



PAPER

Success in layers: how widening access students build success in their university life

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how students from widening access backgrounds make sense of their success in higher education. Semi-structured interview data was collected from eight mature undergraduate students at a widening access university in England. Thematic analysis identified three interconnected layers that shape success: personal inner drivers, social co-production, and institutional structures. Students described how small moments of reassurance, self-belief, and determination helped them stay motivated, while the support of family, peers and approachable staff gave them strength and confidence to continue. Institutional factors, including inclusive teaching, consistent communication, and support mechanisms, either empowered or hindered their progress at times. Together, these findings show that success is not an individual act of resilience, but a shared achievement built through personal growth, supportive relationships, and responsive institutional environments. The study offers practical insights for universities seeking to design policies and practices to support widening access students to belong, progress, and succeed.

KEYWORDS: widening access, student success, belonging, mature students, student voice.

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Background

Widening access is a well-known term in the higher education sector. It refers to the policies and practices aimed at expanding the participation of students from underrepresented groups, including those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minority

communities, mature learners, and students with disabilities (Thompson, 2019). Initial efforts of the policies of widening access aimed mainly at the recruitment and enrolment of students from underrepresented groups. However, the agenda has now changed towards ensuring not only the entry of the students but also their retention and success, recognising that access without success risks reinforcing inequality (Jones, 2021).

National policy initiatives, such as Higher Education Funding Council for England funding measures, Office for Fair Access (OFFA)'s access agreements, and the Office for Students' access and participation plans, demonstrate ongoing commitment to widening access (Harrison & Waller, 2017; OfS, 2019). Despite these interventions and policies that support widening access, significant challenges exist in effectively supporting students from widening access backgrounds (Mellors and Vicencio, 2025).

Evidence suggests that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, and mature students continue to report higher withdrawal rates and lower attainment rates compared to their more advantaged peers (Baines et al., 2024; Hillman, 2024). According to the Office for Students (OfS, 2024), the continuation gap between the most and least advantaged students is around seven points, and similar disparities appear in attainment and graduate outcomes. These patterns are not only evident in the UK, but they are also seen across Europe and Australia. Several studies from other countries suggest that disadvantaged students are more likely to withdraw and less likely to progress or achieve strong results, even though different equity-driven policies are in place (Pitman et al., 2022; Vossensteyn et al., 2015). These outcomes are not a result of their lack of previous academic preparedness, but are formed by deeper structural and cultural inequalities embedded within higher education institutional practices (Reay et al., 2010; Yorke, 2014). These inequalities are also linked to race, disability, and socio-economic background, and continue to influence awarding and progression outcomes in UK higher education (Advance HE, 2023b; OfS, 2024). An intersectional perspective is therefore important when considering widening access. Several interventions have been developed by higher education institutions to address these inequalities. This is through outreach programmes, financial aid, contextual admissions, and dedicated support roles such as student success officers (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2017; Universities UK, 2022) to help widening access students succeed. Although these interventions are valuable, this alone has not eliminated outcome gaps (TASO,



2024; Universities UK, 2022). Research suggests that there are several factors that contribute to the student success journey. This includes individual factors like self-efficacy and self-management (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022), along with broader issues of culture (Cook, 2024), pedagogy and curriculum (Cohen & Viola, 2022), and institutional belonging (Hunt et al., 2023). Taking into consideration the multifaceted nature of student success, it is important to explore the student voices in their higher education journeys. Drawing on these insights, this article explores how students from widening access backgrounds perceive their higher education journeys. While widening access includes many different underrepresented groups, this study specifically focuses on mature students who entered higher education through an access route, as they often have different responsibilities and transition experiences.

While policies and frameworks support the access of students to higher education, research suggests that several other factors contribute to their continuation and success. One of the important factors that contributes to student success is their sense of belonging to their higher education institution (Allen et al., 2024; Crawford et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2024). Thomas (2013) in her study identified that students who feel they are connected both academically and socially in their first year are more likely to stay in their course. Other studies have also identified that belonging is not just fitting in but also about feeling recognised and valued as a part of the university community (Boulton, 2022; Howson & Kingsbury, 2024). This is especially important for students from non-traditional backgrounds as they often face 'imposter syndrome' at the start of their course (Kilby et al., 2022). Stokoe et al. (2024) argue that it is important at the start of their course to build confidence for a smooth transition to higher education.

Another important factor that influences student success is their social support. Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2016) found that social support from staff, useful feedback, and mentoring all helped students stay focused and succeed. Gill et al. (2015) showed that encouragement at home and sharing household chores helped the mature students manage their studies. Hunt et al. (2023) add that belonging to an institution should be seen as something co-produced between students, their families, and the institution. Another key factor that contributes to student success is the way courses and systems are designed. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2023) stresses that inclusive teaching, clear assignments, and reliable timetables help reduce dropout rates. In contrast, systemic delays and sudden changes in their timetables can



cause real problems (Delavande et al., 2025). Pollard et al. (2019) reported that student finance delays have affected students from low-income backgrounds, while Runacres and Herron (2022) found that inflexible timetable changes were extremely difficult for students with job and caring responsibilities.

This article adds to this debate by focusing on students' own voices on the factors that contribute to leading a successful student journey. A few previous studies have explored student success in widening access. For example, in the UK, Thomas (2017) highlights the importance of a whole-system approach to widening access and success and explores how institutions have tried to address the gaps. This study showed how belonging and engagement support success, but her work focused primarily on the level of institutional strategy and programme design. Although her study explained the importance of belonging, it did not focus primarily on how students themselves perceived the experience of their success journey. Further studies, like Humphrey and Lowe (2017) and Hunt et al. (2024), explored students' sense of belonging and the emotional dimension of the student journey in higher education, but did not focus on a comprehensive journey towards success. Advance HE (2023a) developed a student success framework that provides a strategic institution-led model, while this study contributes a complementary student-defined perspective.

International studies like O'Shea (2016) and Lessky (2024) explored students' success journeys, specifically focusing on younger first-generation students. Their studies identified how identity, resilience, and family dynamics shape access and continuation. By contrast, the students in this study are predominantly mature students, not always first-in-family, with some having children or relatives who had already graduated. Mature students and those entering through access routes often balance study with work and caring responsibilities, and may experience transition to university differently from traditional students (Gill et al., 2015). In conclusion, the previous literature confirms that belonging, identity, and family support systems matter in the success journey of students, but there are limited studies that focus on widening access students' success journeys in their own words. This article, therefore, addresses this gap by showing how success is achieved and sustained for mature students who try hard to balance work, care, and study. The study was guided by the following research question: how do mature, widening access students describe the factors that shape their success in higher education?



This article interprets student success through a learning development lens. In the UK, learning development has developed in the context of widening participation and has been closely associated with asset-based, student-centred, relational practice (Hartley et al., 2011). This framing aligns with Syska and Buckley's (2024) account of learning development as a student-centred practice, committed to strengthening inclusion and making expectations and practices of higher education easier to understand and navigate. This perspective also resonates with broader discussions of transformative practice in higher education, understood as changes that reduce barriers to access and engagement while fostering more equitable, person-centred relationships (Syska et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to examine how students made sense of success in their own terms. This approach was appropriate because the research question focused on meaning, experience, and interpretation rather than variable testing or outcome prediction (Bryman, 2016).

Study context

This study was conducted at a university campus in England that recruits predominantly mature students from historically underrepresented groups in higher education. This includes mature students, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minority communities, students with disabilities, and students without prior formal qualifications. The institution is highly focused on advancing equitable access and student continuation. Institutions with similar student profiles face ongoing challenges in supporting progression and completion (Advance HE, 2023a; OfS, 2024; Thomas, 2013). Understanding students' own perspectives on success can inform retention and progression strategies. This study took place in 2024, a period when more emphasis across the UK higher education sector was placed on belonging, inclusion, and mental health following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants while providing space for individual narrative depth. This approach is the most common and effective approach to collect data to understand people's perceptions (Bryman, 2016).



Interviews were conducted one-to-one via Microsoft Teams for accessibility and convenience for mature students with multiple responsibilities. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The data was held on the university's secure servers with restricted access.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis following the six-phase approach, informed by later developments in reflexive thematic analysis that emphasise interpretation and researcher reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2024). The process started with familiarising the scripts, line-by-line coding, grouping similar ideas into initial themes, cross-checking and refining these into final themes through an iterative process (Naeem et al., 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). Coding and theme development were understood as interpretive processes shaped by the researchers' perspectives. Team discussion was used to deepen analysis and question assumptions, not to establish inter-coder reliability. In line with the reflexive thematic analysis, coding and theme development were treated as interpretive acts (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2024). Credibility was supported through iterative analysis, team dialogue, and transparent reporting (Nowell et al., 2017)

Ethical consideration and researcher reflexivity

Ethical approval was granted by the university's research ethics committee. All participants received an information sheet detailing the study aims, procedures, and their rights, and participants completed a written informed consent form. They were assured that participation was voluntary and could withdraw at any stage without any disadvantage. All their personal identifiers were removed from transcripts to protect confidentiality.

Reflexivity was approached as an ongoing process throughout the study. The interviewer and one other team member held leadership roles within the institution, though neither was directly involved in teaching or assessing the participants. The other team members also included a teaching academic and a professional services colleague. These different roles informed interpretation and were considered explicitly during analytic discussions (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2024).



Results

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of eight undergraduate students enrolled in Business or Health and Social Care programmes. All participants had progressed beyond their foundation year after successfully completing it and met pre-defined eligibility criteria: completion of at least two academic terms, successful completion of their study to date, and maintenance of a minimum 70% attendance record. This purposive sampling strategy intentionally focused on students who succeeded because this study wanted to focus on perceived enablers of successful continuation rather than withdrawal pathways. The sample comprised seven women and one man aged between 30–55 years. Participants were either in paid employment or primarily engaged in home making and caring responsibilities. While some participants referred to disability in their accounts, no detailed demographic data were collected. Subgroup representation is therefore not claimed. Recruitment took place through targeted email invitations to eligible cohorts. Data collection concluded after eight interviews, when no substantially new insights were observed, consistent with the data saturation in qualitative studies (Bryman, 2016). Given the small sample size ($n=8$), the findings are offered as context-sensitive insights that may be transferable to similar settings, rather than as results that can be statistically generalised (Bryman, 2016). Thematic analysis of the data identified three main themes.

Theme 1: Personal inner drivers of success

For widening access students, staying on and completing the course can be challenging due to their commitments or other barriers. They did not describe persistence as something that they naturally had, but as something built over time from personal experiences and self-belief. Students explained the moments that reassured them to continue their journey when they struggled to cope. This theme shows that success grew out of small but powerful personal drivers that slowly helped them build confidence and identity as learners. Three subthemes were identified, which show how they achieved success through their personal inner drivers.



Subtheme 1.1: Defining moments of commitment

For many students, there are moments of commitment that drive them through their struggles. This includes experiences of reassurance, an unexpected spark of interest, and deliberate personal motivations. Each experience helped them move from uncertainty to action, enabling them to view their studies as possible and worth pursuing.

One participant explained how a brief, but clear message of acceptance changed their view of studying at university:

P2: She was like, 'You will receive an email, but I will let you know, you are in'. That reassurance was really good. Because I think that if I didn't have that reassurance on that day, I don't think, could have lasted these three years here.

This shows how one clear confirmation can spark determination to persist despite the challenges. This reassurance acted as an early sign that they belonged and could manage the journey ahead. Another student described how an uncertain start became an act of taking control. The participant faced confusion and setbacks when applying to another university and was unsure whether to continue. However, taking autonomy and deciding to come back to this university gave them a new sense of direction and confidence. P4 explained that, 'I was going to go to a different university. They were messing me around. And then on my own terms, I came back ... I was more confident coming forward, giving my own information and getting in'.

Another participant mentioned how pushing themselves past hesitation to fully engage helped the participant to strive. As P8 explained, 'I thought I should give myself now the proper kick to do this course wholeheartedly'. Here, a deliberate, strong internal decision sparked the motivation to continue their studies. These accounts show that deciding to remain in higher education is shaped by distinct moments that shifted them from uncertainty to action, whether through reassurance, reclaiming control, or strong inner drive. Such moments helped the participants to sustain their studies when challenges arose.

Subtheme: 1.2: Managing life commitments

Many accounts of participants highlighted the deliberate work involved in balancing study with other responsibilities. Their accounts highlighted that success requires practical choices, negotiation, and sacrifice to manage their commitments. The participants showed strong



personal drive to manage their commitments effectively, which was central to continuing and thriving.

One participant described the decision to reduce paid work to provide more time for their studies. They framed the change not as a loss but as part of investing in their future by explaining that, 'I gave up my job so I could work less and study more ... It wasn't a light decision, just part of the journey' (P3). This shows that long-term commitments require sacrifice at times. Demonstrating that understanding individual needs and decisions to make the study viable is important for success.

Practical time management strategies were evident in many participant accounts. This is a key factor that supported their success and helped them manage multiple commitments. As P5 reflected, 'Plan the day before ... every minute is important ... attend every lesson'. This participant highlighted the importance of effective planning that helped them to succeed. This is particularly important to the students from widening access.

Another participant spoke about how managing their other commitments effectively helped them to succeed. For example, 'Nursery time gave me space to study, and late nights paid off with a high mark' (P7). Most participants highlighted the importance of managing their commitments effectively, and it played a crucial role in their success. This strong personal skill to manage commitment led to their successful journey.

Subtheme: 1.3: Transitioning into a confident learner

Students highlighted moments that sparked the decision to continue, and they have also described how persistence also requires a gradual transition to a confident learner. They acknowledge that during the journey, they have transitioned from fear and doubt to familiarity with the university, gaining new skills, and understanding their strengths and weaknesses. Through this process, students began to feel that they belonged and could succeed in their journey.

One participant reflected on how their early fear slowly shifted over time. At first, the participant was fearful to even think about university, but as they stayed on, their perception changed. They came to see it as a place they could approach and navigate with confidence, explaining, 'I was really petrified at first thinking uni was a scary place ... but it's not ... my perception changed; it's approachable place' (P3). This statement shows that moving from



fear to familiarity created confidence to continue their study. It suggests that persistence is strengthened when students begin to feel the university is a place for them.

Another participant described how developing specific academic skills builds their confidence. The participant explained how gaining skills changed their sense of ability and enjoyment in learning. 'Doing presentations built my confidence ... I enjoy learning, now I have found strategies and ways of me learning ... it's just been sailing and I enjoy it' (P7). Here, confidence came from doing work and identifying personal learning strategies. Success in challenging tasks provided encouragement and identity as a capable learner. It shows how building academic skills and strategies helps persistence over time.

Another participant described each day as a chance to move forward and learn something new. This helped the participant to turn education into a meaningful, confident journey. As stated by P8, 'My journey was a difficult one to start with. No day I regret ... every day is a new learning for me. I learned a lot and I am now confident that I can do more'. This reflection shows that the students go through their learning journey and transition to confident learners through the learning process.

Another participant spoke about the acceptance of the way they think, which made their journey a success. 'Being a student, I had to let down my pride and be open to accepting the support I should have had as a child ... lots of tears of relief and understanding how my brain functions' (P5).

This account shows the journey to be a confident learner is very personal, including accepting vulnerability, seeking help, and using new understanding and striving. Overcoming barriers through effective support and finding effective strategies created space for success. Taken together, these narratives show that several factors contribute to their success; It could be small moments that spark desire and motivation to strive, effectively managing their commitments, and persistence in transitioning into a confident learner.

Theme 2: Social co-production of success

Students explained throughout their narratives how the support they received from staff, peers, and family played a crucial role in their success. Success was not described as something they achieved alone; instead, it was built with others. The networks of support



were not always formal. Both formal and non-formal networks helped students both practically and emotionally.

One participant explained how the academic support helped them in overcoming their difficulties. The support removed the barrier to their success, for example, 'Referencing became easy with the help of lecturers and the librarian' (P1).

Informal encounters were appreciated by the students, and that welcoming environment helped them to show up and establish relationships, as stated by P2: 'Even just cheerful faces at reception made me get up and go to uni'. This shows that a small act of kindness can improve students' engagement and belonging.

Family support also plays a key role in students' success. Supportive partners, children, and parents were all mentioned as part of their success by students. For example, one participant mentioned how he shared the caring duties and contributed to the study: 'My husband took the evenings and even proofread drafts for me' (P7).

Peer support was appreciated by the participants and mentioned how it helped in reminding deadlines, working together, and supporting each other:

P5: We have a WhatsApp group, where the girls will remind us of the deadline, share updates on their progress and post useful articles to read. We all support each other, we encourage one another, especially when someone falls behind or faces difficulties.

Participants' accounts explain how the success can be co-produced by formal and informal networks of support. The network provides practical and emotional support and indicates how persistence is sustained beyond the individual and co-produced with the help of a supportive network.

Theme 3: Institutional role in student success

While personal inner drives and supportive relationships are vital, students also made clear that the university itself played a crucial role in shaping student success. Participants explained how the course structures, teaching approaches, and organisation of study helped them to build confidence or created barriers. The participants additionally mentioned how administrative and wider policy decisions impacted their studies.



Participants described that teaching practices and course structures make learning feel more accessible and achievable to them. A participant described how accessible materials supported their learning. The participant felt that making the materials inclusive made all the difference to their learning as stated by P3. 'Assignment print and font size mattered ... audio versions of briefs made all the difference'.

Another student commented on how the pre-induction programme (Springboard) and the initial Level 4 course built familiarity and confidence for later study: 'Springboard plus the level 4 basics meant level 5 didn't feel completely new' (P1).

This shows the scaffolding of learning with a well-structured sequence can reduce shock and support student persistence by making them feel they are ready for new demands. Another participant contrasted their experience of online and in-person study by stating that, 'The two terms online were horrible ... being on-site changed everything' (P2).

This shows that the mode of delivery is an important factor for students' success and how the wider policies during COVID-19 may have impacted the learning experience of students.

While students appreciated effective design that helped their success, they have also identified ways the institution made their journey harder. One participant linked administrative problems that created difficulty in their learning journey as mentioned by a participant, P5: 'Student finance issues, last-minute module date changes, and even parking all affected my learning'.

Another student also mentioned that late timetable changes were a repeated source of stress for them, as the participant found it hard to manage other commitments with last-minute timetable changes. As highlighted by participant P1, 'Timetable changes came too late and clashed with work and family ... it left us to deal with the mess'.

Another student mentioned the unnecessary burden of administrative procedures, causing additional time and energy to navigate these complex systems: 'The process for proof and evidence was long-winded ... I had to persevere' (P3).

Together, these narratives show that institutional policies and structures supported them in their journey as well as created direct challenges to success. This theme shows that persistence to success is not only personal or social but also systemic. It is important for the



institution to design its policies and procedures that are student-friendly to support their journey.

Success for widening access students was built through an interplay of personal determination, support from others, and the learning environment itself. The personal inner drivers gave students the confidence to begin and continue their journey, and relationships sustained their efforts. The inclusive institutional design supported and, at the same time, challenged their journey. Together, these themes show that thriving in higher education is a shared achievement shaped by students' personal characteristics, the people around them, and the environment created by the university.

Discussion

This study offers a layered account of success for students from widening access backgrounds. The findings of this study show that success is constructed across three linked layers, which include personal inner drives, social and practical relationships, and institutional structures. This model advances the current debates by showing how these layers work together to shape persistence, leading to student success. This layered account also contributes directly to learning development, which is grounded in asset-based, student-centred practice and built through strong relationships (Hartley et al., 2011; Syska & Buckley, 2024). The three layers identified here reflect the domains in which learning developers frequently operate. The three layers are not discrete categories but operate in interaction, reflecting the cross-layer nature of learning development practice.

The first layer, inner drivers of success, shows that success grew out of small but powerful personal drivers that slowly helped them build confidence and identity as learners. This layer explains success as a process supported by personal characteristics and choices. Small moments of recognition and self-direction increased their commitment, leading to a confident learner. Another key personal characteristic that helped all the participants was the effective management of multiple commitments. Widening access students often balance multiple commitments, including family, employment, and academic study. The effective management of these commitments is therefore essential for their success, a relationship that has been well established among traditional student populations (Adams & Blair, 2019).



In this study, participants demonstrated deliberate and effective management of their commitments, reflecting previous findings that mature learners who plan ahead and negotiate family and work responsibilities are more likely to sustain engagement and achieve positive outcomes (Kahu, 2013). Furthermore, participants viewed their development into confident learners as a gradual process from fear to familiarity. Their accounts show that belonging was not built immediately, but built through repeated experiences of learning, support, and competence. This supports Thomas (2020) and Humphrey and Lowe (2017), who view belonging as an evolving process shaped by engagement over time.

The second layer, success co-produced through relationships, highlights the enabling roles of others in their student journey. It could be the support from family, university staff, or peers that played an important role in their success. Students valued approachable staff, welcoming interactions with staff members, and supportive family and peers. These features align with research that links belonging and social connection (Crawford et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2024; Thomas, 2013). In our data, social networks did not replace the student's own management of commitments. Rather, they supported the students so that personal strategies for balancing study could be maintained.

The third layer, the institutional environment, shows that the course and system design could either support or undermine student success. Inclusive teaching and assessments, accessible materials, and effective scaffolding between levels of study reduced uncertainty and built confidence, and align with QAA guidance and work on inclusive pedagogy (Cohen & Viola, 2022; QAA, 2023; Thomas, 2017). By contrast, financial delay, late timetable changes, and complex procedures created barriers for students in their journey. This echoes sector reports on the unequal burden of different administrative procedures (Runacres & Herron, 2022; Woelert, 2023).

While Thomas (2020) proposed a whole system approach to widening access at the institution and policy level, this study extends that framework by illustrating how strategy is experienced and applied in everyday student life. It shows how small, routine interactions and design choices shape student confidence and belonging and how administrative barriers can affect student experience negatively. In contrast to other studies that focus on traditional students of first-generation cohorts (Lessky, 2024; O'Shea, 2016), this study highlights the voice of mature students who balance study with work and caring responsibilities.



This study also extends to the work of Hunt et al. (2023), where the co-production of belonging effectively captures the emotional and relational aspect of student experience, but it does not highlight the practical realities faced by widening access students. In this study, belonging and success are not only co-produced through relationships but are supported through the effective use of personal characteristics, including managing multiple commitments. This analysis positions the active balancing of work, care, and study as a distinct personal layer of success, supported by the social networks but not replaced by them. By distinguishing and linking the personal, social, and institutional layers that shape success and persistence, this study adds to our understanding of what truly helps widening access students to thrive. It emphasises the importance of designing policies and strategies that not only address institutional goals but also recognise and support all the layers of student success. For learning developers, the interconnection of the three layers is particularly significant. Learning developers constantly engage with these three layers in practice. They engage with students' personal development, build their confidence through relational support, and contribute to curriculum and assessment conversations within institutions (Hartley et al., 2011; Syska & Buckley, 2024). The layered model, therefore, offers a practical lens for reflecting on both direct student support and wider institutional influence.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have clear implications for higher education policy and practice. Institutions seeking to improve success and progression among widening access students should design interventions that operate across all three layers of success rather than focusing on one dimension in isolation. At the personal level, institutions should design interventions to gain personal skills like time management, public speaking, and opportunities for recognition and small academic success, which will strengthen student commitment at the early stages of study. At the social level, interventions should be designed to foster peer and staff relationships, and university teams should value the commitments of students outside their classrooms. Family-inclusive activities and communication can strengthen the bridge between home and university life. At the institution level, administrative processes should be designed to suit mature students and ensure stability, inclusivity, and accessibility at all levels of the student journey. Although some of the recommendations relate to wider institutional decisions, many are within the scope of learning developers. Learning developers can support



clearer curriculum design, strengthen relational practice, and contribute to more inclusive approaches.

This study has its own limitations. It was conducted with a small sample of eight mature students from a single widening access university. No detailed demographic data were collected, and the study does not analyse differences across protected characteristics. The findings are therefore not generalisable, but offer transferable insights that may inform practice in similar contexts. Participants were chosen from students who remained in the study, so the experiences of students who withdrew were not captured. Further research could extend this model by exploring how the three layers of success operate across disciplines, institutions, and student demographics. Longitudinal studies following students over the course of their study would provide richer evidence on how personal, social, and institutional design evolve and interact over time.

In conclusion, this study provides a deeper understanding of the student journey in a widening access context. It moves beyond views of resilience or isolated policy interventions as core to student success to a more layered and shared achievement. Personal characteristics, social support, and supportive institutional systems work together to make their success possible. Recognising this complexity can help universities create environments where widening access leads not only to entry but also genuine opportunity, progression, and success. Although this study was designed as a qualitative exploration rather than a formal case study, its focus on a single widening access institution offers the foundations for future case-based research. Further work could examine the practical operation of the three layers across programmes and student groups to deepen contextual understanding of widening access practice.

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