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PAPER

Bridging the gap: motivations, challenges and early grades among widening participation students in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing access to higher education (HE) for students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, disparities in retention, awarding and student experience persist. This study examines differences in motivations, barriers, and support for WP and non-WP students, and examines whether early grade differences are present. A sample of 293 undergraduate first and second year Psychology or Cognitive Neuroscience students at an English, Russell Group university completed the survey. Students self-identified with WP criteria. Findings revealed WP students were more likely to identify financial concerns and sense of belonging as barriers, were more motivated by future earning potential, and were less likely to report family support compared to non-WP peers. No early grade differences were shown, suggesting that final degree awarding gaps may emerge later during university study rather than at entry. The study highlights the need for institutions to support students' financial concerns and foster a more inclusive sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS: access and participation, higher education transition, awarding gap, widening participation.

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Introduction

In England, inequalities in access to higher education (HE), academic progression and awarding are noted at all levels of education in many minoritised groups (Department for Education, 2024; Maisuria & Lally, 2024). Widening participation (WP) is the deliberate effort to address these concerns and increase the representation of students from minoritised and underrepresented groups. Although no universal list of WP criteria exists, definitions of WP groups include groups from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minority backgrounds, those living with a disability and those with experiences of being in care or having caring responsibilities (Department for Education, 2024; The University of Manchester, n.d.; UCAS, n.d.). These inequalities are not only unfair to individual learners, but they also limit social mobility and reinforce cycles of disadvantage. WP efforts have been successful in enabling increased progression of these students from schools/colleges into universities (Office for Students, 2023a). WP initiatives have included outreach programmes in schools, financial support schemes, contextual admissions policies and access and participation plans made by universities (Ní Chorcora et al., 2023; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020; Thomas, 2017). Although these initiatives have effectively increased university access, they tend to prioritise entry over ongoing support. This imbalance has contributed to persistent disparities in retention and academic success for students from WP backgrounds including both early grade (how students achieve in their first semester) differences and final awarding (the degree classification achieved at graduation) gaps (Office for Students, 2023a; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020).

Students from WP backgrounds have higher attrition rates within HE, highlighting a potential lack of institutional support to ensure their retention and academic progression (Hillman, 2024). In parallel, evidence points to persistent disparities in final degree outcomes between WP and non-WP students (Office for Students, 2023a). Collectively, these trends could suggest that many of the barriers which historically limited access to HE for WP students continue to affect their experiences once enrolled, hindering their ability to reach their full academic potential. It is therefore crucial to consider the entire student journey, both into and throughout HE, to better understand and address the underlying causes of these disparities in retention and final degree awarding.

Within the literature, some commonly reported barriers associated with HE include; financial pressures, social exclusion, or structural inequalities, and these challenges often intersect to create complex barriers to success for WP students (Lambrechts, 2020; Marshall, 2016; Ravulapalli et al., 2024). Financial pressures remain one of the most significant barriers within HE, affecting all students but perhaps having the most pronounced impact on students from low-income households (Universities UK, 2025). These students often juggle part- or full-time employment alongside their studies, to supplement insufficient student finance in order to meet essential living costs. This necessity for paid employment while studying often places these students at a further disadvantage by limiting time and energy for study and by impeding engagement with developmental opportunities such as internships and networking that enhance future employability (Hordósy et al., 2018; Office for Students, 2023b; The Sutton Trust, 2023). This may deter students from continuing their studies or even enrolling in the first place (Universities UK, 2025).

Students from WP backgrounds may also encounter structural and institutional challenges within HE that unintentionally disadvantage them. These obstacles include inflexible timetables that conflict with caring responsibilities or employment obligations, and limited access to tailored support services (James et al., 2024; Thomas, 2017). Generic university support models often fail to address the distinct and intersecting barriers WP students face, contributing to experiences of exclusion and feelings of imposter syndrome (Taff & Clifton, 2022). This absent sense of belonging and isolation in academic environments was also shown to negatively affect students' engagement, grades, and wellbeing (Taff & Clifton, 2022).

Students from all backgrounds pursue HE for a range of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, but these motivations often differ between WP and non-WP students due to variations in life experiences, access to resources, and family expectations (López Vargas, 2025; The Student Room, 2017; Whittaker, 2017). A sample of 8,700 UK students (The Student Room, 2017) reported that some WP students are inspired to go to university by a genuine love of learning and an intellectual curiosity that fuels their desire for personal growth and academic exploration. However, other students suggested more extrinsic factors motivated their decision to go to university, many viewed HE as a pathway to better career prospects and increased financial stability. The goal of earning a degree often carries symbolic weight, often representing resilience, achievement, and a desire to make family proud (Capannola &

Johnson, 2022; Sanchez Hernandez et al., 2025). This may be especially true for students who are the first in their family to attend university, are financially supported by their family to go to university, or come from traditionally underrepresented communities.

Support systems also play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences when applying to and attending university. Support from family, teachers, advisors, and peers influences students' decisions to apply to university and helps them navigate the academic and emotional demands of HE (Descals-Tomás et al., 2021; Sartania et al., 2021; Timmis et al., 2024). However, students from WP backgrounds may encounter disparities in these support structures, as they may be supported by family or social networks with less knowledge of the HE systems or with negative perceptions of its value, which can restrict their access to informed guidance and diminish their confidence in pursuing HE (Sartania et al., 2021). Access to mentoring, outreach programmes, financial support services, and inclusive campus communities have been shown to contribute to a smoother transition into university life for WP students and lower rates of attrition (Stephens et al., 2014; The Brilliant Club, 2024). This demonstrates the importance of appropriate support when at university to enable the success of WP students, however such specific support systems are not universally accessible across HE institutions in England.

Although research on WP students has grown, particularly regarding access to HE, key gaps remain in understanding their success at university. Few studies have examined how multiple influential variables (e.g., barriers, motivations, and support) interact with intersecting identity markers — such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, or care experience — to shape student experiences. Most research focuses on single markers, overlooking how disadvantages can compound (Kettell, 2020; Morrison et al., 2024). This limits understanding of how these factors contribute to early grades received and final awarding gaps. The present study addresses these gaps by: (1) comparing barriers, motivations, and support between WP and non-WP students, (2) examining these factors across WP subgroups, and (3) analysing early grading trends across multiple assessment types.

When considering these barriers, motivational factors and differences in sources of support for WP students, it is easy to see how these factors could contribute towards final awarding gaps between WP and non-WP students. It is important to establish if academic under-preparedness, stemming from unequal access to quality schooling or limited subject

availability in underfunded colleges, might leave some WP students struggling to meet the demands of higher-level study (Office for Students, 2022). If so, this could lead to lower self-efficacy in relation to academic ability, which has been linked to receiving lower grades and possible disengagement from studies (Schneider & Preckel, 2017). However, it may also be that the academic grade differences emerge only while studying at university, leading to final awarding gaps. Factors like financial strain, needing to work alongside studying and external caring responsibilities are likely to frequently reduce the time and energy WP students can devote to their studies, compared to other students without these concerns and responsibilities. Understanding where in the academic timeline these gaps begin and how they may lead to awarding gaps, along with their underlying causes, can be crucial in developing appropriate support. For example, a project led by Kingston University demonstrated how the use of a value-added metric combined with an inclusive curriculum framework can help universities identify intervention points and implement targeted, inclusive interventions to support students (Office for Students, 2020). This illustrates how data-driven and inclusive approaches can enable universities to reduce awarding gaps and foster student success.

Methods

Study design

Ethical approval was obtained by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: 2023-16440-31142). This quantitative study represents the first phase of a larger exploratory mixed-methods design, in which follow-up qualitative interviews (reported separately) were conducted to illuminate and expand upon the survey findings. In this phase, a cross-sectional survey design was employed to generate a broad, comparative overview of motivations, barriers, and support among WP and non-WP students. Therefore, the focus of the current study is on our qualitative findings.

Participants

Participants were invited to take part in this online survey study. Eligibility criteria included: a) over the age of 18, b) a first- or second-year student studying one of two specified undergraduate courses: BSc Psychology or BSc Cognitive Neuroscience and Psychology, at the University of Manchester. In total, 293 participants completed this survey. Of this sample, 264

participants gave consent for their grades data to be accessed. All participants come from recent, post-COVID student cohorts.

WP criteria

For this study, participants self-identified which of the WP criteria outlined by The University of Manchester (n.d.) applied to them: 1) from low-income backgrounds; 2) from areas where participation in HE is low; 3) the first in their generation to attend HE; 4) attended schools and colleges where performance is below the national average; 5) are care experienced; 6) living with a disability; 7) are young carers; 8) estranged from their families; 9) from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds; 10) from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities; 11) are refugees or asylum seekers; 12) from military families. A 13th option to indicate non-WP background was also included.

Materials and procedure

Participants completed an anonymous online questionnaire via Qualtrics designed to explore motivations, perceived barriers, and sources of support related to applying to HE. Students received course credit for participation as part of a compulsory course requirement. However, students could choose from a wide range of available studies or complete an alternative assessment to earn this credit, therefore participation in the present study remained entirely optional. Informed consent was obtained before students began the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into four main sections and was informed by the literature and expertise of the research team. First, participants provided basic background and relevant demographic information, including their year of study, international student status, and self-identification with relevant WP criteria. Participants were also asked to provide their student ID number, if they consented to their grade data being accessed. Next, participants were asked about their motivations for applying to university. They were presented with a series of statements regarding common motivators for pursuing HE (e.g., career goals, placement/study abroad, family expectations). Participants then completed similar questions about the perceived barriers they faced during the application process. In this section, participants were asked to rate the relevance of various potential barriers to applying or considering applying for university (e.g., financial concerns, missing information, fear of not fitting in). Finally, participants answered a series of questions about the sources of support

they had when applying to university (e.g., school staff, family members, outreach programmes). For each of the statements relating to motivators, barriers and sources of support, participants indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each statement (1 strongly disagree – 4 strongly agree). These ratings were later binarised to simple agree/disagree scores. See Table 1 for full list of questions asked in relation to barriers, motivations and sources of support.

Data analysis

Based on WP self-identification data, two additional groupings were created: 1) WP and non-WP groups, and 2) WP intersectionality groups based on the number of WP criteria with which a student self-identified (0, 1, 2 or 3+ criteria). Chi-squared analyses were used to compare proportions of WP and non-WP students agreeing or disagreeing with suggested motivations, barriers and sources of support when applying to university. The binarisation of the data in this instance was important for the assumptions of the chi-square to be adequately met. Note that for one of the motivation questions, Fisher's Exact Test was used as a non-parametric alternative to chi-square. Bayesian generalised linear mixed effects models were also run on the binarised data about potential barriers, but used thematic groupings of WP criteria (e.g. low-income backgrounds, coming from an area with low HE participation or first gen, ethnic minority backgrounds). As grade data were collected from different year groups, all grades were first converted to deviations from the relevant year group's mean grade. This allowed for a fair comparison of grades across different year groups and individual units. One-way ANOVAs were then used to compare grade deviations between the levels of WP (1, 2 and 3+) and non-WP groups.

Table 1. Statements provided by students relating to the perceived barriers, motivators and sources of support when considering applying to and studying at university.

Question	Statement	Category
Please state if each of the below barriers to applying or considering applying for university are to your experience	1. Money for myself to live at university. 2. Sense of belonging at university. 3. Feeling 'good enough' to attend university. 4. Lack of knowledge about applying.	Barrier

What were your main motivators for wanting to study at university?	1. Because I enjoy learning. 2. Because I want to earn more money in my future career. 3. Because I want to graduate.	Motivator
Please state if each of the sources of support were available to you when applying or considering applying to university	1. Family/parents. 2. School/college teachers. 3. University access schemes.	Support

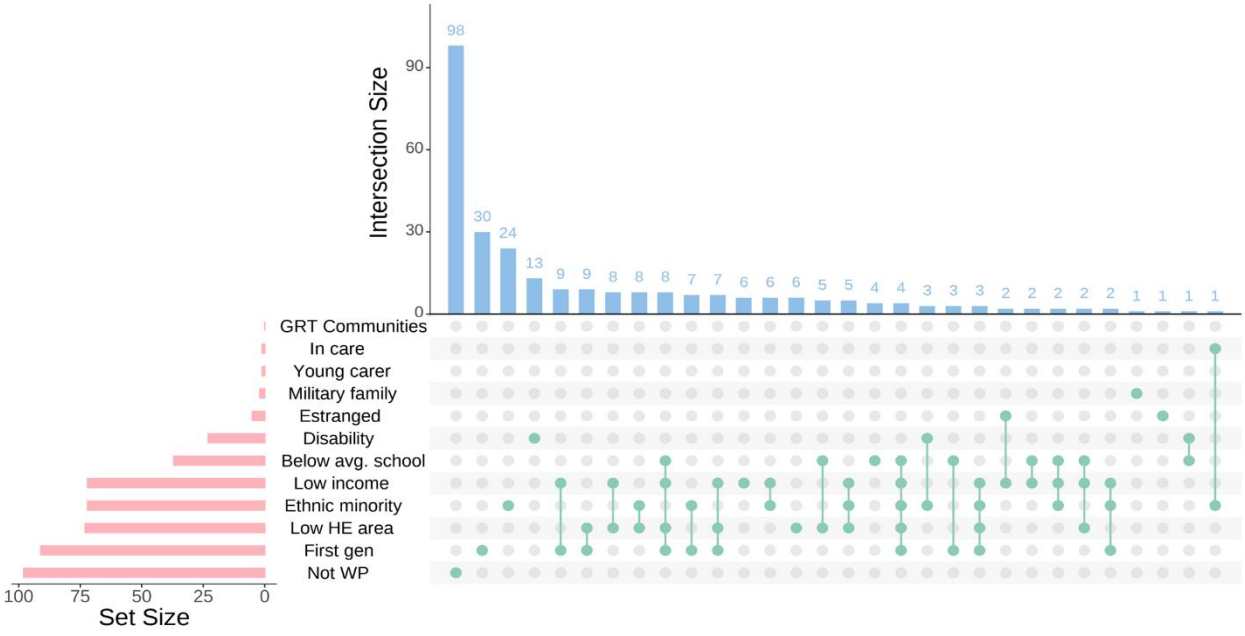
Results

Of the 293 participants, 98 identified as not being from a WP background and 195 self-identified with at least one of the WP criteria. Figure 1 shows the number of participants self-identifying as belonging to each of the WP criteria.

Comparison of barriers, support and motivators between WP and non-WP groups

We conducted cross-tabulation chi-squared tests to compare WP students and non-WP students on each of the barriers, facilitators and motivators contained within the questionnaire (Table 1). For these tests, any student self-identifying with one or more of the WP criteria was considered a WP student. Of the ten associations tested, four were statistically significant: two barriers, one source of support and one motivator.

Figure 1. Combinations of widening participation (WP) criteria reported by participants



Note: UpSet plot showing the combinations of WP criteria reported by participants. Green dots and connecting lines indicate which WP criteria are included in each combination. Blue vertical bars represent the number of participants within each combination (intersection size), while orange horizontal bars show the total number of participants reporting each individual criterion (set size). There was a significant but weak association between sense of belonging and being a WP student: χ^2 (1) = 5.03, p = .025, V = 0.131. 60% of WP students reported that this was a barrier, compared to 45% of non-WP students. Similarly, there was a significant but weak association between having money to live and being a WP student: χ^2 (1) = 7.88, p = .005, V = 0.164. 57% of WP students reported this was a barrier, compared to 39% of non-WP students. Responses to these questions are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

A further significant but weak association between having family as a source of support and WP status was shown: χ2 (1) = 4.01, p = .045, V = 0.117. 81% of WP students and 91% of non-WP students reported that having a supportive family was a facilitator to accessing HE (see Table 4). Finally, using Fisher's Exact Test, we found that there was a significant association between wanting to earn more money as a motivator for going to university and WP status (p = .006). A total of 99.5% of WP students and 94% of non-WP students reported that earning potential was a motivator while at university. No other barriers, sources of support or motivators showed significant associations with WP status.

Table 2. WP and non-WP students' responses to perceiving 'sense of belonging' as a barrier when applying to university.

Response	Non-WP	WP
Disagree	54	79
Agree	44	116

Table 3. WP and non-WP students' responses to perceiving 'having money to live at uni' as a barrier when applying to university.

Response	Non-WP	WP
Disagree	60	84
Agree	38	111

Table 4. WP and non-WP students' responses to perceiving a 'supportive family' as a source of support when applying to university.

Response	Non-WP	WP
Disagree	9	37
Agree	89	158

Exploration of common barriers, for related WP groupings

We compared the likelihood of different groups of students experiencing the following potential barriers to HE: not enough money to live at university, experiences of not feeling a sense of belonging, not feeling 'good enough' to attend university, and missing knowledge about the application process. We did this by fitting the survey data to Bayesian generalised linear mixed effects models in *R* (version 4.1.2; *R* Core Team, 2021) using the *blme* package (version 1.0.5; Chung et al., 2013). The data were analysed according to thematic groupings of participants based on WP criteria, shown in Table 5. Each group was considered entirely independently of all other WP criteria. Therefore, students in the 'higher income' group, for instance, consisted of non-WP students plus students who were classed as WP according to alternative criteria (e.g., coming from an underrepresented ethnic group).

Table 5. Number of participants in each related WP group.

Grouping	WP criteria	N
Income background	Low income	72
	Higher income	221
Educational background (local HE participation * student generation)	Low local HE participation	73
	Higher local HE participation	222
	First-generation student	91
	Non-first-generation student	173
Ethnic background	Underrepresented ethnic group	72
	Majority ethnic group	221

Income background

The first analysis compared groups of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds as defined by those self-identifying as 'from a low-income background' and those who did not consider themselves to come from a low-income background, regardless of whether they fulfilled any other WP criteria. We ran four models, each featuring income background (low = 1; not low = 0) as the only fixed effect, participant as a random effect, and one of the barriers as an outcome variable (e.g., lack of money to live at university [barrier experienced = 1; not experienced = 0]). See Table 6 for summaries of each model's output. The models revealed that students from low-income backgrounds were 34.1% more likely to

report experiencing struggling financially to live at university as a barrier to HE and 14.1% more likely to report an experience of not feeling a sense of belonging as a barrier than students from higher income backgrounds. However, there were no significant differences in the extent to which not feeling 'good enough' and missing knowledge about the application process affected students from low vs. higher income backgrounds.

Table 6. Potential barriers faced by students depending on their income backgrounds: summary of Generalised Linear Mixed Effects Models.

Barrier (outcome variable)	Fixed effect	Coefficient	Std. error	*z* value	Pr (>|*z*|)
Money to live at university	Intercept	0.02	0.16	-0.15	.883
	Income background	1.82	0.42	4.33	< .001***
Sense of belonging	Intercept	0.39	0.17	2.33	.020*
	Income background	0.70	0.35	2.01	.044*
Feeling 'good enough' to attend	Intercept	0.20	0.16	1.23	.22
	Income background	0.44	0.33	1.34	.180
Lack of knowledge about applying	Intercept	-1.03	0.22	-4.77	< .001***
	Income background	0.33	0.34	0.97	.344

* p < .05 *** p < .001

Educational background

The second set of analysis explored the influence of HE participation within students' families and amongst people living in their local geographical areas, independently of any other WP criteria. Again, we ran one model for each of the four potential barriers. Each model included level of participation in HE in students' local area (low = 1; higher = 0) and status as a first-generation student (first generation = 1; not first generation = 0) as fixed effects, plus a two-way interaction term between them. Participant was added to all models as a random effect. See Table 7 for summaries of each model's output. We found that students self-identifying as being from areas where participation in HE is generally low were 27.5% more likely to report struggling financially to live at university, and 10% more likely to experience not feeling a sense of belonging as barriers than students from areas where there is greater participation in HE. There were no further differences between students from areas with low vs. higher

participation in HE, and no significant differences in the impact of these barriers on first-generation students vs. those who were not.

Table 7. Potential barriers faced by students depending on their educational backgrounds: summary of Generalised Linear Mixed Effects Models.

Barrier (outcome variable)	Fixed effect	Coefficient	Std. error	*z* value	Pr (>|*z*|)
Money to live at university	Intercept	0.02	0.19	-0.8	.933
	Local HE participation	1.42	0.51	2.78	.005**
	Student generation	0.31	0.38	0.82	.415
	Local HE participation * Student generation	-0.23	0.75	-0.30	.761
Sense of belonging	Intercept	0.41	0.19	2.17	.030*
	Local HE participation	.31	10.56	2.33	.020*
	Student generation	0.15	0.39	0.38	.702
	Local HE participation * Student generation	-1.47	0.76	-1.92	.055
Feeling 'good enough' to attend	Intercept	0.15	0.18	0.83	0.40
	Local HE participation	0.39	0.46	0.85	.395
	Student generation	0.26	0.37	0.70	.486
	Local HE participation * Student generation	-0.18	0.68	-0.27	.789
Lack of knowledge about applying	Intercept	-0.99	0.24	-4.16	< .001***
	Local HE participation	-0.35	0.49	-0.71	.475
	Student generation	0.45	0.37	1.16	.246
	Local HE participation * Student generation	-0.11	0.72	-0.15	.879

* p < .05 ** p < .005 *** p < .001. **Note:** The fourth effect for each outcome represents the interaction effect between the two variables.

Educational background

Lastly, we ran four models to compare the potential barriers experienced by students from underrepresented ethnic groups and those from the majority ethnic group, independently of other WP criteria. Ethnic background was the sole fixed effect in each model (underrepresented ethnic group = 1; majority ethnic group = 0), and participant was included

as a random effect. See Table 8 for summaries of each model's output. Students from underrepresented ethnic groups were 21.7% more likely to report experiences of not feeling a sense of belonging as a barrier than students from the majority ethnic group. The extent to which money to live at university, feeling good enough, and knowledge about the application process impacted both groups of students did not differ significantly.

Table 8. Potential barriers faced by students depending on their ethnic backgrounds: summary of Generalised Linear Mixed Effects Models.

Barrier (outcome variable)	Fixed effect	Coefficient	Std. error	*z* value	Pr (>|*z*|)
Money to live at university	Intercept	0.40	0.17	2.4	.016*
	Ethnic background	-0.08	0.32	-0.24	.810
Sense of belonging	Intercept	0.31	0.17	1.85	.064
	Ethnic background	1.12	0.38	3.00	.003***
Feeling 'good enough' to attend	Intercept	0.39	0.16	2.39	0.017*
	Ethnic background	-0.36	0.3	-1.09	.275
Lack of knowledge about applying	Intercept	-0.93	-4.53	0.21	< .001***
	Ethnic background	-0.03	0.35	-0.08	.936

* p < .05 ** p < .005 *** p < .001

Early grades

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare students' grades in Year 1 Semester 1 units, assessed through different media, among students meeting different numbers of WP criteria (none, 1, 2, or 3+). Three units were compared, one assessed via exam only, one assessed through essay only and the final unit assessed as 50% exam and 50% coursework. Sample sizes for each group are shown in Table 9.

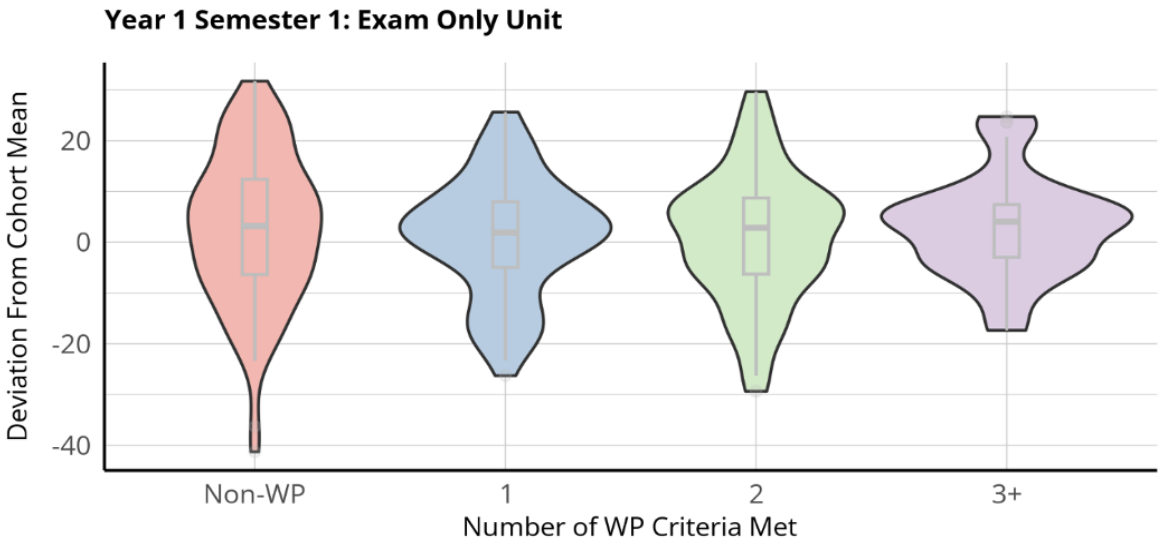
Table 9. Sample sizes for each WP group included in each of the three analyses for different assessment types.

Assessment type	Non-WP	Meets 1 WP criteria	Meets 2 WP criteria	Meets 3 or more WP criteria
Exam only	82	74	58	39
Essay only	81	73	57	40
Written assignment & exam	82	74	58	40

Across all three assessment types, no significant differences in grades were seen.

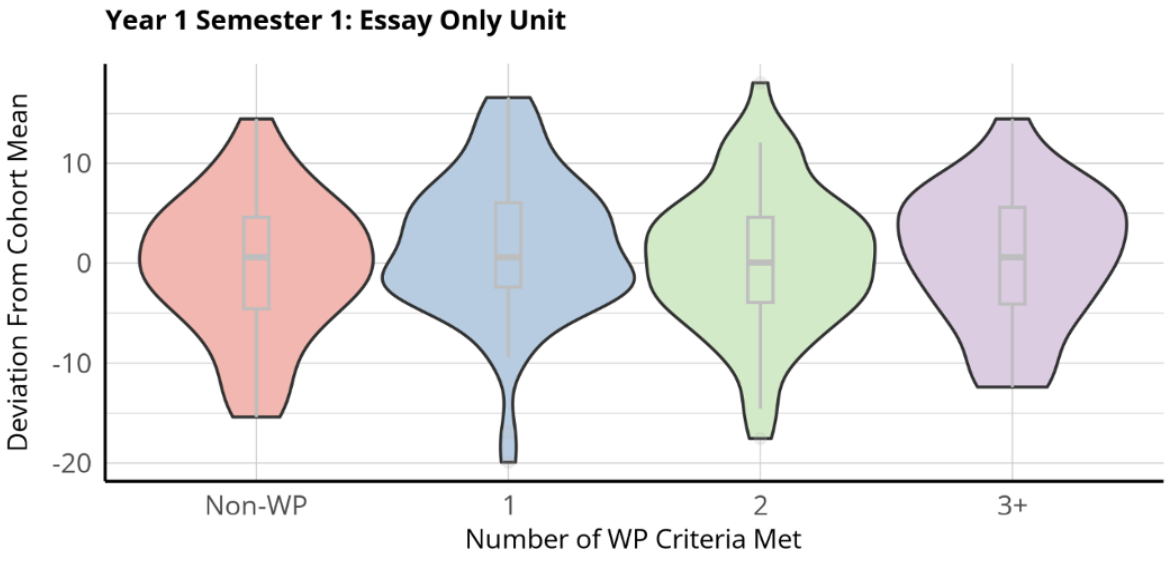
Distributions of grades per WP group across these three assessments is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Grade distributions by number of widening participation (WP) criteria across different assessment types.



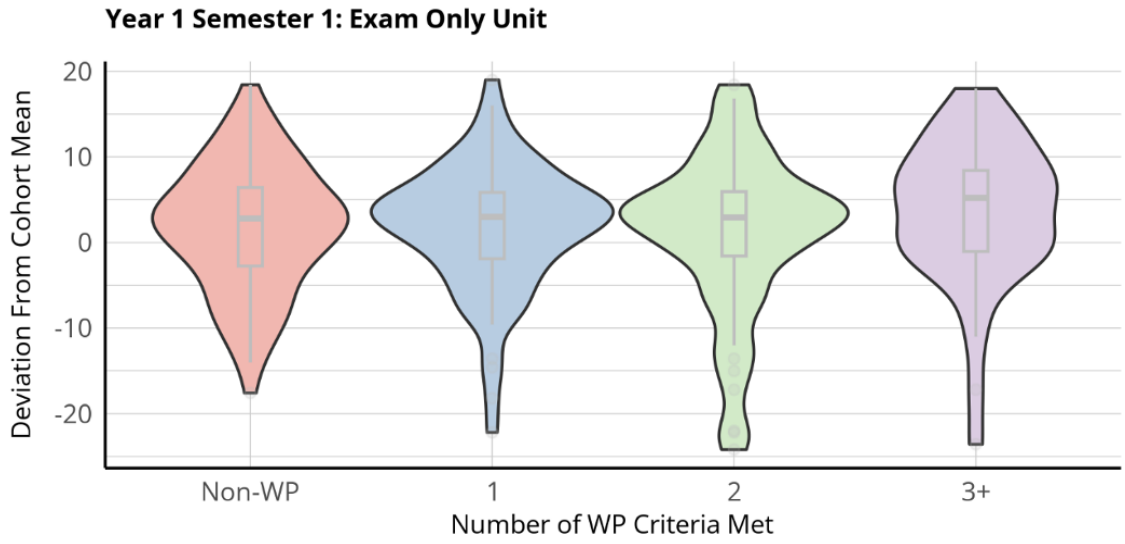
Note: Violin boxplots showing grade distributions (expressed as deviations from cohort means) for an exam only course unit. Students are grouped by the number of WP criteria they identified with: no WP criteria, one WP criterion, two WP criteria, or three or more WP criteria. Boxplots within each violin show the mean and interquartile range. The width of each violin indicates the density of students at each grade deviation, with wider sections representing a greater concentration of students at those values.

Figure 3. Grade distributions for an essay only course unit by number of widening participation (WP).



Note: Violin boxplots showing grade distributions (expressed as deviations from cohort means) for a coursework (essay only) course unit. Students are grouped by the number of WP criteria they identified with: no WP criteria, one WP criterion, two WP criteria, or three or more WP criteria. Boxplots within each violin show the mean and interquartile range. The width of each violin indicates the density of students at each grade deviation, with wider sections representing a greater concentration of students at those values.

Figure 4. Grade distributions for a course unit with both an essay and an exam by number of widening participation (WP) criteria.



Note: Violin boxplots showing grade distributions (expressed as deviations from cohort means) for a course unit with both a written assignment and an exam. Students are grouped by the number of WP criteria they identified with: no WP criteria, one WP criterion, two WP criteria, or three or more WP criteria. Boxplots within each violin show the mean and interquartile range. The width of each violin indicates the density of students at each grade deviation, with wider sections representing a greater concentration of students at those values.

Discussion

The findings of the current study provide insights into the barriers, motivators and sources of support experienced by students across the full spectrum of WP backgrounds. Results suggest that although both WP and non-WP students are impacted by these factors, there are significant associations between WP status and specific barriers (financial concerns and decreased experiences of sense of belonging), motivators (future earnings) and sources of support (family). We also found no evidence of early grade differences for WP students relative to non-WP students, regardless of increased WP intersectionality.

More specifically, WP students were more likely to consider financial burdens and decreased experiences of sense of belonging as barriers to applying to university than non-WP students. These associations, although significant, have weak effect sizes, suggesting these factors may not be universal across the whole WP cohort. However, these barriers were also both significantly more likely to be reported for students from lower-income backgrounds compared to both non-WP students and students meeting other WP criteria. This finding aligns with research that has suggested both financial concerns and a sense of belonging as established barriers to HE for WP students (Thomas, 2017; Universities UK, 2025). Similarly, within this analysis, financial concerns were significantly more likely to be reported by students from low participation areas compared to students not from these areas. Given that low income and low participation areas are both likely to be markers of socioeconomic disadvantage (Office for Students, 2023a), there may be some overlap between students included in the analysis for low-income backgrounds and for low participation areas. We found that sense of belonging was a significant barrier for students from an area where participation in HE is low. However, this was to a lesser degree than finances, suggesting that self-perception of one's financial status plays a slightly more influential role in perceptions of belonging at university than regional identity (e.g. regional background).

In contrast, a sense of belonging, but not financial concerns, was significantly more likely to be reported as a barrier to university for students from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds. This mirrors previous research highlighting that students from these groups often report not feeling a sense of belonging in HE environments (Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Kauser et al., 2021). In our study, this suggests that both class and ethnicity may interact with sense of belonging, underlining its importance as a barrier. Sense of belonging is multifaceted, likely affecting students differently depending on personal, academic, and institutional factors (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Bettencourt, 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Interestingly, first-generation students were no more likely than others to report sense of belonging as a barrier, reflecting variability within and between individuals (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2023).

Addressing these challenges through curriculum and pedagogy may help. Learning Development research indicates that embedding academic literacies within the curriculum can ensure that support reflects students' lived experiences and barriers (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025). Similarly, pedagogical approaches that foster belonging enhance

engagement by strengthening students' wellbeing and sense of inclusion (Lemon et al., 2025). These findings suggest that targeted curriculum and teaching strategies could play a key role in mitigating a sense of belonging as a barrier for WP students.

In relation to motivators for going to university, students from WP backgrounds were more likely to report a desire to earn more money in their future career, but did not show any other motivational differences when compared to non-WP students. No motivational factors were more likely to be reported for specific WP groupings. Future earning potential has also previously been mentioned by all students in reviews of motivation for university study (Shao, 2023; The Student Room, 2017). The emphasis on future financial earnings among WP students who simultaneously identify current finances as a barrier underscores a heightened financial consciousness. It may reflect a strong aspirational drive to overcome socioeconomic disadvantage and secure improved prospects for themselves and their families, particularly in the context of England's recent economic history.

As may be expected, WP students in our sample were less likely to report receiving support from family when considering applying to university than their non-WP counterparts. Previous literature suggests that students from WP backgrounds are more likely to come from families with limited familiarity with HE or sceptical perceptions of its relevance (Gazeley & Hinton-Smith, 2024; Thomas, 2017). Although not a high proportion of students overall, both WP and non-WP students reported comparably similar support from school/college and university access schemes. This may reflect the considerable efforts made by schools and universities to support all students accessing HE (Office for Students, 2023a).

No significant differences in early grades received were shown between any intersectional WP and non-WP groups for any of the three types of assessment examined. This indicates that, in our sample, grade differences are not present at the early stage of university study (end of semester 1 of year 1). Interestingly, no significant associations were shown between WP status and feeling good enough to study at university, again implying that awarding gaps reported in the literature may occur later in a student's academic journey and are not present at the early stages. Final awarding gaps may therefore be more reflective of the extrinsic pressures (e.g., finances) disproportionately experienced by students from WP backgrounds, rather than intrinsic factors that would contribute to feeling good enough to study at university. This challenges suggestions that academic gaps for students from WP backgrounds

may already exist when students join university due to academic under-preparedness (Office for Students, 2022).

Although this study used a robust sample size, all participants were drawn from a single Russell Group university with a high entry tariff. This introduces a potential selection bias, as WP students who gain entry to such institutions are likely to be more academically resilient than the wider WP population. Consequently, the absence of grade differences in our findings may reflect this heightened resilience rather than a broader trend, limiting the generalisability of this specific result to institutions with lower entry requirements or different student demographics. More broadly, while we observed statistically significant differences in barriers, support, and motivators between WP and non-WP students, these effects were weak, meaning the findings should be interpreted cautiously even within our own cohort. Although this work has not differentiated between home and international students included in the analyses, it is possible that different factors may influence WP and non-WP students in different ways. Future studies may wish to include this within their analysis in order to understand how these factors can uniquely impact WP home or WP international students.

Based on the present findings, we propose that final degree awarding gaps may develop while students are at university as grade differences are not present in the first semester of study. This highlights the important role that HE institutions play in supporting students throughout their studies. Interventions to reduce final awarding gaps can be suggested to target sense of belonging and financial concerns as barriers to academic success. Sense of belonging must be considered from multiple perspectives, to ensure all students feel valued and a part of the student community, thus increasing engagement with the course and in turn reducing attrition rates and awarding gaps. Similarly, financial pressures are likely to increase the need for some students to work part- or full-time alongside their studies. While HE institutions could ideally provide financial support to alleviate this burden, many universities are themselves facing significant financial constraints. Therefore, a more feasible approach may be to offer greater flexibility in timetabling, extended deadlines, and other academic arrangements, helping to reduce the negative impact on students' experience, academic performance, and retention (Hordósy et al., 2018; Universities UK, 2025).

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the barriers, motivations, and support experienced by WP students navigating entry into HE. While WP and non-WP students reported broadly similar levels of support when applying (except from families), WP students, particularly those from lower-income households and underrepresented ethnic groups, were more likely to face financial pressures and a lower sense of belonging. The absence of early grade differences and the lack of significant association between WP status and feeling good enough to study at university challenge assumptions about pre-entry academic preparedness. Taken together, these findings highlight that final degree awarding gaps may be driven by extrinsic pressures (e.g., finances, social exclusion), which emerge during study, rather than intrinsic factors or academic under-preparedness at entry. These findings highlight the need for universities to offer continual, inclusive support, such as flexible timetables and assessments, targeted financial aid, inclusive curricula, and community-building initiatives, to foster belonging, address socio-cultural barriers, and ensure equitable academic success as access expands.

Disclosure statement

The authors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: ChatGPT 4.0. The tasks performed by ChatGPT 4.0 were limited to improving clarity, flow and readability of the final manuscript. All intellectual content, including analysis and figure generation, remain solely the work of the human authors.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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