

Accessing Robert Gordon University: The experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Sarah Minty & Stephen Vertigans
School of Applied Social Studies
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Executive Summary

Introduction

Researchers from Robert Gordon University's (RGU) School of Applied Social Studies explored the pathways and influences that hindered and enabled current students from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education at the University. The qualitative study focused on the relationships, institutions and experiences that shaped students' decisions and capacity to enrol at RGU. It aimed to inform future approaches to enable more people from disadvantaged positions to pursue higher education opportunities, thereby improving their life chances.

Routes to RGU

The research findings highlight the different experiences and various challenges and enablers faced by students depending on the route they took to RGU. Generally, those entering directly from S6 faced less pronounced obstacles, partly related to their relatively higher attainment levels (vs those entering via college). School entrants faced more subtle barriers, with issues around attainment, subject choice (e.g., availability of Advanced Highers) and teaching practices impacting upon degree subject and institution decisions. Students emphasised how highly education was valued and perceived as a route to a better life by their parents; however, parents were often unable to assist with the practicalities of applying to university, leaving students to rely on their teachers or themselves.

Students who entered the university via college were notably more disadvantaged than those entering directly from school. College entrants had lower attainment, and more than half were early school leavers. They were more likely to live locally to the University and less likely to be from MD20 areas, despite high levels of disadvantage (e.g., homelessness; financial hardship; disrupted learning; adverse childhood experiences; dyslexia; bereavement; and involvement with Children's Hearings). For those without family to provide support, positive reinforcement and encouragement from school, college, work colleagues and other professionals were key in countering low confidence and self-esteem. The importance of being able to make multiple (often unsuccessful) attempts at FE and college-based HE courses was often raised, with students able to move between courses and institutions, and in and out of education to care for families and build careers prior to entering RGU. There was evidence of duplication with students undertaking multiple courses at the same qualification level. Rates of articulation varied; the majority of HNC students entered first year rather than taking direct entry, citing low confidence. Women's education was often interrupted by pregnancy and childcare responsibilities.

Choosing to study at RGU

More than half the sample came from outside Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire. Students' decisions to study at RGU were informed by a mixture of attainment, attitudes to finance, distance from home and parental influence. Students commented on regional patterns of HE participation, with those from the West of Scotland generally more reluctant initially to travel to Aberdeen. The financial implications of moving away from home to study were a key barrier, with Aberdeen viewed as an expensive city. Visits to the University played a key role in students' decisions to enrol at RGU.

Around two-fifths of students lived locally to the University, and the majority of these students applied only to RGU. They were often familiar with the campus through friends, family and school outreach. Distance from home was key to their decision, with many older students tied to Aberdeen by parenting responsibilities, employment, family and support networks. Younger students noted the financial and domestic benefits of remaining in the parental home, and of studying with friends. Several care experienced students wished to leave Aberdeen to study but were unable to due to financial barriers.

Experiences of RGU and factors in retention

RGU was overwhelmingly described by students from all backgrounds as ‘welcoming’, ‘friendly’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘supportive’. The majority of students expressed a strong sense of belonging and praised staff (academic and non-academic) for making them feel part of the University. Some care experienced and estranged students, however, highlighted the social and academic difficulties of adjusting to university life, especially during their first year at the University. Strong staff-student relationships with lecturers and personal tutors helped to counter this, although a minority felt they would never fit in as a result of their background and experiences.

Funding for living costs was a key barrier to progression and retention for all students, but especially those from care experienced and estranged backgrounds. Discounted accommodation charges for first year halls of residence, Access scholarships, discretionary and hardship funding, and the Care Experienced Bursary (CEB) all played a part in retention, helping reduce the amount of part-time work required, and allowing students to focus on their studies and spend time with families. Students’ financial circumstances have worsened during the pandemic, with fewer opportunities to raise summer income to fund living costs, reduced wages following furlough, and greater competition for fewer part-time jobs. The lack of saving opportunities is likely to impact on levels of financial hardship and retention, alongside increasing levels of poorer mental health, in 2020/21.

Recommendations

A range of recommendations have been informed by the research for consideration by the University and relevant stakeholders.

Improved promotion of institutional and national financial support packages for widening access students prior to application would assist students in deciding between institutional offers and make living away from home more feasible for those reluctant to travel far. Further collaboration between national bodies, schools and universities may help to increase the take up of Advanced Highers among disadvantaged students. RGU, North East Scotland College (NESCOL) and other colleges could consider how HNC/D students can be better encouraged to take direct entry. National bodies and RGU should review current widening access indicators and consider broadening these to include both individual and neighbourhood level measures of disadvantage.

With regards to care experienced students, nationally there is a need to raise awareness of the benefits of self-identifying as care experienced to access support, and of the Care Experienced Bursary among students, and college and university staff. Greater capacity building by RGU and colleges’ support services and academics would improve retention, progression and degree outcomes of vulnerable students. At RGU, students suggested a care experienced student network could provide valuable peer support. At a national level, extending the Care Experienced Bursary to estranged students without experience of care would help tackle the significant financial challenges these students face.

1. Introduction

Researchers from Robert Gordon University's (RGU) School of Applied Social Studies explored the pathways and influences which hindered and enabled current students from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education at the University. Using qualitative interviews, the study aimed to learn from students who had overcome obstacles in accessing university, focusing on the relationships, institutions and experiences that shaped their decisions and capacity to enrol at RGU. It was hoped that the research would inform future RGU approaches to enable more people from disadvantaged positions to pursue university opportunities, thereby improving their life chances.

The research focused on students from the 20% most deprived postcode areas (known as 'MD20') as classified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)¹, and those from care experienced backgrounds². Although the expansion of higher education has resulted in greater numbers attending university, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be less likely to enrol. In 2018/19, 15.9% of full-time first-degree entrants came from the most deprived 20% of postcodes, compared with 27.8% from the least deprived 20% of postcodes (Scottish Funding Council, 2020a). Rates also vary widely between universities; 4.8% of entrants at the University of Aberdeen were from MD20 in 2018/19 vs 28.2% at the University of the West of Scotland. Inequalities among care experienced students are particularly stark; in 2017/18, just 4% of looked after leavers went on to HE vs 39% of all school leavers (SFC, 2020b). This under-representation contributes to significantly reduced life chances for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In order to help address this inequality, and building upon the work of the Commission on Widening Access (2016, 2019), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) ties some university funding allocation to the achievement of widening access targets, known as Outcome Agreements. While each university is set its own individual targets, the SFC set an overall target for each HEI to have 10% of full-time, first degree Scotland domiciled entrants from MD20 data zones by 2020-21, with the intention that this should rise to 20% of undergraduate entrants from MD20 postcodes by 2030 (SFC, 2019a). In 2017-18, 6.5% of RGU's first degree Scotland domiciled entrants were from MD20 data zones. The University of Aberdeen has similarly low rates of MD20 students; in 2017-18 6% of students were from MD20 postcodes (SFC, 2019b).

Compared to the central belt, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire have relatively higher levels of advantage, as classified using SIMD, meaning there is a smaller pool of local MD20 students from which to recruit. Research points to the limitations of using SIMD, an area-based measure, to accurately identify individual disadvantage (Paterson et al., 2019; Gorard et al., 2019; Boliver et al., 2017) and of the problems of capturing rural poverty in more sparsely populated areas (Shucksmith, 2004). The Commissioner for Fair Access (2019) notes that despite being different types of universities (post-92 universities generally admit higher proportions of MD20 students than ancient universities), the University of Aberdeen and RGU have similarly low rates of MD20 students. This distinction 'suggests that SIMD is a much less useful metric in the north east - as it is in all regions with more scattered populations' (p12). An additional challenge is that attainment among local MD20 students is also lower than among MD20 students nationally. The bulk of MD20 students in Scotland live in and around Glasgow and the West of Scotland, areas which research shows students are traditionally more likely to study close to home (Paterson, 1993; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Minty, forthcoming).

¹ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation or SIMD is a neighbourhood area measure which rates small postcode areas (data zones) according to seven different measures (education, housing, crime, employment, geographic access, income and health).

² Within the context of the research study, the term 'care experienced' rather than 'care leaver' was used, adopting the SFC definition of care experienced students as those who have any experience of being in care or are from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, no matter how short, including adopted children who were previously looked-after (SFC, 2020a).

In terms of RGU's widening access activity, the University's guidance on Minimum Entry Requirements (MER) considers contextual information relating to MD20/40 postcodes, SHEP pupils, care experience, and young carers. RGU offer a range of different outreach programmes for various groups: Access RGU, Northern Lights (S1 and S2 pupils) and Degree Link (for articulating students). The Access RGU programmes are aimed at S5 and S6 students and consist of a series of Access projects aligned to different RGU subject programmes. Priority eligibility is given to students who are based in Aberdeen City or Aberdeenshire and live permanently in an MD20/MD40 area, or who have spent time as a Looked After Child and/or Accommodated Child. Additional criteria include those who:

- Attend a local SHEP school
- Are first generation entrants
- Experienced a disruption to studies based on personal circumstances
- Are in the minority gender at subject level (e.g. Access to Nursing & Midwifery, Computing and Engineering programmes)
- Receive Educational Maintenance Allowance or free school meals
- Have a significant role looking after someone else who is experiencing illness or disability.

The University offers a range of Access scholarships which eligible applicants are invited to apply for. Accommodation assistance is provided for MD20 students from outside of Aberdeen City who are eligible for free or discounted first-year accommodation in specific halls of residence. The University provides care experienced students with a dedicated care leaver advisor and offers 52-week accommodation with a 20% discount on the first year of accommodation. Welcome packs are also provided to widening access students consisting of stationery, vouchers for groceries, books and travel.

Having outlined the context that informed the basis of the study, the report now describes the methods used to collect and analyse the student data.

2. Methods

The project focused on three groups of students: those with care experience, those from MD20 postcodes, and those in receipt of RGU Access Scholarships. The last group were included on the basis that these students would likely have faced some of the highest levels of disadvantage and may not be picked up in the other two categories. A small number of students met all three criteria, but most met one or two. Invitations were emailed by the University's Access team. In total, around 400 students were invited to participate, of whom 48 were interviewed.

Students were sent an information sheet detailing the aims and purpose of the research, and information about consent. A short pre-interview online survey collected data on demographics, course, etc, as well as contact details and preferred interview format (i.e., telephone or by video call using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp). Most students were interviewed over the phone rather than by video. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes; most were around 55 minutes.

The research was granted ethical approval by the School ethics panel. Students received information about consent in advance of the interview. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and could choose not to answer any question. Contact details of a named School staff member was provided whom students could turn to for help and advice as a result of any issues arising from the interview, and they were alerted to the availability of the university's counselling team. The aims of the research were explained to every student and their informed consent was sought verbally at the start of each interview. Each participant received a £10 Amazon voucher in recognition of their time. To protect students' identities, quotations are attributed to either care experienced / estranged students or those from an MD20 postcode.

The design of the semi-structured interview schedule was informed by a pilot interview with a care experienced student from an MD20 postcode. The interviews began with a broad, open question, 'Can you talk me through how you came to be studying here at RGU?' This allowed students to reflect back on the route they took, with the researcher using prompts to explore the factors which hindered or enabled their path to university along the way. Students were asked about:

- Attainment and their experiences of school / college
- Motivations for going to university and how they came to be at RGU
- Any challenges they encountered along the way
- What helped them in accessing university
- Views and experiences of RGU
- Financial issues
- Suggestions on how to widen access at RGU.

The interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of students and audio files were professionally transcribed. All transcripts were inputted into NVivo where they were coded thematically, initially using broad themes and then with more detailed codes under each broad heading.

3. The sample

This section provides descriptive data to summarise the backgrounds of the 48 interviewees:

- The majority identified as female (n=36), ten as male, and two as non-binary
- They were overwhelmingly White (42)
- More than a third of students (17) were aged 18 to 21; 14 were aged 21 to 25, and 17 were aged between 26 and 50. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 48.
- More than two-thirds of the sample (33) were from MD20 postcodes
- 16 students were care experienced and/or estranged from their families
- Nine students received a scholarship of some kind (either from RGU or another independent organisation)
- Most interviewees (42) were first generation entrants
- Almost half (22) attended a SHEP school
- Almost half (22) received Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and/or Free School Meals (FSM), denoting low income households
- 10 students were parents
- 11 students were dyslexic
- Four had caring responsibilities of some kind prior to attending university
- Nine students were estranged from their families, some of whom were also care experienced.

Although all the students in the sample were defined as disadvantaged in terms of their postcode or care experience status, there were clear differences in terms of the actual levels of disadvantages faced by students. The intersection of different measures of disadvantage increased the barriers students faced and the time it took them to make it to university.

The majority of interviewees (33 students) came from MD20 postcodes. The remaining 15 students came from the least deprived 40% of postcodes (LD40) but were some of the most disadvantaged in the sample (13 were care experienced and/or estranged from their families, while five received an Access scholarships). This illustrates the limitations of providing additional support on the basis of postcode alone. A number of care experienced and estranged students lived in homeless accommodation prior to university, often in city centre areas classed as less deprived.

Table 1: Levels of neighbourhood deprivation among the interviewees by SIMD (n)

SIMD quintile	Number of students
MD20	32
MD40	4
MD60	3
MD80	6
MD100	3
Total	48

Overall, care experienced and estranged students faced far greater levels of challenge in accessing university. Care experienced interviewees included those who had been adopted, and those who were placed in kinship care, foster care and residential care. Some care experienced students identified as estranged also, while some estranged students had no experience of care. Although estranged students are not a focus of SFC data collection for universities, it should be emphasised that the levels of disadvantage faced by the two groups was considerable and comparable. Indeed, on the whole, non-care experienced estranged students were more vulnerable than some of their care experienced peers, given that they were unable to access additional financial support.

The students were evenly spread in terms of degree year group. Nine of the 11 University Schools were represented, with the majority of interviewees studying in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, School of Applied Social Studies and Gray’s School of Art – the three Schools with the most MD20 students in 2019/20.

Having described the interview sample, the following sections present the key research findings. Section 4 considers the different routes students took to university contrasting the experiences of those who entered RGU directly from S6 with those who entered via college. Section 5 explores how students decided to study at RGU, while Section 6 considers students’ experiences of RGU once they enrolled and discusses the factors that helped and hindered students’ ability to remain in university.

4. Students’ routes to RGU

This section considers the routes students took to enter RGU, and the obstacles and enablers they encountered along the way. The experiences of ‘school entrants’ – those who entered directly from S6 – are considered first. Almost half the sample (22 students) took this route. Next, the experiences of the 26 ‘college entrants’ are considered. Although there are some similarities between the two groups, they had distinct characteristics, with the latter group facing considerably greater challenges in accessing university, the impact of which can be seen in their attainment and qualifications on entry (see Table 2).

Table 2: Comparing the challenges faced by school and alternative route entrants

	School entrants	College entrants	Total no. interviewees
Care experience	6	8	14
MD20 postcode	17	16	33
BAME	4	2	6
EMA/FSM	10	11	21
First generation	19	23	42
Access Scholarship	4	5	9
Estranged	2	7	9
Close family bereavement	2	5	7
Parent	0	10	10
Looked after someone	1	4	5
Homelessness	2	7	9
Diagnosed with ASN	4	7	11
Early leaver (S4/S5)	0	13	13
Changed secondary school	2	9	11
From Aberdeen City/ Aberdeenshire	5	15	20
From outside Aberdeen City/ Aberdeenshire	17	11	28
SHEP school	11	11	22
Attainment			
No Highers	0	10	10
4 or more Highers	20	6	26
One or more Advanced Higher	9	1	10
Highest qualification on entry			
Higher	13	0	13
Advanced Higher	9	0	9
NC or equivalent	0	4	4
HNC	0	11	11
HND	0	8	8
UG	0	3	3
Total no. interviewees	22	26	48

4.1 School entrants

This section explores the barriers and enablers to accessing university for those who entered RGU straight from school. Almost half the sample (22 out of 48 interviewees) entered university directly from S6. Most (17 students) were from MD20 postcodes, four received scholarships, and six were from care experienced backgrounds. Nearly all (19) were first generation entrants and half (11 students) had attended SHEP schools with lower-than-average proportions of school leavers entering higher education. Most (15) were aged between 18 and 20 at the time of the interview; seven students were aged 21 to 25. More than three quarters (17 students) came from outside Aberdeen City/ Aberdeenshire.

Several school entrants highlighted their 'standard' routes to university. Indeed, when asked what challenges they had encountered in accessing university, some school entrants said they had not faced any barriers, pointing to their qualifications and university offers. However, what appeared relatively straightforward routes to university belied a more complex picture with subtle barriers at work. Family support and encouragement were key enablers to accessing university directly from school. Those without family to rely on struggled the most and faced more difficult transitions to university.

4.1.1 School attainment, subject availability and the impact on HE decisions

A key enabler of access to university for the school entrants was their higher attainment levels that ensured they met the University's entry requirements. While school entrants' attainment was markedly higher than college entrants' (see Table 2 above), it was nonetheless mixed. The school entrants had four to eight Highers each, often including a mixture of As, Bs and Cs.

Although the school entrants had successfully accessed university straight from school, their mixed attainment meant that some students downgraded their aspirations. This was the case for eight of the school entrants, two of whom entered RGU via clearing. These students initially hoped to study subjects that would have allowed them to access the elite professions of dentistry, medicine and architecture. They said that over time they realised they would struggle to meet the entrance requirements and moved towards pharmacy, forensics, health science and architectural technician courses instead. Attainment was a key barrier to being able to realise their early ambitions. These students demonstrated resilience in reorienting their aspirations, adapting to situations and assessing what the next best option might be, as this student demonstrates:

Because I was thinking about applying for medicine, and then I decided not to because I didn't want to be in university for the next 7 years, I wanted to jump straight in and actually work. And in S5, my exams didn't go that well, I didn't study, I didn't concentrate enough, and I think that's when it hit me that I really need to figure out what I was doing. (MD20 student)

The role of contextual admissions and minimum entry requirements for students from disadvantaged backgrounds was rarely mentioned and appeared misunderstood. Some school entrants mentioned receiving offers from RGU while being rejected from elsewhere. However, there was little awareness that these offers may have been contextual based on the minimum entry requirements for MD20 students. Where contextual admissions were raised, students appeared defensive, illustrating the need for greater understanding of their aims and principles among prospective students.

School entrants identified aspects of school practices which may have contributed to their lower attainment. There were a number of issues in relation to subject choice and availability. Out of 22 school entrants, six had 'crashed' Highers (including sciences, languages and art), with varying degrees of success. Some crashed a subject having only settled on their preferred degree subject late on. Others complained they were poorly advised by teachers as to what might be required in terms of subject qualifications for specific courses. For example, a student interested in medicine who crashed Higher Biology blamed poor school careers advice for his misunderstanding of subject requirements. Most crash Higher students complained of a lack of additional support to complete the course; the only student who reported receiving intensive support was an independent school pupil.

Students highlighted issues around subject availability, particularly at Advanced Higher level. Nine out of 22 school entrants achieved an Advanced Higher (an additional four students either dropped out, did not sit their exam or failed Advanced Higher). All those who undertook Advanced Highers had relatively strong Higher grades; however, it was notable that other students with similar grades did not undertake Advanced Highers. The SHEP student quoted below should have been a strong candidate for Advanced Highers given her good S5 Higher results, but limited subject availability in her school meant she had to travel to a different school to study some Higher subjects.

The [Higher] subjects I was interested in, it was difficult to do even at my own school, never mind doing Advanced Higher. I don't think I can think of anyone in my school that done Advanced Highers. (MD20 student)

Having to travel to another school for specific subjects was mentioned by a number of students as a deterrent, particularly in terms of travel time which would impact on teaching time for other subjects. A more advantaged student went so far as to change schools so that she was allowed to take her preferred Advanced Higher.

Although some school entrants did not have the option to study Advanced Highers, others said that their teachers had encouraged them, but that they lacked confidence to complete or worried they might achieve a lower grade than in their Higher. Several students opted to resit Highers, hoping to achieve an A rather than a B, for example. This was potentially a risky choice, given that some S6 students said they became demotivated after receiving their university offers, combined with the

potential boredom of repeating a subject. There appeared to be a lack of understanding as to the difference between Advanced Highers and Highers, with little awareness of the benefits of Advanced Highers in terms of preparing students for the independent learning and thinking required at university, or of the positive way in which university admissions may view the qualification. Where students repeated a Higher in an attempt to increase their grade, it was unclear whether this was encouraged by teachers.

Within the classroom, students from both SHEP and non-SHEP schools provided examples of challenging teaching experiences. They highlighted the detrimental impact of teacher shortages, staff turnover, and teachers who had to focus on behaviour management rather than teaching. Some spoke of the impact of ability streaming, pointing to what they perceived as the inferior teaching quality in lower streams and of the difficulty of moving to higher ability classes. Five school entrants were diagnosed with dyslexia (mostly only when they enrolled at RGU and were seen by the Inclusion team). While they acknowledged the difficulties this caused in terms of writing essays and sitting exams, the school entrants appeared less hampered by their dyslexia than college entrants (see Section 4.2).

Several school entrants complained their teachers had doubted their abilities or had not supported them in their ambitions to access university, worsening their already low self-esteem. An MD20 student who attended a SHEP school suggested his teachers did little to cultivate ambition among working-class students, noting that he had been admonished for ‘alienating the rest of the class and making them feel bad’ by answering questions. Some school entrants applied to university against the recommendation of their teacher/s who encouraged them to pursue college routes instead:

I applied for uni and I was told by my Guidance Teacher not to because I'm not academic enough, she said. And she used my mum as an excuse to say that, because my mum was paying obviously for the UCAS [application]. My mum's a single parent and she only works part-time. The teacher was like "your mum has to pay for it, you don't want to waste your mum's money." She kept trying to force me to go to college open days and stuff, even though that's not what I wanted. That was kind of a disheartening moment, that was the Guidance Teacher that was supposed to push you to get your dreams and stuff. (MD20 student)

Having applied to university regardless, the student was interviewed by four universities and received an unconditional offer from RGU.

School experiences were nonetheless mixed, and a number of school entrants recalled more positive interactions with their teachers. Students who attended non-SHEP schools (i.e., those with higher rates of HE progression among school leavers), where progressing to university from school was more normalised, said this had positively influenced their attainment and university aspirations. Two MD20 school entrants made placement requests to attend schools outwith their catchment area, prompted by the poor reputations of their local SHEP schools. Both students noted how involved their parents had been in arranging these moves, demonstrating the high value some parents attached to education.

It was just because we thought that is in a better area than where the [local] high school was. I went to [the local] primary school, and that wasn't the best experience for me because I felt like the people there didn't match what my ambitions were. I didn't feel like I belonged there. (MD20 student)

Although school entrants' experiences of interacting with their teachers were mixed, when it came to applying to UCAS, most of the first-generation school entrants relied upon teachers to guide them through the practicalities of university applications or advising on subjects and institutions. Teachers were often credited with influencing students' school subject choices and then later guiding them into particular professions, courses or institutions. These nurturing relationships, usually with just one subject teacher, were critical influences on students' ambitions.

My teacher, I used to be really good in that class, that was like my favourite class ever. And I think he studied at [RGU]. And he always spoke about "I learned this at university, I learned that at university." And I think he was always keen on pushing me to make sure I went to university as well. I think he had an influence on me picking the course that I did. (MD20 student)

Many school entrants mentioned the dedicated classes held at school in S6 to assist students with their personal statements. Some students found teachers to be excellent sources of information while others considered they did not receive sufficient time and were unsupported. There was a perception amongst some participants that support was prioritised for the highest and lowest achieving students, with those in the middle being 'left to their own devices'. This brought particular challenges for first generation students unable to rely on family to help them with the process.

School entrants discussed the role of outreach events and activities in shaping their university decisions. Nine out of 12 SHEP school students recalled some form of school and/or university-based outreach. Students' recall of these activities and of the extent to which they had influenced their decisions were sometimes vague. Most said they had aspired to university prior to participating in outreach activities and that their involvement had confirmed this. However, they also noted the programmes helped to make them more comfortable, and less intimidated at the prospect.

It's something really useful, and it's something I would definitely recommend to other people. It familiarises you with what is expected on the course. It just gives you a good scope of what you're signing up to for the next year. So, I think it helped me feel a little bit more at ease. (Care experienced/estranged student)

4.1.2 The importance of family support

Most school entrants said they had long considered going to university, despite being the first generation of their family to do so. These aspirations were cultivated by parents and other family members whose support enabled and encouraged students to remain in school and to aspire to university. The school entrants tended to have less complex family lives than those entering university via college (although this was not the case for a minority of school entrants, explored at the end of this section). School entrants who lived with their parent/s, guardians or kinship carers often spoke of how influential their families had been in encouraging them to go to university. They said their parents, many of whom had themselves left school at 16, nonetheless strongly valued higher education as a route to a better life and a means of leaving disadvantaged areas.

They did kind of push me to go to uni because my mum and dad, they kind of know that if you don't really get a uni course, I can't leave the area that I was brought up in. They clearly want me to have a better life than what they grew up on. So, they definitely pushed me to stay in school and get a degree, but in the sense of what I did or where I want to go, they were just like "do what you want." (MD20 student)

This quote sums up a number of the comments made by MD20 school entrants. Although parents were said to be highly supportive of the participants' choices, they had little involvement in terms of actual decisions about courses or institutions, deeming their children to be the experts. The few students whose parents had been to university said their parents read over their personal statements and helped to edit them. Several first-generation students described their parents' involvement in their university decisions as 'supportive, but not pushy', emphasising the reassurance and encouragement they provided over their involvement in the practicalities of assisting with UCAS applications which were considered the school's responsibility. Students whose parents left school at 16 and felt unable to help noted how self-motivated they had to be:

It was on my own personal research and commitment that I was able to get everything done. There wasn't really anyone to help me. [Mum was] not very [involved in application], because she didn't know very much about it so there

wasn't much she could help with. I knew more than she did about the stuff, it was more off my own back. (MD20 student)

Given the vocational nature of a number of the courses offered at RGU (many interviewees were student nurses, social workers, physiotherapists etc), it was unsurprising that most students viewed going to university principally as a route to a career and a good job. Some first-generation school entrants described going to university as a non-decision, believing there to be few viable alternatives available to school leavers. Students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (those who had experienced poverty or chaotic upbringings) were especially keen to study vocational degree subjects which they believed could provide financial security and stability.

I seen the employment that they [family members] had, I seen the prospects that they had, I seen the struggles that they had, and I think that was part of the reason that made me realise actually... I want something more permanent, more sustainable, more secure. (MD20 student)

A BAME student from an MD20 postcode spoke of the racism he and his family had experienced, something he used as 'motivation' to get a good degree and leave his area.

It was something just ingrained that I want to get out of this place where we're being attacked racially. We can't call our home 'home' when we're scared to go outside. And it's something that I just use as motivation now. (MD20 student)

For first generation entrants, siblings and cousins were also important in terms of normalising the idea of university. Care experienced students who were placed in kinship care pointed to the significant role of their grandparents, aunts and uncles, while non-care experienced students also highlighted the role of older family and friends as 'positive forces'. Being the first generation of a family to go to university was a key motivator for some students who viewed going to university as a way not just to better themselves, but as something which would impact on their wider family.

And it was almost like a dream to be doing something to improve the family life. As I said, no one's ever been to uni before, so it was trying to get it so someone could say they'd been to uni. (MD20 student)

Three school entrants had parents who had been to university themselves, all of whom were from middle-class families. These students described their progression to university as part of an assumed path, though interestingly they spoke little of their parents' own experiences of university.

I guess it was always in my family, you need to go to higher education. I don't know, I think it was not an "I've decided to go to university" one day, I think it was just like an expected thing in my family. (Care experienced/estranged student)

The interviews point to the need to consider multiple factors in assessing disadvantage, with parental education being just one part of the picture. Some students with middle-class, degree educated parents from more affluent areas were care experienced/ estranged from their family, while some MD20 students were relatively advantaged. One such MD20 student highlighted the limitations of using SIMD to measure disadvantage, noting her 'relative privilege'.

While many school entrants spoke of being part of close and supportive families, a minority of school entrants described difficult home lives. These students were care experienced, estranged, young carers and/ or had experienced close family bereavements or periods of homelessness. Staying in school was particularly hard for those who had spent time in temporary accommodation and students mentioned often feeling alone and unsupported, feelings which, for some, continued once they were at university. They spoke of the stigma attached to being from a care experienced background and of the difficulties of trying to live independently at such a young age. Some participants had struggled to get their utilities connected in new flats whilst being under 18, found it hard to find rent guarantors, and/or had to work long hours to support themselves financially. Others noted the unsuitability of

temporary accommodation to studying. These students were highly driven and determined to reach university. Unable to rely on family members for support, they were motivated to be different to their parents, and in doing so, managed to find a way to turn their very challenging experiences into something more positive. Nevertheless, this process was clearly exhausting and involved a great deal more effort on their part than for most school entrants, as a care experienced student explained:

Not only do you feel isolated in yourself, you feel cut off from most people. So, it's really hard. And I think it does take... I'm not calling myself strong, but I think it does take a strong-minded person to be able to make it through and actually achieve something. (Care experienced/estranged student)

As the next section outlines, such experiences were echoed by a number of students who entered RGU via college.

4.2 College entrants

More than half the sample (26 out of 48 students) entered RGU via alternative routes. The students in this group were incredibly diverse in terms of the routes taken to RGU. Although some went directly from school to college and then immediately on to RGU, others took much longer, moving in and out of college/s and the workplace, and in a few cases attending other universities, before making their way to RGU. All but one of the students in this group had been to college at some point during their journey to the University and are thus referred to as 'college entrants'.

Among those who attended college prior to entering RGU, six students undertook FE level courses such as National Certificates (NC) or other equivalent qualifications immediately before enrolling in first year at the University (two of these students already held HNDs in other subjects); 12 entered with a Higher National Certificate (HNC); and seven with a Higher National Diploma (HND)³. Two college entrants already held undergraduate qualifications from other universities, having chosen to retrain and accessing RGU via NC and HNC qualifications. A third graduate who had built a career before retraining was able to access her course without additional qualifications and bypassed college. The three graduates were all from MD20 postcodes, yet it should be noted that two of the graduates had one or more degree educated parents, suggesting lower levels of disadvantage than among most other college entrants.

On the whole, college entrants generally faced greater barriers than their peers who accessed RGU directly from school. They tended to have lower attainment, were older, have more caring responsibilities (10 were parents), and were more likely to be care experienced (eight students), estranged (seven), to have experienced homelessness (seven), have been young carers (five) and suffered close family bereavements (five). Despite generally being more disadvantaged than school entrants, it is notable that a lower proportion of college entrants came from MD20 postcodes (16 out of 26 college entrants vs 17 out of 22 school entrants). This contrasts with national level data (SFC, 2020a) which demonstrates that older students (aged over 21) are more likely to be from MD20 areas. This may be related to the fact that more college entrants than school entrants were from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire (15 out of 26), areas with fewer MD20 postcodes. Of the ten non-MD20 college entrants, nine were local students and eight were care experienced. Of those who attended college prior to RGU, most had been to NESCOL (14 students), while six attended colleges in Glasgow.

The following sections consider the barriers and enablers identified by college entrants, including: the impact of multiple disadvantage on attainment and ability to remain in school; their experiences of

³ Note that these numbers do not tie up with the numbers provided in Table 2 as that relates to students' highest qualification on entry. It was possible for students to hold a higher qualification e.g. an HNC/D or undergraduate degree, but to have undertaken a lower level qualification such as an HNC or NC immediately prior to entering the University.

school; the role of positive reinforcement; and the importance of the college route in terms of providing alternative routes to HE.

4.2.1 Multiple disadvantage as a barrier to school attainment and remaining in school

Low school attainment and a lack of qualifications were major barriers to university access for college entrants, and many took a significant amount of time between leaving school and entering RGU (several interviewees were in their late 40s). Ten college entrants left school with no Highers, while nine had one to three Highers, and six students had more than four. Among those who had Highers, most had a mixture of Bs and Cs. Early school leaving was a key factor for those with the lowest school attainment. Almost half of college entrants were early school leavers (12 out of 25 students). Nine students left school in S4 (most at age 15) and a further three in S5. While some students had been excluded, others chose to leave early as a result of negative school experiences and challenging home circumstances.

Compared to those entering RGU directly from school, college entrants faced significant multiple challenges during their time at school which impacted on their experiences and attainment. These included: disrupted education as a result of multiple school moves, particularly during secondary; experience of abuse and trauma; close family bereavements (sometimes during critical exam periods); (frequently undiagnosed) dyslexia; having to care for family members; parental addiction; parental mental health problems; students' own mental health problems; bullying; family estrangement and homelessness. A number of students said they had been disruptive in school, regularly truanted and/or avoided school. Several had been involved in the Children's Hearings system.

Care experienced and estranged college entrants were more likely to have faced these learning barriers than other college entrants (seven out of 12 early school leavers were either care experienced or estranged from their family). Some care experienced students were placed in care for the first time while in secondary school, while others had been moved in and out of care since they were very young. Several students became homeless at 16, meaning they had to work to support themselves rather than remain in school. They spoke of the resulting difficulty of focusing on schoolwork, with university deemed out of reach. As a student who left school at 15 said:

When I first started thinking about university, I was in secondary school. It was an aspiration that I had. But it seemed at the time to be absolutely unattainable, unrealistic... it just seemed so far out of reach just because of circumstances and things that were going on, and the stress of the process of being through the Children's Hearing system, going into care. I desperately tried to keep up with my schoolwork, but the circumstances were just horrendously stressful around the moves and the transitions. So, schoolwork just became too hard. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

As the extract above illustrates, some of the students had always hoped to go to university but were prevented from doing so by multiple obstacles. For others, the idea of university was not something which was considered until much later on.

I can't speak for everybody, but I know my education was impacted because of my experiences. I don't even know if I knew about university, really, as a child and young person. It wasn't anything that was on my radar at all. I think I might have heard the word, but I really wouldn't have been able to tell you what it was or what people did there. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

A number of the most disadvantaged care experienced and estranged students identified structural barriers that hindered them in accessing further and higher education upon leaving school. Students who were housed in temporary or homeless accommodation, or who received housing benefit, said they had been advised not to work or to take up college and university places so as not to lose their benefits. A number of students fell into rent arrears this way and some were still repaying debts as

they neared the end of their degrees. Students highlighted the unsuitability of homeless accommodation for young people, pointing to the lack of Wi-Fi and prevalence of drugs, alcohol and antisocial behaviour, which made it hard to study. Students placed in this type of accommodation while still at school had felt particularly vulnerable. Once provided with their own accommodation, they faced additional challenges such as finding rent guarantors for tenancies and having to pay for food, bills and furniture. Like the care experienced and estranged school entrants, they reported feeling socially isolated and alone with no one to turn to. The lasting effect on some students was resentment, distrust, low self-esteem and self-reliance, as illustrated in these comments from estranged and care experienced students:

I got to the point where I thought that because I moved around so much and because I'd been homeless for so long, I'd kind of given up a little bit, and I thought it's not going to get any better and I just need to accept it. At the time, I kind of felt like nobody wants me to be working, nobody wants me in education, they just want me to be at home on benefits. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Because when you are without parents and you're put into the world with no guidance and no safety net, no backup plan, where you don't even have a plan, never mind a backup plan, you're screwed. You have to figure that out by yourself, because no one's going to do it for you. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Some care experienced and estranged students, particularly those who were older and able to reflect on their experiences from a greater distance, recognised the resilience they had developed through having to be so independent at a young age. This was harder for some of the younger students who were still grappling with the trauma of their experiences. Nonetheless, they noted how their experiences had made them more determined to improve their lives. A few previously homeless students were allocated support workers who helped adjust to independent living, liaised with other services on their behalf and kept them focused on university aspirations.

4.2.2 School experiences

Frequent school changes, especially at secondary level, and the disruption this caused to learning were often cited by care experienced and estranged college entrants as an additional barrier to learning. They spoke of the long-term impact this had on their ability to make friends, and on the disruption caused to their relationships with teachers. A minority of care experienced students, however, noted the positive impact of moving schools. They appreciated being able to 'start afresh' and escape the stigma (and teachers' associated expectations) they felt was associated with their care background, while also being able to form new friendships and leave behind negative influences.

Early school leavers reported receiving little support from their teachers either to remain in school or to aspire to university. They spoke of feeling ignored by their teachers, disregarded, and having their abilities and commitment questioned. This experience added to the already low self-esteem many of these students held, and also affected some of those who remained in school until S6. A student said she had always wanted to go to university but her low school attendance as a result of bullying impacted on her grades. She complained her teachers did little to support her, and after a teacher told her she would not succeed in studying her preferred course, she left school in S5 to do an HNC before joining RGU in first year. This teacher's lack of belief fuelled the student's determination to attend university and prove them wrong (a common motivation among many of the most disadvantaged interviewees), but she felt let down by the lack of school support:

I don't feel like I got a lot of help in school to keep me in school so that I would actually want to attend school and engage with schoolwork so I would get good grades. I didn't have that school support. Obviously if I'd done well in school, I would have progressed better and easier to university, but I didn't so it was quite

tough to move through the sectors because I had to figure everything out for myself. (MD20 student)

Like those who entered RGU straight from school, college entrants also referred to teachers who had to spend a considerable amount of time dealing with behaviour management. Teachers were also criticised for encouraging students to aim for college rather than university. Students who had been diagnosed with dyslexia (eight out of the 11 dyslexic students were college entrants), reported finding school especially difficult. They highlighted the challenges of processing information and focusing, with some developing their own coping strategies, not least because they were often only diagnosed after enrolling at RGU. Dyslexia had long lasting impacts on the college entrants, some of whom attended school decades ago when they suggested attitudes were perhaps different. An MD20 student who left school at 15 said:

I think I had difficulties [at school] because I had undiagnosed dyslexia, so I found academically it was very difficult. And at that time, going back 20-odd years ago, if you couldn't manage something, you were just branded as a bit thick, you were stupid. The teachers didn't really have very much time to help me. (MD20 student)

Not all of the college entrants had negative experiences of school. Some care experienced/ estranged students described school as their 'safe place', where they could escape any difficulties they faced at home. Among college entrants who stayed in school until S6, some had strong levels of attainment (five students had more than four Highers). A high attaining student with an Advanced Higher explained that her school had made every university applicant also apply to college as a backup. She initially accepted an offer to study at a different university but chose to defer and go to college on account of being just 17 when she finished S6 (another young student did the same). She described her college experience as 'transformative', leading her to change her degree course and institution. College entrants who held degrees from other universities also had good levels of attainment, highlighting the heterogeneity of the college entrants.

4.2.3 The need for positive reinforcement

As with those who entered directly from school, family support made a considerable difference to some college entrants from MD20 postcodes. Students credited their parents' support as a significant factor in their university aspirations. One MD20 student was greatly influenced by her mother who obtained her degree as a mature student. Another MD20 student who left school at 15 to go to college spoke of how strongly her parents valued education and employment, echoing the views of the school entrants in Section 4.1.2:

They wanted me to do something. They wanted me to go to university and better my life. They didn't want me to have a struggle the way they had to struggle. [...] you always want better for your own kids. (MD20 student)

The experiences of the students above contrasted sharply with those who had more difficult relations with their families, particularly those from care experienced and estranged backgrounds. Unable to rely on family support, positive reinforcement and words of encouragement from a range of different sources were crucial in terms of inspiring students to believe they were capable of going to university and countering low confidence, self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness.

Although many college entrants described negative school experiences, some care experienced and estranged students pointed to the concerted efforts of teachers who did their best to keep them in school, providing learning support or assisting them in coping with their challenging home lives. Those with more positive memories of school highlighted the role of one or two teachers who spent time to build their trust, enabling students to be more open about events happening outside of school. Teachers encouraged students to remain in school and in some cases helped them to navigate relations with social services (e.g., liaising with social workers, support workers, housing/ income support, policy etc). A student who had been homeless for a time in senior school referred to some of

her teachers who 'did more than just teaching', spending time so she could discuss what was happening and motivating her to complete her exams. Two students who suffered bereavements but managed to remain in school until S6 highlighted the role their teachers played in this. One student was allowed to repeat the year, while another was encouraged to take an Advanced Higher early, boosting her self-esteem and confidence considerably.

From my teacher saying that, I felt really motivated to do well, and I didn't want her to think that she'd made the wrong choice. And it all paid off, because in the end, I got an A in Advanced Higher. That sort of showed me that I can turn my life around, because a few years prior, I was just a complete mess. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

A number of male college entrants (from MD20 and care experienced/ estranged backgrounds) highlighted the importance of close relationships with male carers and teachers who acted as father figures and role models and were influential in inspiring them to remain in education and/or aim for university. They also noted how helpful it had been to take up hobbies and sports whilst at school which diverted them away from possible bad influences. Some female students said they were involved in formal and informal diversions which directed them away from potentially troublesome behaviour; one participated in a behaviour support group for girls which she said, 'really helped us, they made us feel like we belong'. Another student referred to a police officer's encouragement which helped them feel acknowledged and valued.

Work colleagues were an important source of positive reinforcement for students from a range of backgrounds. Colleagues increased students' confidence and self-belief, as well as providing practical advice, for example assisting with UCAS personal statements or by providing relevant continuing professional development and training. One student received career mentorship, practical and financial support through an internship programme which allowed them space to find the right career path. For nursing and social work students, care work roles helped guide students towards these careers, including those who had never previously considered them. Such jobs were often taken on as a means to an end after dropping out from other courses or on the recommendation of family members who worked for the same employer. Students noted how enjoyable the work was and how colleagues encouraged them to pursue the careers further. A student took on a care role as a stop gap after dropping out of her HND.

Once I stopped studying prior, I honestly thought I'll never study again. But I guess doing a really rewarding job, looking after people who clearly appreciated me, and then getting positive feedback from them to tell me that they think I've got the potential to do more, I think that's kind of what led me to it. (MD20 student)

Despite these instances of positive reinforcement and recognition, for some care experienced and estranged students, feelings of worthlessness and low confidence continued once they were at university (see Section 6).

Given the challenges faced by care experienced and estranged students in particular, both in and outside of school, it is important to emphasise just how highly motivated and ambitious these students were. They were driven by a deep and often long held desire to go to university, spurred on by the need to prove their doubters wrong and make a life for themselves.

I think just determination for people to not see me as a failure. Because I'd always been told I wouldn't amount to anything, even the teachers said to me I wouldn't amount to anything at all. And it was like "well, no, I will." I think it's just determination to prove people wrong. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Those with families were keen to build a new life for their children and act as a positive role model for them, in order to ensure they would not have to go through what they themselves did. In the absence

of positive reinforcement from others, students highlighted the importance of their own resilience and determination in enabling them to access university.

So, proving people wrong does matter to me. And I see it every year, the graduates in the paper and stuff like that, and I am going to be in that paper, just so everyone can see. And my [child] is going to be right beside me. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Among most college entrants, relationships with lecturers were cited as having made a key difference in terms of how they viewed education and encouraging them to go on to university, and it is this which is discussed next.

4.2.4 College: providing a second (and third and fourth...) chance

Most college entrants had positive experiences of college, even those who had not completed some of their courses. They appreciated the different learning environment it offered, often noting improved relationships with lecturers and subsequent increases in confidence. At college, many students found the positive reinforcement and encouragement they said was lacking at school. Some care experienced students appreciated the anonymity college provided and the ability to make a fresh start without the stigma associated with them at school.

[It felt] a little bit [different at college], in the sense that nobody knew me, I wasn't carrying the fact that I was the kid from the home. I suppose I could kind of go in and just be me, it was more of an adult setting. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Other participants commented on how moving to college facilitated a change in friendship groups. Those who had previously been involved with youth justice agencies noted how this allowed them to cut ties with negative influences, to build new friendships with like-minded people and create new support networks. As a student said of her college peers:

They all had ambition. They were always a little bit older than me, which kind of made me grow up, which was good, and I think I needed that. But, yeah, they saw me on a good path. They were supportive, but they were good for me, we all had kind of the same aims, we all wanted to go on and do a career. (MD20 student)

Students had different reasons for attending college. Some wanted to obtain specific qualifications as an alternative route into university, having not achieved the grades needed from school. These students had aspired to university for some time, but for various reasons (see Section 4.2.1) had not succeeded academically. Others went to college as a means of remaining in education, because they were encouraged to do so by others (e.g., parents or colleagues) or due to an interest in a subject. These students often enrolled with little intention of going to university, but over time grew in confidence, appreciating the lack of pressure that the incremental progression route of NC, HNC, HND, degree offered.

So, I think it was just a natural progression, I done an NQ, and then liked [it] so I thought I'd try and get an HNC, and then I was like "I'll try and get an HND." "I'll try and get a degree, see how that goes." (MD20 student)

What was striking about the college entrants' route to RGU was the complexity of the routes taken in between leaving school and starting at the University. Many college entrants (both care experienced and non-care experienced students) had made multiple attempts at FE and HE courses, often in widely differing subject areas. Students shifted between courses and institutions, moving in and out of education and work. Some, especially those who left school early and/ or had to balance work and study with caring for families, had taken many years in between deciding they wished to go to university and actually enrolling. A number highlighted the financial hardships they faced while at college, particularly those from care experienced and estranged backgrounds (see Section 6.2). Some

early school leavers who had gone straight to college dropped out or changed course soon after starting, said they had not been in the right head space for college at that point in their lives, and only later discovered what 'clicked'. Care experienced students, especially, highlighted the importance of being able to make multiple attempts at FE and HE, noting the difficulties of dealing with childhood trauma and the time taken to feel ready for university and realise their capabilities.

I would say it's having that second chance. [...] And I think that just having the ability to go back again and then go back again. My drive combined with that, if I didn't have that chance, I would have screwed it up for good. So, I think that that's really important, because you can think you're ready, and you're not. You can think you're healed, and you're not. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Several women in the sample noted how pregnancy and subsequent childcare had interrupted their education, leading them to drop out of college and degree courses at other universities. Some reported being poorly supported to remain in education upon becoming pregnant. Eight mothers and two fathers were interviewed. While having children prompted mothers to take time out of studying, fathers identified this as a reason for returning to education.

Other reasons for drop out included not finding the right fit with a course, having to work to support themselves and not being able to manage college on top of complex lives. The result of the movement in and out of education was some students held multiple NCs and HNCs in different subjects. The route taken by an S4 leaver from an MD20 postcode is a case in point. He completed two NCs and started multiple HNCs, each time dropping out to return to employment and a regular income. This student finally completed the qualification on his third attempt, then progressed to an HND before direct entry to third year.

Rates of articulation varied among those with HN qualifications. Of the 12 students who completed HNCs before entering RGU, just two took direct entry into second year, with ten entering first year. Some HNC students said they had turned down offers of direct entry, preferring to enter first year and have the 'whole student experience' and achieve a good grounding in course content so as to maximise their chances of completing the degree. Students lacked confidence that they would complete if they took direct entry, and most considered they made the right decision in entering first year. Some participants said their college lecturers emphasised difficulties faced by articulating students and had encouraged them to take this longer route. Others indicated that the 'degree link' between their college and RGU had not been in place when they applied. A couple who did not articulate noted how repetitive the work had been in first year, which had left them bored and demotivated.

Of the seven students who undertook HNDs immediately prior to entering RGU, five were direct entrants to third year. Several HND students said their decision to attend RGU was based on being able to take direct entry into third year. They were keen to have their prior experience recognised and to ensure their degree was achieved in the shortest time possible, so as to be able to enter employment.

Few students raised the financial implications of not articulating, in terms of having to fund additional years of living costs. Some students who had begun, but not necessarily completed, multiple HNs prior to entering RGU mentioned having to pay their own fees for some courses because their allotted years of tuition fee funding from SAAS had been used up. Given that the most disadvantaged students are likely to take longer to complete their course and more likely to make multiple attempts at FE and HE level courses, this represents additional barriers for already highly disadvantaged students.

5. Choosing to study at RGU

Having explored some of the issues particular to the school and college entrants, this section considers how students came to choose to study at RGU. It discusses the factors in students' decisions with a

focus firstly on non-local students, and secondly on those from Aberdeen City/ Aberdeenshire. The extent to which students were familiar with RGU prior to application and what influenced their decision to study at RGU is then explored. The interviewees came from across Scotland, with only the South of Scotland unrepresented. More than half were from outwith the local region, while 20 were from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire. The following section explores how students from outside of Aberdeen came to be studying at RGU.

5.1 Students from outside Aberdeen

The majority of the sample (28 students) came from outside Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, and most of these students (25) were from MD20 postcodes. Students' decisions to study at RGU were informed by a mixture of attainment, attitudes to finance, distance from home and parental influence. Those from the central belt, particularly areas in and around Glasgow, noted how unusual they were among their peers in choosing to leave the central belt, let alone moving to Aberdeen.

All my friends have stayed in Glasgow. They're all at uni and they've all stayed in Glasgow. [...] I'm the only one from our sixth year that's moved away. (MD20 student)

Often these students set out to study locally, citing the cheaper costs of living in the parental home. An MD20 student, rejected by his preferred ancient institution in his home city, entered RGU through clearing, only visiting the University for the first time on the day he enrolled. He was typical of many MD20 students from outside of Aberdeen in terms of how finance shaped his intention to study close to home:

I wanted to live at home originally, because of money. Yeah, I wanted to stay at home because I had my mum at home, my girlfriend, my grandparents. So, yeah, I wanted to stay at home. It never occurred to me to move away. (MD20 student)

The financial implications of moving away to study were a major barrier to many students in the sample. Just four out of 48 students received some form of financial support from their parents, with most relying on student loans, non-repayable bursaries and part-time work (mainly during term-time) to support their living costs. Many perceived Aberdeen to be an 'expensive' place to live prior to arrival. Students noted that while rental costs had reduced in the city in recent years, it nonetheless retained its reputation for high living costs.

From my experience and from the people I know who have chosen to stay at home, it is largely from a financial point of view. Most people I've spoke to, it's always about being able to afford it. And Aberdeen is viewed as being quite an expensive city. (MD20 student)

MD20 students from areas outside of Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire noted how their schools tended to promote primarily local universities, suggesting that more could be done in schools to tackle students' concerns about moving to universities outside of their local areas.

I didn't know Robert Gordon was a uni when I was in secondary. [...] I think for Glasgow anyway, for where I was brought up, everybody was like "I'm only going local, I'm not leaving Glasgow." And everybody was a bit scared. But if people did go into schools and sit there and explain it's not as scary as it seems, moving out, moving a couple of hours away, it's good courses and stuff like that, I think that would have probably helped. (MD20 student)

The University's offer of discounted halls of residence for first year students from MD20 backgrounds was received very positively. Students said it removed some of the stress involved in moving away from home, as an MD20 student explained:

It took a lot of the pressure and anxiety of going to university off, that I know I would at least be able to afford my rent for the first year without having to worry about it, or work on top of university for the first year. I would be able to concentrate on uni, basically. (MD20 student)

Parents were a key influence in students' decisions about where to study. Several students noted how reluctant their parents had been for them to leave home to go to university, preferring a local commute. Parents who accompanied their children to open days or interviews at RGU, often changed their views, having seen the campus and their child's reaction. An MD20 student from the central belt explained how her mother's input had been critical in her decision between studying locally and moving away to RGU.

I was debating taking that [local] offer over RGU, and my mum was like "but you don't want to do that, why would you pick it just to stay at home with your friends?" That was a big focus. So, I think that was the only time she was really involved, like "you're being an idiot, go to the university that does the course that you want and is the best for the course that you want." (MD20 student)

Some students noted how important their college lecturers had been in helping them to widen their geographical horizons. A number of students who attended colleges in and around Glasgow said it was their lecturers who encouraged them to consider going further afield.

To be fair as well, when I first thought about uni, the farthest I went was just Glasgow. I didn't even think about going anywhere else. I don't even know what that was about, because I've always been like "I want to travel", but the thought of going to a uni outside of Glasgow was very scary, especially at that age, I was just like "no, I'll stay in Glasgow." And then when I went to college, they really encouraged people not to stay in Glasgow, to go to other unis. (MD20 student)

While distance from home meant that some students did not consider RGU as an option until they visited for an open day or interview, a small number of students were attracted for that very reason. Some MD20 students highlighted the state of their local areas, pointing to the prevalence of drugs, alcohol and low employment, and expressed a strong desire to move far away from home.

I definitely wanted to go as far away from [home city] as I could. I hated the area I grew up in, I never liked anything to do with it. It's the sort of area where nobody ever leaves. You either grow up and do something like hairdressing, work in a salon down the street, or you marry a drug dealer and that's your source of income. (MD20 student)

Students said they had explored league tables when researching where to study, citing RGU's strong graduate employment rate and its reputation for inclusion and student support.

Me and my friends were actually sitting talking about this when we were in sixth year, I think we more looked at how well they support the students and how welcoming they are. I think it was also mostly looking at when you graduate, are you more likely to get a job? (MD20 student)

Open days and interview visits were also important in helping students choose to study at RGU. Nearly all students commented on the 'welcoming' environment they encountered and 'friendly' staff which helped them to feel at ease and like they would fit in.

I just really liked it. People were so friendly, and I liked the campus. It was more the course that I fell for, and the campus. And there were students there already who were showing you around and stuff, and it just felt a nice place to be. I knew after the open day I wanted to go there. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Despite this, some students enrolled at the University having never visited Aberdeen nor RGU. Unaware that travel costs could be reimbursed, they commented on being unable to visit the university in advance, pointing to the expense of public transport and the difficulty of being allowed time off work.

5.2 Local students

Two fifths of the sample (20 out of 48 students) lived locally in Aberdeen City or Aberdeenshire, ten of whom were care experienced or estranged from their families. Most of the local students were college entrants (15 students vs five school entrants). More than half (11 students) were not from MD20 areas (instead coming either from care experienced or estranged backgrounds and/or being in receipt of a scholarship). Most of those local to Aberdeen (14 students) applied only to RGU. The majority of local students (11 students) were classed as independent students and aged between 26 and 50.

Almost half the local students (nine) were parents, and a desire to provide continuity for their children was a key factor in them choosing to study locally. Reluctant to make their children change schools or their partners find work elsewhere, they chose to remain in Aberdeen.

No [I didn't consider leaving Aberdeen], because we have the house and everything, and [partner] doesn't want to move there. So, it wasn't even really... it was just what was available. It wasn't that I chose RGU because it was a good uni, as such, it was just because it was on my doorstep. But it does have a good reputation. (MD20 student)

Some of these students were already familiar with the University, knowing family members or friends who attended and had visited the campus before. Other participants were familiar through college. NESCOL students referred to the links between the college and RGU, highlighting how this influenced their decision. Being able to study '2+2' was a particular pull for those with HNDs. Some HN students were deterred from studying elsewhere having not been offered direct entry. Friendship groups were another important influence, as a local student explained:

I wanted to do direct entry. I didn't want to go straight from first year again, so I remember looking up to see which universities I could go to. And, to be honest, I wanted to stay in Aberdeen, I was quite happy where I was. And also my friends were going to RGU. That sounds so stupid, but it was nice to go to a uni where your friends were going to as well. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Five local students entered RGU directly from school. They noted the financial and domestic benefits of remaining in the family home, such as having their washing done and meals cooked. Three of the local school entrants had participated in RGU's access programme while at school, noting how important an influence this had been. A local SHEP school entrant focused on the convenience of being able to live at home and her decision was also strongly influenced by her mother. Like some of the other local students, she highlighted the reduced costs of living at home:

I wasn't overly keen about going away, really, never, but my mum just said "get your four years done here because you don't have to pay for anything at the moment, so financially you can save." [...] So it just worked out for the best to just stay at home. If there was a course that was offered in the city I was in, then there was not much point in moving away. (MD20 student)

Like the non-local students, RGU's graduate employment rate and record on inclusion were also highlighted by local students who noted the appeal of the additional support on offer. They too described it as 'welcoming', 'supportive', 'homely' and 'friendly'.

I got a good feeling about it, actually. When I went, I felt “yeah, I want to come here.” I’m not sure [why I felt like that]. Because I had only met the one lecturer. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

While most of the students were very happy with their decision to study locally, several care experienced students expressed regret that they had not been able to leave Aberdeen to study. Keen to make a fresh start away from the city, they were unable to afford the increased living costs associated with moving away.

I really wanted to move out of Aberdeen, but it’s not something I could afford to do. Even the uni open days down in Edinburgh or Glasgow, I couldn’t get myself down there, I couldn’t afford to; I was living off of benefits and in full-time education, so I couldn’t work. So, I never really had the opportunity to, and it’s something I really, really regret. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

While the care experienced bursary enabled some care experienced students to overcome the financial barriers associated with going to university, not all of the care experienced students were able to access it (see Section 7), and estranged students were ineligible. It is the students’ experiences once they reached university that are turned to now.

6. Experiences of RGU and factors in retention

Although the focus of this research was on access to university, in the course of the interviews students also frequently discussed their experiences of being a student and issues relating to retention. This section explores their perceptions and experiences of studying at RGU. Students’ feelings of belonging are considered as well as the financial obstacles faced, and the role of RGU and Scottish Government financial support in alleviating these challenges.

6.1 A welcoming university

The majority of interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about their time at RGU. Students emphasised the ‘welcoming’ nature of the university, describing it as ‘friendly’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘supportive’, and commenting favourably on the diverse ethnic and social mix of the student population.

I really like the uni, everyone is so helpful and stuff. My first couple of days there, I didn’t know my way round, and just being able to go up to anybody and ask where to go or things like that, it was just really welcoming, such a lovely uni. (MD20 student)

Such comments were indicative of the high regard in which students held staff – both teaching and non-teaching. These positive descriptions partly followed students’ positive experiences with inclusion and support services. Some of the students were diagnosed as dyslexic soon after enrolling at university and most were generally pleased with the level of support they received. More widely, students said staff fostered an environment in which they felt valued, supported and developed a strong sense of belonging. As the extracts from the students below demonstrate, this was often down to the small details of student-staff interactions.

When I first started there, it felt like I was in the right place and I belonged there. I don’t know, I felt proud that I had got to university because no one in my family had before, it felt good to be there. And the lecturers were really supportive, and everyone in my class and everyone that I’ve met, they were all nice and I got on with everyone, so it felt like I had made the right choice by going to Robert Gordon. (MD20 student)

For me, it was 100% the staff. The staff were fantastic, they were always smiling and always asking “how was the travel?”, and just little things they would ask, like “how are you doing today?” That made the difference for me, it made me feel welcome, and you never felt like you were bothering them, like “oh, come back later on.” It was “yep, come on we’ll go get a coffee.” They were brilliant. (MD20 student)

While most students adapted well to the transition from school or college to the University some, particularly those from care experienced and/ or estranged backgrounds, found this more challenging. These students took longer to settle in and adapt to the university environment in their first year, both academically and socially. Low self-esteem among care experienced students led some to question whether they should be at university.

I was quite overwhelmed. I was still a bit like, “I don’t feel like I should be here”, kind of like a fraud. I just felt like first year hit me quite hard, that I found it quite hard to adjust, especially being away from my support network and stuff like that. It’s hard when you’ve had all that support in the past to go to zero again. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Settling into life at RGU was less ‘daunting’ for those who knew peers from school or college. Having supportive relationships with lecturers made a big difference for care experienced students. Some noted how they had felt comfortable enough to share their care experience with staff, and how staff helped them to combat negative thinking and provided reassurance.

[Lecturer] was really supportive and encouraged me to think positively. Whenever I’ve felt that I was losing confidence, she has helped me believe in myself. She has helped me build my confidence so much. Having that person that’s giving you positive feedback, it just gives you that strength to keep going and believe in yourself. I think for care leavers, having a big positive go-to person that is positive means a lot. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Among those entering the university from college, direct entrants said they coped reasonably well with the transition. Some, however, complained that referencing was not well taught in college, while some direct entrants said they struggled to make friends and integrate with existing peer groups when they joined second or third year from an HNC/D.

One aspect which was credited with fostering inclusivity and feeling welcomed among those from MD20 postcodes were the ‘welcome packs’ distributed at the start of first year to those from MD20 postcodes. These included a 3-month bus pass or parking vouchers, grocery vouchers, book vouchers, stationery and vouchers for course materials. The packs were well received, with students referring to them as a ‘nice gesture’ from the University.

It definitely seemed like someone did care, kind of knew what you were going through... well, not going through, what kind of background you came through, and they were willing to help, which is all very nice. (MD20 student)

6.2 Financial obstacles and support

As Section 5 demonstrated, financial issues were a significant barrier to accessing university, influencing the extent to which students felt able to move away from their home areas and shaping ideas as to what might be possible in terms of going to university. Financing the living costs associated with being a student was also a key barrier to progression and retention. Few students (four out of 48) received regular financial contributions from their parents, aside from the in-kind support provided to those who lived in the parental home. Instead, students relied on a combination of student loans, income assessed SAAS bursaries, non-income assessed student nurses’ bursaries, care experienced bursaries, university administered hardship and discretionary funds, free and discounted

first year accommodation for RGU halls of residence for MD20 students, part-time work, and institutional and national scholarships provided to the most disadvantaged.

School entrants in receipt of the maximum student loan, SAAS bursary and discounted first year accommodation tended to report experiencing fewer financial difficulties. Older college entrants with more financial responsibilities e.g., families or mortgages, experienced greater challenges. Among both school and college entrants, the greatest financial obstacles were experienced by care experienced and estranged students.

For students living away from home without parental financial contributions or accommodation discounts from RGU, part-time work was a necessity, given that most or all of their student loan would be taken up with the costs of accommodation. Likewise, many of the local students were classed as independent students (over the age of 26) and were thus entitled to lower levels of bursary and maintenance loan from SAAS, while at the same time having more outgoings due to dependents. Two-thirds of students worked part-time during the term; some students worked considerable hours and noted the difficulty of managing this, not just with their academic work, but also socially. For those with caring responsibilities, juggling these different tasks was especially difficult, as this extract from a parent illustrates:

The weekend was the only time I had with my children. But to financially support myself, I had to work at the weekends. So, that was difficult. I would have liked to spend more time at home and focusing on my essays and spending time with my children. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Some students who previously worked long part-time hours reported reducing their hours or quitting as a result of the impact on their academic work or families. A number of those without part-time jobs noted how difficult it was to find work, even prior to the pandemic. This had worsened as a result of lockdown restrictions.

I've not actually managed to find any work here yet. I applied for a couple of places and they got back to me, but it was a case of "you can only work weekends? Okay then." And then never hear anything back. And I've been finding it hard now because of the lockdown and stuff like that. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Undertaking part-time work was difficult for student nurses who frequently reported financial challenges. Although provided with a non-repayable bursary from SAAS of £8,100 per year, they were not entitled to maintenance loans, and the nature of their placements meant it was not possible to commit to regular part-time work, leading some to call for increases in the bursary. It should be noted that the Scottish Government has since increased the nursing bursary to £10,000 for those starting in 2020-21, which may go some way to addressing their concerns.

The Government are always crying out for nurses, saying they don't have enough, but they don't make it very easy for us to get through it. When it comes to things like placements, we're told that our jobs basically come second, placement has to be your priority. And, yes, that's understandable, but at the same time, you still need to pay your bills, you still need to eat. I think for what you're doing, it's not enough. If they expect you to not have a job, then they need to be relooking at the bursary. (MD20 student)

Financial support provided by RGU and SAAS (in the form of scholarships, hardship and discretionary funds and the Care Experienced Bursary) went some way to addressing students' concerns, but they did not remove them completely.

Scholarships played a key role in helping disadvantaged students to remain in university. Nine interviewees received a scholarship, either as an RGU Access Scholar or through other independent scholarships, all of which were awarded on the basis of disadvantage. The scholarship students had a

significant level of need, and outlined the considerable hardships faced in reaching university. All reported that the additional funds eased the financial burden of living costs and meant being better able to focus on studies as a result of reducing the number of part-time hours worked (though most continued to work part-time). Students used their funding to pay their rent, save for study abroad or accommodation costs during the summer, removing some of the associated stress.

I feel like I'd be struggling quite a bit more if I didn't have the scholarship. Yeah, if I didn't have this scholarship, I imagine I would have to take on a job to support the funds and that. (MD20 student)

Care experienced and estranged students frequently referred to the financial difficulties they faced. Estranged students with no care experience faced considerable financial hardships with no recourse to additional Government support on top of maintenance loans and young student or independent student bursaries. Despite not forming part of SFC access targets, estranged students were severely disadvantaged financially, academically and emotionally. University distributed hardship and discretionary funds were one of the few funding options available to them. An estranged student who regularly experienced financial crises and had no other recourse for funds described the university's financial support team as being 'like my parents'. The complexity and level of evidence required of estranged students was an additional hardship:

There were a lot of hoops and stuff I had to jump through to get that sorted. Because I didn't go through care, so, it was a bit difficult. I think if you're in a bad situation like that and you've kind of fallen through all the loopholes, it ends up taking me until now get to university. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

By contrast, care experienced students were eligible for additional support through the Care Experienced Bursary (CEB), a non-repayable bursary provided by the Scottish Government to care experienced students since 2017/18. Introduced in response to the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA, 2016), this entitled care experienced students to a bursary of £7,625, initially for those undertaking HE courses only and for those aged under 26 at the start of the course. In 2018/19, this increased to the current rate of £8,100 and was extended to cover those in FE also. The age limit was removed in 2020/21. Among the care experienced students who received the CEB, comments were made about the significant difference this made to their financial situations, easing their concerns and reducing the amount of part-time work required.

It made a huge difference, just having that extra funding and not the pressure of knowing you'd have to pay it all back. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

It's going to help me not have to do too many hours at my work, I can rely on this bursary to help me get through my day-to-day living, which has been brilliant. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

However, students reported confusion around whether or not they were entitled to the CEB, and difficulties encountered in accessing it (half the 14 care experienced students said they received it). In some cases, this was due to initial age criteria, a source of deep frustration for older students who emphasised the length of time it can take care leavers to access higher education.

It is frustrating, because I don't know why there was an age restriction in the first place. [...] Care leavers, for example, in my case, it's taken me longer to get to university and know what I want to do because I've had things happen along the way. So, it shouldn't have had an age restriction in the first place, it's something that should have been thought about. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

Some college entrants complained that they had not known about the CEB when they studied HNs at college and had to instead incur student loan debt to support their living costs. They called for improved knowledge and awareness among college financial advisors of the support available to care

experienced students. In a couple of cases, students acknowledged they had perhaps missed out on the CEB due to their reluctance to self-identify as care experienced while at college, highlighting the need for HEIs to make students aware of the benefits of self-identification. There was some confusion around CEB eligibility among those who attended college, with few students aware that the bursary was only introduced in 2017/18. Consequently, some college entrants may have undertaken HNs prior to its introduction and mistakenly believed they were eligible. However, some students who clearly should have received it at college mistakenly took on student loan debt instead, only finding out about the CEB once they enrolled at university.

6.3 The impact of COVID-19

The interviews were conducted in June 2020 in the midst of lockdown. The financial impact of COVID-19 restrictions was often referred to by students, many of whom were furloughed at the time of the interviews. Participants explained that only being furloughed for their guaranteed hours meant missing out on prospective full-time hours which they would normally work over the summer. This meant that students were starting the 2020-21 academic year with far fewer savings to rely on than usual, and with fewer options to build their income in the future.

That's been quite a difficult thing as well, I've been furloughed for part-time work. But last year I would have worked full-time during summer and that would have kept me in Aberdeen during summer. But this year obviously I'm not going to get that. (Care experienced/ estranged student)

While many students returned home to their parents during lockdown, others were unable to do so. Consequently, some students had received additional support from the University's Covid fund to assist with the costs of summer accommodation.

The pandemic has exacerbated not just financial challenges for the students but also emotional and psychological ones. While some students were very happy to move home and see their families, others struggled to adjust to life back home, or had no home. It was particularly hard for first years who had only been in university a short time before the lockdown hit. Students said they had adapted to online teaching with varying degrees of success, although some complained that placements had been cut short or cancelled. Mature students noted the difficulty of balancing university assessments with part-time work and home schooling. Student nurses appreciated being paid for their placements, remarking how they felt more valued as a result. By comparison, art students who required access to on campus materials and studio space expressed disappointment at not being able to publicly exhibit their work. More widely, students from across the University who should have graduated this year were devastated at the prospect of not being able to do so at a ceremony. For those who had taken many years to reach the point of obtaining their degree there was great disappointment at not being able to share the day with their families and peers.

7. Conclusions

This study explored the pathways and influences that hindered and enabled RGU students from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds to access university. The interviews with 48 students from MD20 postcodes, care experienced backgrounds and those in receipt of Access scholarships examine not just the considerable obstacles students from disadvantaged backgrounds encountered in accessing university – both in terms of their home lives and educationally – but also what enabled them to overcome these.

7.1 Secondary school experiences and attainment

Students' ability to access university differed greatly depending on whether they entered RGU directly from S6 or via college. For both groups, students' experiences of secondary school and their resulting attainment were critical to university access. While levels of attainment were significantly higher

among school entrants, some of these students nonetheless relayed instances where they had downgraded their expectations as a result of lower than anticipated attainment or noted that their attainment was such that it precluded them from gaining entry to other Scottish universities.

Although school entrants' path to university was generally smoother as a result of having higher attainment than college entrants, they identified subtle barriers relating to school subject choice, careers guidance and teaching practices which impacted on their choice of degree subject and institution. There were particular issues around the availability of Advanced Highers, echoing Shapira and Priestley's findings (2018; 2019) that there tends to be greater choice and availability of subjects on offer in schools with more advantaged intakes. Our research also pointed to students' poor understanding of Advanced Highers, with some students who had the potential to pursue Advanced Highers choosing instead to repeat a Higher in the hope of increasing their grade. As most students' parents had no experience of HE, school entrants relied heavily on teachers to assist them in the practicalities of applying to university; some were highly critical of this support, while others noted how influential teachers had been in guiding their decision-making. For some of the most disadvantaged college entrants, relationships with teachers were highly influential, making the difference between a student remaining in school or leaving early.

Among college entrants, secondary attainment levels were generally very low, with half this group having left school in S4 or S5, mostly with few or no qualifications. Across Scotland, there are significant gaps in attainment between those from the most and least deprived postcodes, with those from MD20 postcodes achieving significantly lower levels of attainment than their more advantaged peers. Scottish Government school leaver attainment data for 2017/18 (Scot Gov, 2019) shows that 44.4% of MD20 school leavers attained one or more pass at Higher vs 81.8% of those from LD20 postcodes. Inequalities in the take up of Advanced Highers can also be seen in the Scottish Government's data – 9.1% of MD20 students left school with an Advanced Higher, compared to 34.7% of LD20 students.

The interviews highlighted some of the reasons behind students' low attainment levels. Students from all backgrounds, especially those with care experience, estranged students and early school leavers, pointed to significant challenges in their home lives. These challenges impacted heavily not just on students' secondary school experiences and attainment, but also at every point on their route to university and on their retention and progression once there. These included: experiences of trauma and neglect; care experience; estrangement; caring and parental responsibilities; financial hardship; early school leaving; additional support needs; bereavement and homelessness. In the face of multiple disadvantage, the students demonstrated considerable perseverance and resilience, with some using these difficulties as motivation to better themselves.

Parental support and encouragement were key enablers of access, even though most MD20 school entrants were the first in their family to go to university. Parents instilled in their children the value of education, with university and degree qualifications viewed as a route to a better life, a stable career and a secure income. For those without family to rely on, positive reinforcement and encouragement from school, college and RGU staff, work colleagues and other professionals helped to improve students' low confidence and self-belief.

7.2 The role of colleges in promoting access

For those with few school qualifications, college (at both FE and HE levels) was credited with playing a pivotal role in setting students on the path to university, allowing them to obtain the qualifications needed to progress to university. Students contrasted their often negative experiences of school with college. For many, college provided a turning point in their relationship with education. Students said they benefitted from the change in environment, forming new friendships and building strong and supportive relationships with staff.

College entrants were notably more disadvantaged than school entrants, being more likely to be care experienced, estranged, and to have experienced homelessness and/or close family bereavements during their time at school. This mirrors the national picture in Scotland, whereby MD20 students are more likely to be enrolled in college-based-HE courses than in university degree programmes (Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016). While the proportions of MD20 students entering HE have increased in recent years, the majority of these increases have occurred via articulation and college routes, rather than via school leaver recruitment (Iannelli et al., 2011; Riddell & Hunter Blackburn, 2019; Gallacher & Reeve, 2019).

Among the interviewees, some college entrants took a considerable length of time to reach university. Already disadvantaged (socially, economically and academically), these students demonstrated great determination to reach university. Being able to make multiple (often unsuccessful) attempts at FE and college-based HE courses was critical to eventual university access. Students were able to move frequently between courses and institutions, and in and out of education to care for families and build careers over a number of years prior to entering RGU. Time and flexibility to find the right course was particularly important for the most disadvantaged students who took much longer between leaving school and enrolling at university. Care experienced students noted how important it was to have this time to heal and to find their place in education.

There was, however, some duplication both in terms of students undertaking multiple courses at the same qualification level, and in terms of articulation, where ten out of 12 HNC students entered first year rather than as direct entrants to second year. This was a result of the combination of a lack of confidence as well as the desire to have the 'full student experience'. Such duplication points to the need for schools, colleges, and universities to reassure students from disadvantaged backgrounds of their abilities and to provide adequate support for transitions. Few students raised the financial implications of having to fund additional years of living costs, though some had to pay part of their tuition fees having used up their allotted number of years funded by SAAS. Given that the most disadvantaged students are more likely to take longer to complete their course and to make multiple attempts at FE and HE level courses, this represents additional barriers for already highly disadvantaged students.

7.3 Institutional, geographical and financial issues

The findings summarised above are consistent with other widening access research and literature. Issues around low attainment, low confidence, the importance of family support, subject availability and careers guidance have long been highlighted in both Scottish and UK-wide research studies on disadvantaged students' university access (see COWA, 2016; Riddell et al., 2013; Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016; Sosu et al., 2016; Shapira and Priestley, 2018, 2019; and Reay et al., 2009, 2005). They also echo findings of studies undertaken with care experienced students (Jackson et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2017; O'Neill et al., 2019) and estranged students (Costa et al., 2020).

Regional patterns of HE participation, whereby students, especially those from the West of Scotland, are more likely to study close to home have long been a feature of Scottish HE (see Minty, in press; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Paterson, 1993). This research is unusual in that it explores the experiences of North East students who studied locally, and those who travelled a considerable distance from home to move to Aberdeen. In terms of the local students in particular, the study provides further evidence as to the limitations of defining disadvantage using area-based measures of neighbourhood deprivation alone (see also Paterson et al., 2019; Boliver et al., 2017), and of the drawbacks of SIMD classifications as they apply to the North East of Scotland (CoFA, 2019; Weedon, 2014). Although the majority of interviewees came from MD20 postcodes, the 15 students who were from the least deprived postcodes (13 of whom were local to RGU) were some of the most disadvantaged in the sample. Thirteen care experienced and/or estranged, seven had experienced homelessness, and five received a scholarship. By contrast, a small number of MD20 students came from relatively privileged

backgrounds. To ensure disadvantaged students are accurately identified and support reaches those who need it most, a range of area-based and individual access indicators should be considered.

Students were overwhelmingly positive about the University, particularly in terms of feeling a strong sense of belonging. Most described it as welcoming, inclusive and supportive, praising teaching and non-teaching staff alike. That is not to say that interviewees did not experience difficulties while studying here. Finance was a major barrier to university access and retention for nearly all interviewees. Concerns about the cost of living in Aberdeen initially deterred non-local MD20 students from considering RGU, while a lack of money also prevented some local students from leaving Aberdeen to study. Most interviewees received no regular financial support from parents, meaning that they relied on maintenance loans, SAAS income assessed bursaries and nursing bursaries. Part-time work was a necessity for most interviewees who highlighted the difficulties of balancing academic work, paid employment, social lives and family. Accommodation discounts made things easier for first years, reducing some of the financial strain. Scholarships made a significant impact on the lives of recipients, ensuring they had to work fewer part-time hours. There is scope to improve the promotion of financial support available at a national and University level so that scholarships, and all other forms of financial support, are better known and understood among students prior to application and can thus inform students' decisions about where to study. Interviewees frequently raised issues around the financial impact of the pandemic, including reductions in income as a result of furlough and a more challenging part-time jobs market. It is likely this will lead to significant financial difficulties for students in the coming year.

7.4 Care experienced and estranged students

Although many of the themes raised in this research were relevant to all of the disadvantaged groups interviewed (MD20, care experienced and scholarship students), it was clear throughout that care experienced and estranged students faced greater challenges at every point between leaving school, entering university and progressing through the degree. These students had less financial, social and emotional support than non-care experienced/ estranged students who were more likely to be able to rely on families. Care experienced and estranged students also faced considerable day-to-day financial difficulties, often relating to accommodation.

Despite these difficulties, they were highly ambitious, motivated and resilient, driven by a desire to improve their lives. Yet they had very low levels of self-esteem which impacted significantly on their sense of belonging once at university. Some clearly felt isolated and let down by systems, emphasising they had to work much harder to reach university than their peers.

While most interviewees adapted readily to university life, those from care experienced and estranged backgrounds generally found their first year at RGU more difficult, with some struggling to fit in away from their usual support networks. Some care experienced/ estranged students had informally shared information about their background with staff, but others expressed reluctance citing concerns about stigma. It may be that through encouraging students to be more open about their care experienced status then students can be better supported academically as well as practically. This raises issues about how aggregate level data on student cohorts might be used by academic Schools to better understand their students and build capacity to support the most vulnerable students. Given the sense of social isolation experienced by care experienced and estranged students, some suggested an informal network of peer support between care experienced students could help.

Although estranged students are not a focus of SFC data collection for universities, it should be emphasised that they faced significant barriers to access, comparable to those of care experienced students. Estranged students recalled the financial and emotional difficulties of being estranged whilst also having to tackle practical challenges of proving their estrangement and supporting themselves. Students estranged from their families who had no experience of care and/ or who came from a non-MD20 postcode were particularly vulnerable, given that they were unable to access the additional national and institutional financial support offered to these groups. With no other safety net to rely

on, discretionary and hardship funding were vital for these students whose financial positions were incredibly precarious.

7.5 Future research

It is important to note that although the sample of 48 interviewees was large and well spread in terms of age and year of degree, it was skewed towards White students, females, and particular academic Schools. The ethnic diversity of RGU's student population was noted and welcomed by a number of interviewees, yet just six BAME students volunteered for the research. Three-quarters of the interviewees were female, with most coming from courses with large gender imbalances e.g., nursing, allied health occupations, social science, art etc. The interviews demonstrate how pregnancy and childcare interrupted women's routes to university, causing them to drop out of FE and HE courses, and making it difficult to balance academic work, part-time employment and childcare. Future research with BAME students, student parents, those from courses with predominantly male/ female cohorts, and those academic Schools with the lowest proportions of MD20 students would be especially helpful to consider how access might be improved for these groups.

The research provides valuable insights into the routes and educational pathways taken by disadvantaged students when accessing university, and their experiences once enrolled. The findings highlight how multiple levels of disadvantage intersect and influence students' decisions and capacity to enrol at university. Given the considerable obstacles faced by the interviewees, that they made it to university is testament to their hard work, dedication and strong desire to better their lives through higher education.

8. Recommendations

The research findings have informed the following recommendations.

The University should:

1. *Continue to create and foster links with local and non-local schools and colleges*
2. *Improve the promotion of financial support packages for widening access students to increase awareness among prospective students prior to application*
3. *Review, and consider broadening, eligibility criteria for minimum entry requirements and widening access support*
4. *Liaise with NESCOL and other colleges to consider how HNC and HND students can be better encouraged to take direct entry*
5. *Consider how University support services and academic Schools identify and build capacity with those students who are most vulnerable to improve retention, progression and degree outcomes*
6. *Establish a care experienced student network for care experienced students to access and provide peer support*
7. *Conduct additional research with disadvantaged students to further explore the effects of ethnicity and gender, and low proportions of MD20 students in specific academic Schools*

National level organisations (Scottish Government, SFC, SAAS, SQA etc) should:

8. *Raise awareness among prospective care experienced students as to the benefits of self-identification in order to be eligible for additional support*
9. *Improve awareness and understanding of the Care Experienced Bursary among HE providers to ensure all who are eligible are able to benefit from it*

10. *Consider providing additional financial support in the form of a non-repayable bursary for students estranged from their families*
11. *Adopt individual level measures of disadvantage (e.g. free school meals, household income etc) alongside neighbourhood measures such as SIMD to ensure disadvantage is accurately identified*
12. *Explore issues around Advanced Higher availability and ensure the qualification is well understood by teachers and pupils*

Colleges

13. *Improve knowledge and awareness of the Care Experienced Bursary among staff*
14. *Support students to take direct entry by providing additional support to prepare them for the transition to university*
15. *Consider how data is collected and shared with staff in relation to care experienced and estranged students to improve retention and progression among these groups*

Schools should:

16. *Develop further links with RGU*
17. *Improve the availability of Advanced Highers, or work in closer partnerships with neighbouring schools to provide opportunities for study across schools, and promote the qualification among prospective university applicants*

Sarah Minty and Stephen Vertigans, January 2021

RGU	National bodies (Scottish Government, SFC, SAAS, SQA)	Colleges	Schools
<i>Continue to create and foster links with local and nonlocal schools and colleges</i>		<i>Develop further links with RGU</i>	<i>Develop further links with RGU</i>
<i>Improve the promotion of financial support packages for widening access students to increase awareness among prospective students prior to application</i>	<i>Improve awareness and understanding of the Care Experienced Bursary among HE providers to ensure all who are eligible are able to benefit from it</i>	<i>Improve knowledge and awareness of the Care Experienced Bursary among staff</i>	
	<i>Consider providing additional financial support in the form of a non-repayable bursary for students estranged from their families</i>		
<i>Review, and consider broadening, eligibility criteria for minimum entry requirements and widening access support</i>	<i>Adopt individual level measures of disadvantage (e.g. free school meals, household income etc) alongside neighbourhood measures such as SIMD to ensure disadvantage is accurately identified</i>		
<i>Liaise with NESCOL and other colleges to consider how HNC and HND students can be better encouraged to take direct entry</i>		<i>Support students to take direct entry by providing additional support to prepare them for the transition to university</i>	
<i>Consider how University support services and academic Schools identify and build capacity with those students who are most vulnerable to improve retention, progression and degree outcomes</i>	<i>Raise awareness among prospective care experienced students as to the benefits of selfidentifying as care experienced in order to be eligible for additional support</i>	<i>Consider how data is collected and shared with staff in relation to care experienced and estranged students to improve retention and progression among these groups</i>	
<i>Establish a care experienced student network for care experienced students to access and provide peer support</i>			
<i>Conduct additional research with disadvantaged students to further explore the effects of ethnicity and gender, and low proportions of MD20 students in specific academic Schools</i>			
	<i>Explore issues around AH availability, ensure the qualification is well understood by teachers and pupils</i>		<i>Improve availability, awareness, take up of AH</i>

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