particularly interesting when considered alongside the previous question on employability. When explicitly asked about whether a workplace placement would improve employability, 81% of WA respondents replied 'yes'; but when confronted with an open-ended question about initiatives that could enhance employability, only 30% were drawn to workplace placements. This could suggest that whilst students recognise the benefits of a placement when their attention is drawn to it, it is not necessarily always on their mind when considering enhancing their employability.

**Key Message:**

The Careers Service, History department, and Widening Access team should work together to explore options for a variety of innovative work placements.

The survey asked for respondents to identify what type of placement they would like. Nearly half, 48%, of respondents stated they would like a museum placement. Interestingly a school placement was the second most popular response. WA respondents were higher at 35%, compared to the non-WA respondents of 22%. This again highlights that many WA students are likely to plan a career in teaching.

Furthermore when asked what initiatives would make students more employable slightly more non-WA students stated a work placement, at 38% compared to only 30% of WA respondents. However WA respondents had a slightly higher number when asking for information regarding employment opportunities, at 17% compared to non-WA at 14%.

## Independent and team working

Overall, students appear to have relatively high beliefs in their ability to work independently and also as part of a team. However, once again WA students were less likely to select the highest level of confidence than the non-WA participants. In response to the question, *'How confident are you in your ability to work independently/self-manage?'* 24% of WA students selected 'Very Confident', compared to 38% of non-WA respondents. Similarly, 42% of non-WA students were 'Very Confident' in their ability to work in a team, contrasting with 32% of WA students.

## Problem solving and analytical skills

Non-WA students continue to be more likely to select the highest level of confidence when asked about their problem solving and analytical skills. In response to the question, *'How confident are you in your ability to solve problems?'*, 16% of non-WA students responded 'Very Confident', double the 8% of WA students who selected the same response. Similarly when asked, *'How confident are you with your analytical skills?'*, 8% of WA students responded 'Very Confident' compared to 20% of non-WA respondents.

### Key Message:

Work is required to develop problem solving and analytical skills in students, particularly WA students. The History department should explore ways of further embedding these skills within the curriculum, to the benefit of all students.

## Finance

Whilst the same proportion of both WA and non-WA respondents indicated that their term-time financial situation was 'fairly good' (44% - *'I have enough, I can always pay my rent, and bills, but don't always have much left over'*), differences emerged at other ends of the scale. Non-WA students (22%) were much more likely to describe their financial situation as perfect compared to WA students (8%); and 26% of WA students responded 'I struggle', compared with 14% of non-WA students.

### Key Message:

As may be expected, WA students are more likely to experience financial difficulty. Students should be channelled to the Student Financial Support Team for advice on available scholarships and bursaries, and also for tailored money management advice.

The Student Loan is the main source of income for both groups of students, although WA students are more likely to also rely upon bursaries than their non-WA peers:

What do you use to financially support your studies? (multiple responses possible)			
	WA	Non-WA	Total
Student Loan	61%	50%	57%
Pay Day Lenders (e.g. Wonga)	2%	0%	1%
The Discretionary Fund	4%	0%	1%
Student Bursaries	27%	8%	21%
Student Grants	7%	2%	6%
Bank Loans	2%	2%	2%
Financial support from family	26%	34%	29%
Loan from family/friends	3%	4%	3%
State benefits	5%	0%	3%
Savings	22%	34%	26%
Wages	45%	56%	49%
Scholarship	2%	0%	1%
No response	16%	18%	17%

## Stress and retention

More non-WA respondents (22%) than WA (18%) answered that they have considered withdrawing from university. Respondents who indicated such a consideration were asked a follow-up question, 'If you answered yes please let us know why'. The responses to this question were free-text and of a very personal nature so they are difficult to group together but some common concerns were related to struggling with the workload, deadlines, and a feeling of unhappiness with their chosen course.

Students who considered leaving the University were also asked if they received any support and guidance from the University. 30% indicated that they had received some form of support.

Survey participants were provided with categories and asked which of them causes the most stress.

Non-WA students seem more stressed by assignments whilst WA students are more likely to worry about their finances:

### Key Message:

Financial worries could be deflecting concern from coursework for WA students. The importance of staying on top of coursework should be highlighted alongside financial guidance.

What among the following causes you the most stress?						
	Assignments	Exams	Family	Finances	Friends at uni	No response
WA	19%	32%	7%	21%	2%	19%
Non-WA	36%	34%	2%	10%	0%	18%
Total	25%	32%	6%	17%	1%	19%

## Volunteering

When asked “Are you a member of a club, society, sports team, or involved in volunteering of any kind?” non-WA respondents tended to appear more involved at 42%, whereas for WA only 35% stated yes. This shows that non-WA are less likely to be involved in volunteering opportunities.

## Value of Degree

The question “What value, separate from a cause and effect relationship on gaining employment, does your degree have?” was responded to with varying results. ‘Skills’ was identified as a value and was the most popular response. Non-WA respondents (34%) chose this more than WA respondents (26%), which suggests that more non-WA respondents realise that their skills are being developed as a result of their degree. However in terms of why the students applied for university in the first place, answers were almost even in stating that it was because they had an interest in the subject (82% for non-WA and 79% for WA). This shows that the majority of students have a passion and interest in the degree they are studying. Again non-WA respondents cited better employment prospects (64%) as one of the reasons for applying to university; this was only slightly higher than the 60% of WA respondents. However the data reveals that there is a higher proportion of non-WA respondents (44%) that applied for university due to family encouragement, compared to WA respondents (28%). This reveals the differences in family environments at home, as WA families may be more reluctant of encouraging people to go to university, for example due to fear of debt, whereas this may not be a concern for non-WA families.

### Key Message:

The majority of all students applied due to an interest in the subject; but non-WA students are more likely to have received support and encouragement from their families.

More WA respondents stated that they do not feel as if they are a part of the University community, at 34% compared to only 26% of non-WA respondents.

## Commuting and Family

Slightly more non-WA respondents live with their parents (62%) compared to 59% of WA respondents. However 6% of WA respondents lived with their friends, compared to 0% of non-WA respondents. This is interesting when you compare these figures to those living with students that are friends. As 18% of non-WA respondents live with friends that are students, compared to 8% of WA students, this suggests that non-WA respondents may be more likely to form friendships and move in with other students, whereas WA students may display a tendency to stay with the friendship groups they have created prior to university and stay with friends that are not students.

There are similar levels of those that are and are not commuting. 72% of WA and 74% of non-WA respondents stated they commute to university. However non-WA respondents are traveling further during their commute, as 32% of non-WA students are traveling 31-60 minutes compared to 22% of WA students.

## Interview Analysis

Four current University of Strathclyde undergraduate History students were interviewed as part of the research. To preserve anonymity, they have been allocated pseudonyms within this report:

- Jane is a Widening Access student. She is first in her immediate family to attend university, is a direct entrant student, and is also a mature student.
- Liam is a Widening Access student. He is a mature student and is the first in his immediate family to attend university.
- Amanda is a Widening Access student. She is also first in her immediate family to attend university.
- Beth is not a Widening Access student.

## Hurdles to study, employability, international experience and family support

### Commute time and the impact on study and social experience

Jane expressed that she found it difficult to access the University library book loan service due to her commute time. Jane stated *“So it was quite a long travel, I have to get two buses, or if I miss the bus it’s the train, so it’s a bus and a train or two buses. And the journey is quite tedious and quite long...”*

When asked if this presented a barrier to her taking part in extracurricular activities Jane stated that she could not afford to take a book home, especially short loan books, as the travel time did not make it feasible for her to return them. This reveals that students with a long commute time face hurdles when trying to access study materials, such as the short term library loan service for books. Data from the History student survey shows that 26% of respondents’ travel time is 31-60 minutes and 5% are traveling for over an hour. This highlights the importance of ensuring that services are in place for students who have a long commute time.

#### Key Message:

Time-bound services, such as short-term library loans, could disproportionately negatively affect students with longer commute times.

Jane also goes on to explain another hurdle she faces due to her commuting time. She states that during the winter, trains are often cancelled and as a result she can be late and sometimes even miss her classes – creating further stress and a higher workload for her.

On the other hand Beth, a non-WA student, lives in the local area. She explains that she does not face many hurdles due to her commute. She states it is easy for her to travel to university and that during long break periods between classes she can easily go home. She states, *“It does not hinder me at all.”* This shows a direct contrast to Jane’s experience, a student that does have long commute times and therefore faces hurdles due to this. However Beth does note that being a student that does not live on campus still has drawbacks. When asked if commuting to university from home makes her less likely to join clubs and societies Beth stated *“I think so, because...I can just go home,*

*if I was living at university campus I would be more into it.*". This highlights the impact that commuting has on both accessing study materials and upon the social life of students.

## Previous educational establishment and its impact on university preparedness

Jane, a direct entry and WA student also, explained the hurdle she faced due to her previous experience in college. She explained that in college the work was "spoon-fed" and at university it is not; there is a larger workload, and more independence and initiative is expected. She explained that at college there was more one-to-one time with a tutor, whereas at university the experience is completely different. This suggests that a transition hurdle for some college students could be that they are used to having information and answers given to them, but when they join the University they realise it is not like that at all.

However in contrast to this Beth also came from college but is not a direct entry student. She explained that her college had emphasised that at university she "would **not** be spoon-fed" and as a result the college often prepared students for independent learning and encouraged them to use initiative. Reflecting upon this experience Beth pointed out that she felt more confident than school leavers, as they had not had this experience of being prepared by college for university life. This is shown when Beth states "I think I felt a bit more confident than other people who I went to school with in their first year at uni".

### Key Message:

College entrants report a variety of pre-entry experiences, so the University should be cautious of regarding them as a homogeneous group.

This highlights two different experiences and expectations of university. Jane had clearly been exposed to an environment where she was "spoon-fed" the information, whereas Beth had experienced an environment which explicitly expressed that at university students will not be "spoon-fed". This reveals how two different colleges can prepare two students differently for university.

Amanda is a WA student who came to university after her 5<sup>th</sup> year in high school and she felt that as a result her academic skills were not strong enough. Amanda goes on to explain that she realised that at high school she was spoon-fed everything but at university students are expected to do things on their own. Amanda summarises her feelings towards her academic skills by stating "My vocabulary, writing skills, everything was just, I felt, really inadequate." This reveals that Amanda, as a 1<sup>st</sup> year History student, lacked confidence in her own skill set, perhaps due to the way she had been educated in her previous educational establishment.

Liam undertook a SWAP course prior to coming to university. His experience differed from that of both Beth and Jane. He argued that the SWAP course did not really prepare him for university assignments or exams. Liam expressed that he felt other students, particularly younger ones coming from high school, would be more prepared for university than him as they had recently undertaken exams. As a mature student, Liam had not undertaken exams in quite a long time and felt at a disadvantage when compared to other, younger students. This reveals another educational establishment experience and the impact it had on this student's skill set and confidence with managing university academic work.



## Assignments

Beth explained that assignments were one of the factors most likely to cause stress at university. She explained that assignments were *“one after the other”*. As a result of this it led to her becoming very stressed in 2<sup>nd</sup> year and she considered dropping out of university as a direct result. This reveals the huge amount of stress that assignments can have on History students.

Jane has similar thoughts. She states that deadlines (for assignments) were the most stressful factor at university. She explained that she had to prioritise classes to ensure she could meet her deadlines.

Liam also agrees with this view stating that both exams and assignments caused him lots of stress.

Amanda also agrees with this, she goes further and states that she felt most stressed when *“...you have all of your deadlines at the same time”*. She goes on to explain that all of a student’s assignments could be due in the same week if they were *“unlucky”*.

As detailed above all interviewed History students, both WA and non-WA, expressed that assignments caused them the greatest amount of stress, particularly in the case of assignments which are due near the same time.

Interestingly, only 25% of the survey respondents declared assignments to be the most stressful item; but a further 32% deemed exams as the most stressful factor, showing that over half of all History students feel stress at assessed components of their degree programmes. Amanda summarised her thoughts with assignments by stating *“...I felt that in History sometimes it just felt like you were drowning”*.

### Key Message:

Degree staff should work together across modules to reduce ‘assignment bunching’. Deadlines should be spread out to reduce anxiety.

## Employability and perception of own degree and its value

Amanda was very aware of the value of a History degree, as she was able to explain the skills she had gained and how this would help her into direct employment. When asked what skills the degree has helped her develop, she states *“Research skills definitely.”* This reveals she is aware of how the degree has helped her develop during her time at university. She went on to further show this when she stated she was very confident with her degree in terms of gaining employment.

Beth expressed similar ideas, she was able to state the skills she had gained and how she could use them to get a job. She stated, *“...I might not get a job in History but certainly the skill of analysing will help me in life.”* This reveals that both these students are aware of the skills that their degree has developed and how they can utilise these when seeking graduate employment.

Jane explains that her degree has developed core skills and that it will be useful in terms of getting employment. She stated that employers would understand the benefits of employing a History graduate, as they can clearly carry out work. Jane goes on to explain how her communication skills have been developed as a result of her degree.

These opinions are backed up by data from the History student survey. The data states that, separate from employment, a degree in History can help students develop their own skills(29%), knowledge(23%) and personal development(28%). This therefore shows that the majority of History



students have an in-depth knowledge about ways in which their degrees can be useful in terms of gaining employment.

Liam's opinion is in direct contrast to these ideas. He stated that his degree would not be very good in terms of getting a job – outwith any job that asks for any discipline. He explained that the degree would not help him get a job in a specific career route. This perception of the History degree is also shared by other History students. This is shown by data in the History student survey. When asked if they were confident of the job market and opportunities for History graduates 45% of students stated they were unsure. Furthermore 19% were unconfident and another 10% were very unconfident. This reveals that the majority of History students do not know how their degree can get them employment or are not confident that their degree will help them gain employment.

**Key Message:**

Students may not be able to identify future career paths, but they can identify which skills their degree has developed. Work should be undertaken to help these students view these skills as applicable to identifiable careers.

However, when asked if the degree had helped him to develop skills, Liam explained that his degree had developed his public speaking and communication skills. He went on to explain how seminars had developed his communication skills highly. This shows Liam's attitudes towards his degree are that it will be difficult to get a job but he is aware of the skills he has developed.

A quotation from Beth summarises some attitudes towards the History degree. Beth was asked if there is a negative view, towards the degree in History, from other people studying History. In response to this Beth stated *"I think they are assuming you can't do much with it..."*

## International Experience

All students were asked if they had taken part in an international exchange. Beth explained that she faced personal difficulty, as her disability meant it would be difficult for her to travel. Therefore she would not take part in an exchange. In the History student survey 4% of students stated that disability was a barrier to international exchange. As disabled students are a minority and an under-represented group at university Beth's own thoughts on this matter may not be an isolated occurrence. Therefore this is an area the University should consider and explore in more detail.

Jane had a different reason for not taking up an international exchange. She explained that she did not have the funds to do it and that *"money was an issue"*. She explained that if she had the funds she would pursue this. The financial burden that an exchange creates is a view held by a large majority of History students. This is shown in the History student survey which reveals that 74% of students viewed finances as a barrier to taking part in exchanges. This highlights the majority view that finance and financial circumstances are a factor that must be considered when thinking about undertaking an exchange program.

**Key Message:**

Finance is a key barrier to international study for WA students. However, there is a variety of funding available. The History department should work with RIO to raise the profile of this support from early in students' degrees.

Amanda shares this idea and reveals that if she had taken part in an exchange then the barrier would have been finances. She argues that students only find out about exchange programs a short time before the relevant application deadline; she explained that there was little time to prepare the necessary funds. This is shown when she states *"...if people are made more aware of it in first year they maybe have more time to put some of their SAAS aside or something, but by the time we were being told about it, it was a few months until you had to apply."*

Liam explains that his family commitments prevent him from carrying out an exchange program. He states *"If I didn't have a child I would definitely go ahead and do that but there's no way I can do it."* This idea of family commitments preventing international exchange is one shared by other History students. Liam was not the only student who perceived family commitments as a barrier to international study, as the History student survey data reveals 25% of students shared similar concerns.

### Financial support from family

Beth explained that for finances she was supported through her loan, SAAS and that her parents helped her out. This is shown when she states *"...I use SAAS and the loans and that, and my mum and dad help me out as well, so it's kind of part and parcel, both"*. However not all History students can use their family for financial support. Only 29% of History students in the survey stated that family were used as financial support. This reveals that Beth's family support is not what the majority of students will have access to.

### Communication with academic staff

Beth's family were able to support her with various aspects of her university life. For example when she had to contact university support staff she was able to utilise her father, as he is a lecturer. This is shown when Beth stated *"I think my mum and dad helped me out with the first few emails, I would be like 'is that ok', my dad's a lecturer, I'd say 'does this look right' whatever, but I'm ok now."* Beth further goes on to explain that she had a good understanding of university expectations, due to her father being a lecturer. This is shown when she states *"...he sort of knew the ins and outs as a lecturer, what they were thinking and what they were expecting."* This displays ways in which Beth was able to assimilate into university life much easier than others, due to her family having an academic background.

However in direct contrast Jane does not have the same family experience and therefore her family support for university is limited. This is shown when she states *"But family wise I couldn't ask them, what university life was like, because my mum didn't go, she was just at college and then straight into work..."*. This reveals that Jane felt she couldn't ask them anything about university life, whereas Beth could because her family had had this experience. Jane further went on to explain, *"...if you have got an issue you can't really talk to your parents and say 'how did you resolve this while you were at university', you don't have that kind of contact."* This highlights that, as a student, she cannot approach her family with matters concerning university life, whereas Beth has this support in place for her. This therefore shows the differences in students' access to support at home based upon their family experiences.

#### Key Message:

Familial experience of HE is a definite advantage and staff should be aware of this. Not all of their students will have this privilege.

## Recommendations

From the analysis of the survey data and the interviews this report will now put forward recommendations for the University to consider when creating systems and services for Widening Access students.

### Placement and Work Experience

From the analysis it seems clear that students view a work placement as an initiative that would make them more employable. In the History student survey 83% of respondents stated that a work placement would improve their employability.

The majority of History students stated they would like a museum or school placement. 48% stated they would like a museum placement, and 30% stated they would like a school placement. 12% stated they would like a community placement. However it should also be recognised that securing specific placements, particularly within museums, is a difficult task. In view of the appetite for relevant work placements, the History department, Careers Service, and Widening Access team could work together to identify innovative placement opportunities which would allow students to enhance and articulate their employability skills.

### The development of skills

From the interview analysis it is clear that some students are able to identify specific skills and attributes which the History degree has helped them develop. However in the survey analysis foreign language skills came up as one area that more than half of students were not confident in. A large number of History students lack the confidence in their foreign language skills. 34% are unconfident and 36% are very unconfident. Therefore it is recommended that foreign language classes and more foreign language learning opportunities are developed to allow History students to enhance this vital sought-after skill. One suggestion would be for the History department to work with Scotland's National Centre for Language (SCILT) to increase foreign language development opportunities. SCILT is based in the University of Strathclyde and has already delivered various language CPD events for primary, secondary and postgraduate education students at the University of Strathclyde. Both Widening Access students and non-Widening Access groups were almost equally unconfident in their foreign language skills. However 42% of Widening Access students stated they were very unconfident compared to only 24% of non-Widening Access students. This highlights that this is an area of development for both groups, however it is clear that a large amount of Widening Access students in particular lack strong confidence in their foreign skills. It is recommended that classes are created which are open to all History students but which are particularly targeted and marketed towards Widening Access students.

Confidence in academic skills is an area that was highlighted as an issue from the survey data and the interview analysis. For example one interviewee made it explicit that she felt her academic skills, when joining university, were not good enough or a high enough standard. Furthermore the differences between academic confidence has been made explicit between the Widening Access students and non-Widening Access students. It is recommended that steps are taken to ensure that History students are aware of the provision of the Study Skills team, and that they are reminded of the expert support and guidance offered by this team on a regular basis. It would also be prudent to

ensure that there is sufficient capacity within the Study Skills team to meet any increased demand as a result of their raised profile within the History department.

## Careers Service

It is apparent from survey data that the majority of students are not accessing the Careers Service. An overwhelming majority of 74% History students have not yet used the Careers Service. However from analysis of the survey data and interview sessions it is apparent that many students feel that they are unsure or not confident in their knowledge of job opportunities, future employability and career routes. All of this information can be gained from the Careers Service and therefore it is recommended that the Careers Service increases its awareness on campus and advertises its services further so that students can take advantage of the expert guidance on offer. It is also suggested that the History department works in partnership with the Careers Service to promote relevant information about employability to History students, whilst continuing to ensure that all information is relevant to the current job climate and market. This report has found that when students have accessed the support offered by the Careers Service they have found it to be beneficial and were very positive in their comments; however, it was also noted that there were often long waiting times to get appointments, so taking steps to address this would also be a positive development.

## Library Services

The report has revealed the impact that commuting has on various areas of academic life for students. For example it was revealed that having a long commuting time meant that one student, Jane, could not take short loan books out from the library. This was because the travel time to and from university did not make it feasible to take short loan books out. This experience is important as the statistics, from the survey, show that 26% of students' travel time is 31-60 minutes and 5% are traveling for over an hour. Therefore it is recommended that the library services consider increasing the time of short term loan services and offer some flexibility or separate provision for students that are commuting to university, especially for those traveling long distances over long periods of time. It is recommended that academic staff are made aware of the burden that long commute times can have on students and are encouraged to be as flexible as possible, with regards to their circumstances. An example of current good practice exhibited by many academic members of staff is allowing all lecture materials to be available via the VLE, so that students who cannot make it in to university due to travel and exceptional reasons can still access the same materials as others.

## Expectations of University

The interview analysis has highlighted that students had varying levels of expectations before they came to university, and some of these expectations did not match with real academic life. For example Jane explained that she faced a transition hurdle because she had been "*spoon-fed*" at college. Therefore it is recommended that the University continues to ensure that prospective students are made aware of the demands that degree level study involves, regardless of their academic background and entry-route. It is important that students have realistic expectations of university so that when they arrive they have an idea of what they will face.

## Assignments

The interview analysis revealed that students felt a large amount of stress from assignments; even to the extent that one student considered dropping out due to the pressure of these. All interviews

stated that assignments caused a lot of stress; however one student explained that “unlucky” students may find that all of their assignments could be due in the same week. To support students in their assignments during term-time it is recommended that assignment deadlines are not scheduled for the same week, where possible. It is recommended that the University bears in mind the amount of stress that assignments can cause. Initiatives could also be developed to help tackle exam stress and alleviate some of the negative effects of assignments. An example of current good practice in this area is the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences’ holiday Study Skills Top-Up Programme for BA students, which over December 2015 and January 2016 offered four half-days for students to attend sessions to receive tailored revision tips and guidance.

Survey participants were provided with categories and asked which of them causes the most stress. Non-WA students seem more stressed by assignments whilst WA students are more likely to worry about their finances. Therefore it is recommended that the University bears in mind the different forms of circumstances that could cause students stress, not only focusing on assignments but other needs such as financial circumstances.

### **International Exchange**

The financial burden that an exchange creates is a view held by a large majority of History students. This is shown in the History student survey which reveals that 74% of students viewed finances as a barrier to taking part in exchanges. This highlights the majority view that finance and financial circumstances are a factor that must be considered when thinking about undertaking an exchange programme. Two interviewees explained that financial burden meant that they could not take part in an international exchange. It is recommended that the University promotes the available financial support packages and exchange opportunities from as early as first year, to raise awareness of the support that is available for students that wish to take part in an international exchange and to also provide students with time to plan and save additional funds.

The survey data revealed that WA students were more likely to view family commitments, confidence, and finance as potential barriers to international study than their non-WA peers; whereas both groups indicated similar attitudes towards work commitments, language, and disability as potential barriers. Therefore it is recommended that University services remember to include different forms of support for students, not purely financial.

### **Volunteering**

Due to less than half of students reporting that they take part in volunteering activities it is recommended that the University continues to publish, advertise and promote various volunteering activities. Since WA students are less likely to take part in volunteering it is recommended that some opportunities are created and aimed at that target audience, to help increase the number of WA students taking up volunteering opportunities.

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## Appendix: The Survey Questions

**You are about to take part in the History student experience survey. The purpose of this survey is to enhance the opportunities of history students and provide a more robust level of support.**

**If you successfully complete the entire survey you will be entered into a prize draw to win £40**

**There are 56 questions in total. Questions 1-5 are compulsory.**

**By participating in this survey, you are giving us consent to use the data you provide for analytical purposes and to explore and improve the student experience of history students. You are also agreeing for us to use such data, in an anonymised form, in research outputs such as presentations and papers'**



## Opening Questions

\* 1. Are you the first generation of your immediate family to go to university?

Yes

No

\* 2. What high school did you attend before university?

\* 3. What was your home postcode at point of your application to university?

\* 4. Were you ever looked after or in care? (This might have been in foster care, residential care, formal kinship care or by means of a home supervision requirement)

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

\* 5. Are you a mature student? (Age 21 or over on the first day of university)

Yes

No

## Confidence in Ability

6. How confident are you in your ability to write academically?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

7. How confident are you in your ability to write and think critically?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

8. How confident are you in your ability to construct emails?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

9. How confident are you in your foreign language skills?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

10. How confident are you in your business and customer awareness?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

11. How confident are you that you have relevant work experience?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

12. How aware are you of international cultures?

Very Aware

Aware

Unsure

Unaware

Very Unaware

13. How confident are you in your ability to work independently/self-manage?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

14. How confident are you in your knowledge of your chosen job/career?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

15. How confident are you in your communication skills?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

16. How confident are you in your ability to work in a team?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

17. How confident are you in your ability to solve problems?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

18. How confident are you with your analytical skills?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

19. How confident are you with basic literacy and use of English?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

20. How confident are you with basic numeracy skills?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

21. How confident are you in your internet literacy skills (e.g navigating websites etc)

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

22. How confident are you in the use of IT?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

## Uptake/Awareness of University Services

23. Are you aware of International exchange opportunities?

Yes

No

24. What barriers do you perceive there being to international exchange for you? (You are able to select multiple options)

Financial

Work Commitments

Confidence

Disability

Family commitments

Language

25. Have you used the careers service?

Yes

No

## Employment and Volunteering

26. Are you in employment?

- Fulltime employment
- Part-time employment
- Fulltime study
- Part-time study

27. If you are employed do you work more than 12 hours per week?

- Yes
- No

28. How confident are you of the job market and the opportunities available for history graduates?

Very Confident

Confident

Unsure

Unconfident

Very Unconfident

29. What field of employment do you want to enter upon graduation?

- Accountancy, Banking and Finance
- Business, Consulting and Management
- Creative Arts and Design
- Charity and Voluntary Work
- Energy and Utilities
- Engineering and Manufacturing
- Environment and Agriculture
- Healthcare
- Hospitality
- Law
- Information Technology
- Marketing, Advertising and PR
- Law Enforcement and Security
- Leisure, Sport and Tourism
- Media and Internet
- Property and Construction
- Recruitment and HR
- Public Services and Admin
- Sales
- Retail
- Social Care
- Science and Pharmaceuticals
- Teaching and Education
- Transport and Logistics

Other (please specify)

30. Are you a member of a club, society, sports team, or involved in volunteering of any kind? (Can include volunteering within the university and external to the university)

Yes

No

What volunteering are you involved in (if any)

## Perception of Degree and University

31. What do you think the purpose of university is?

32. What value, separate from a cause and effect relationship on gaining employment, does your degree have?

33. Why did you apply to university? (You are able to select multiple options)

- Interested in the subject
- Better employment prospects
- Encouragement from family
- Personal reasons
- Political reasons
- Not given it much thought

Other (please specify)

34. Rank the following graduates in order of their employability? (1 being the highest, 7 being the lowest)

<input type="text"/>	History
<input type="text"/>	Physics
<input type="text"/>	Computer Science
<input type="text"/>	English
<input type="text"/>	Business
<input type="text"/>	Social Work
<input type="text"/>	Civil Engineering



## Helpful Initiatives

35. Do you think a placement in a workplace would improve your employability?

Yes

No

36. What placement would you like? (e.g. office, school, history museum, community project)

37. What initiatives do you think the university should provide that would make history students more employable?

## Finance and Retention

38. What do you use to financially support your studies? (You are able to select multiple options)

- Student Loan
- Pay Day Lenders (e.g. Wonga)
- The Discretionary Fund
- Student Bursaries
- Student Grants
- Bank Loan
- Financial support from family
- Loan from family/friends
- State Benefits
- Savings
- Wages
- Scholarship

39. How would you describe your financial situation during term time?

- Perfect - I have enough to pay my rent, bills, and have lots of money left over.
- Fairly good - I have enough I can always pay my rent, and bills, but don't always have much left over.
- I struggle - I really have to watch what I spend as I often find I'm short of money
- I'm desperate - I do not have enough money and often can't pay for rent, bills and food.

40. Have you ever considered withdrawing from University?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes please let us know why.

41. If you have thought about leaving university did you receive support and guidance from the university

42. What among the following causes you the most stress?

Assignments

Finances

Friends from home

Family

Friends at university

Exams

Other (please specify)

43. Do you feel part of the university community?

Yes

No

## Demographic Questions

44. Who do you live with?

- With family/parents
- With friends
- With students (friends)
- With students (non-friends)

45. Do you commute to university

- Yes
- No

46. If yes to the above question, how long do you commute for per journey?

- 0-10 minutes
- 11-20 minutes
- 21-30 minutes
- 31-60 minutes
- More than an hour

47. Are you in full time or part time study?

- Full
- Part-Time

48. What year are you in?

- 1st Year Undergraduate
- 2nd Year Undergraduate
- 3rd Year Undergraduate
- 4th Year Undergraduate

49. Are you a direct entry student? (E.g straight into 2nd or 3rd year)

- Yes
- No

50. Are you a pre-entry student? (Entered via OS610 Access to University Education)

Yes

No

51. Did you attend college before starting university

Yes

No

52. What is your ethnic heritage?

White

White - Scottish

Gypsy or Traveller

Other White background

Black or Black British - Caribbean

Black or Black British - African

Other Black background

Asian or Asian British - Indian

Asian or Asian British - Pakistani

Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi

Chinese

Other Asian background

Mixed - White and Black Caribbean

Mixed - White and Black African

Mixed - White and Asian

Other mixed background

Arab

Jewish

Other ethnic background

Not known

Prefer not to say

53. What sex are you? If you would describe yourself as e.g. Intersex or polygender, please enter 'other'.

Male

Female

Other (please specify)

54. Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were originally assigned at birth?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

55. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

Bisexual

Gay man

Gay woman/lesbian

Heterosexual

Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

56. Do you self-define as having a disability?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say