

# The future of higher education today

## Episode 2: First in my family – Transcript

Hello! I'm Lauren Harper, and this is The future of higher education today.

We bring people together to talk about the big questions facing higher education, its future and its purpose. Today we're asking: who goes to university?

We all know that going to university is a big decision. It's not just about the person in her family to go to uni.

When I was younger, I was always speaking to my dad and asking him to ask why it's so important that everyone has an equal chance.



indulgent because just no one in our family had ever been. They were just completely unaware of what was possible.

And they would say to me, like, what are you going to do? Like, what are you going to do with this? And I'd say: 'I'm going to be a scientist. I want to be a scientist.' And I just think they just didn't really understand that that was something that we could do, I could do.

Would you say that you found any other barriers?

As I mentioned before, finances were a big issue. They still are. If you're going to do higher education right, maybe you've still got a bit more scope in your undergrad to work while you study. But you know, essentially your study should be a full-time job. And then, you know, you're trying to work as well and you want to do as well as you can in your course. And that's really, really challenging.

I certainly found when I got to master's level and I had to take a year off work, I was 28, 29 years old, something like that. And I took a year off work to go and do my master's and I had to have so much money saved up to kind of get me through that process.

And also, you know, there is a psychological aspect. I did do my undergrad twice. My first time I dropped out. My second time I stuck with it. The second time was the environmental science, but the first time I just couldn't mentally handle it.

And I don't think it was necessarily the pressure from the course, but the pressure was kind of really moving from being a teenager into adulthood, being away from your family, being away from your support system and around all these new people. And they could be the nicest people in the world, but you can still feel isolated, you can still feel lonely. I think that not having close family members that have been through that process, you don't really know what to expect.

And if you were to go back now and look at your undergraduate journey, well, even now, I guess even in your postgrad, do you think that there's any support that you could think of that would have helped you?

Definitely one of the main challenges is the emotional and psychological strain this process can put on you. These are feelings everyone has, you know, to differing degrees. Everyone's going to be affected by that. And I think cultivating an environment where those discussions are every day and they are encouraged is so, so beneficial.

And recently, I've been having some slight struggles and I end up speaking to one of my student colleagues and he said, 'oh, my God, you know, I feel exactly the same way.' And suddenly it was like, 'whoa, okay, that's fine. Then it's not me. It's not my fault. I'm not, you know, it's just part of the process.'

So I think from the point of view of what universities can do, it's really investing whatever time and resources and compassion is needed to make sure that every person knows that it's okay to feel however they're going to feel about stuff, and they just need to talk about it.







of proportion of people who go to university, but it's a significant portion of people who don't, and what could we do for them as well?

So I think it's not just about young people coming through at 18 or a little bit older. It's also about people who are in work at the moment who've missed those education opportunities and what the government can do for them. And I think there are some big challenges around things like adult careers advice and the support that people get.

I mean, the government very helpfully developing something called a lifelong loan entitlement at the moment is a more flexible system that people can access funding to develop their education at higher levels. But without good advice and guidance that sits behind that, are they're going to be making the right choices about taking out that or using that investment in a wise way?

So I think there some big challenges there about the sort of support that people are getting.

Thank you so much to both of you. Thank you, Amy, for sharing your experience, and being so honest and open. And thank you, Chris, as well. It's been great having you in and being able to feed in your personal experience as well, which we really appreciate, because is really good to hear that.

Earlier on we spoke to Amy Solman about the challenges she faced entering higher education. Joining me is Dan.

Hi Lauren. I'm Dan Hurley, I'm Assistant Director of Policy at Universities UK and I lead our work on admissions and access.

I was first generation actually, and I put the fact that I ended up going to university – which was 100% the right choice for me – I put that down to having good careers advice at my school. There was nobody in my family who'd had experience of a university.

And actually I remember on the day when I mentioned to family members, parents, grandparents that I was considering university, you just caught a glimpse of the puzzled faces and the response was: 'Why on earth would you want to do that? Go and get a job and work in a bank, have a job for life, and that's you sorted.'

So actually, without the kind of support and advice I'd got from careers advisors and teachers at school, I would no way have even considered that university was an option for me, and that was life changing in my case, and for lots of other people,



especially first generation students. But I think when we talk to universities and to young people in schools now, the importance of careers advice is as important as ever.

Yes, we've seen schools and others make strides in providing decent careers advice to allow people to make truly informed choices. We've still got really strong gaps in participation at university between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Careers advice and sort of shaping and raising aspirations remains a priority. It has to.

And could you tell us a bit about how the cost of living crisis has been affecting students?

We've been doing some opinion polling with students recently and actually the results are quite stark. Unsurprisingly, most people are concerned about cost of living. There are strong implications for people's ability to pay their bills. People are worried about their mental health and wellbeing being impacted by the cost of living crisis, and there are also wider implications about fuel costs travelling to university and from placements if that affects you also.

I think one of the things that we're clear on is that there is definitely a need for more action to support students to ease some of these costs of living pressures. And that's not something that any one party or organisation is going to solve by ourselves. There's definitely a role for universities, I think, in being really proactive and putting interventions in on the ground to do what they can to ease some of those cost pressures, and we're speaking from members a lot at the moment about what some of these

Well, I think overall, universities are doing a really good job in widening access, widening opportunity. We've got a more diverse student population year upon year,

I think that's actually one of the things that we've seen really develop even further since 2020, and really to the benefit of students. Particularly if you are, for example, a first-generation student, then you don't really have that network to draw on to say or to ask: 'What is university life like? What can I expect?' We all might be able to talk to our school or something if we're that age, but there's nothing quite like maybe friends and family giving you that sort of trusted experience.

So I think universities' own work in that area has really stepped up and it's been really positive to see.

Do you think we've got enough provision to support more people wanting to go to university or maybe older people wanting to go to university?

I mean, I think it's fair to say not everybody who applies in any year will get a place. Some universities and some particular courses at the most selective ends of the of the sector are oversubscribed. I think we're really mindful that the demographics are shifting in a way that the percentage of 18-year-olds applying to university is going up too.

I think one of the messages that we've got this year is there is lots of choice throughout the sector. Universities are places to welcome anyone with the talent to succeed. And that means anybody of all ages, for example, to take your points about mature students in particular.

Thank you so much for speaking to us today. Dan, it was really interesting to hear what you have to say on the subject. So thank you so much and thanks for sharing your experience.

Thank you, Lauren.

Everyone on this podcast today was a first-generation student. We've heard how transformative and life changing going to university was for them. It's not going to be the right choice for everyone, but it's important that anyone who has the ability and desire to go has the opportunity and the support to do so.

While there are more people from different backgrounds to any degree, students are still facing a lot of challenges and barriers, including the current cost of living crisis and the effects of the pandemic.

If you'd like to hear more about the experience of being a first-generation student, I wrote an article about my experience, which you can find on Universities UK's website, and in the description of this podcast.

