

Building a Skills Bridge for uncertain students: supporting students transitioning into HE at Staffordshire University 2018-2021

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Bridging the gap to the unknown world of University



What led to this?

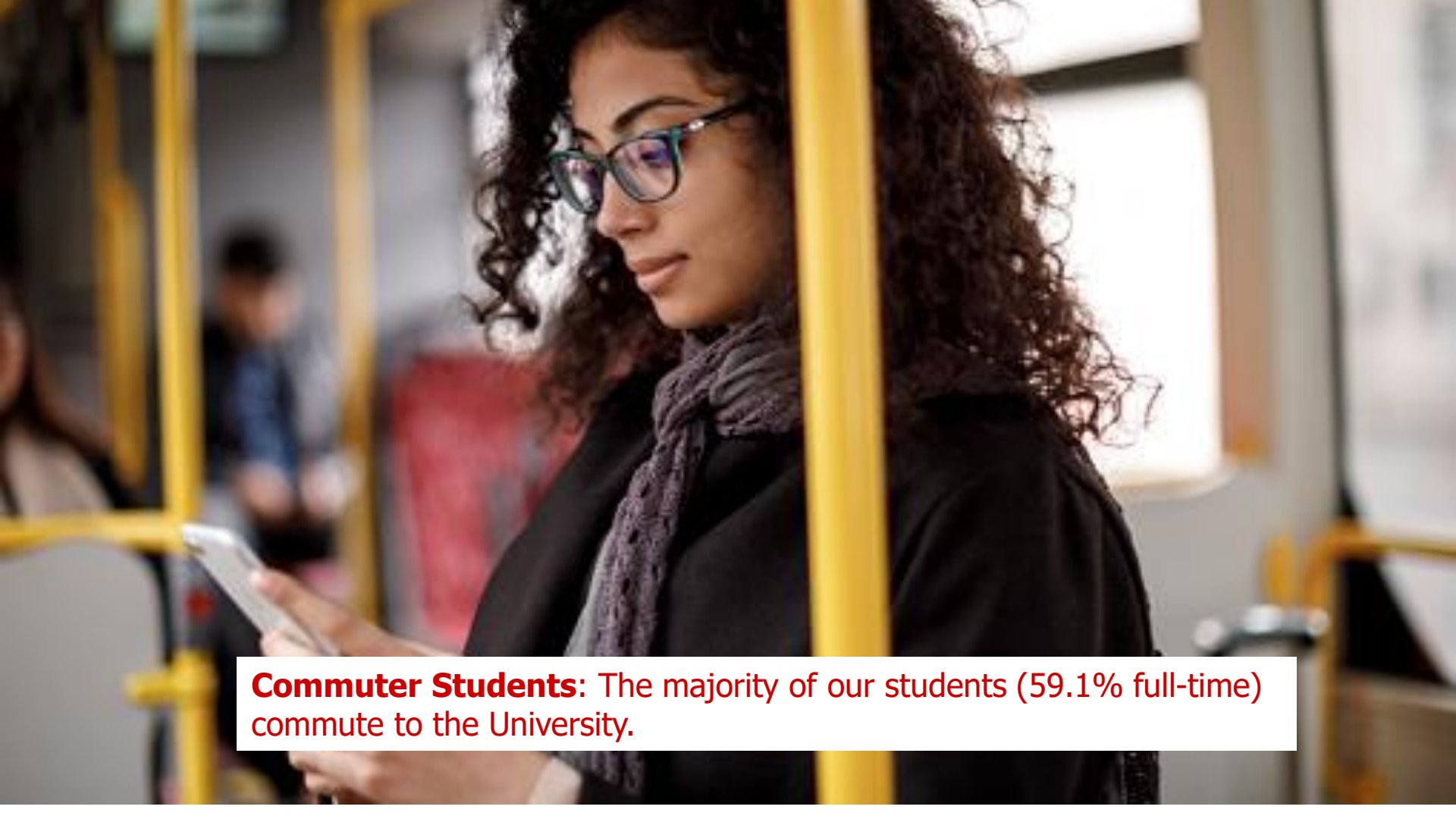
- The University's overarching Access and Participation Plan 2020/21- 2024/25
- Data gathered as part of the University's involvement in the OfS West Midlands DRIVER project led by Coventry University ([ABSS project - Coventry University - Office for Students](#))
- The OfS Start to Success project, in which Staffordshire University was a key stakeholder, highlighted the issues facing non-traditional students coming to the University.
- Since 2018 the Student and Academic Services directorate has been formally committed to offering transition support for students requiring an extra boost to begin their journey in higher education.

Context

- Based in Stoke-on-Trent - with Centres of Excellence in Stafford and Shrewsbury, a base in Lichfield and the recently established Digital Institute London - **28% of our students are drawn from the local** Stoke-on-Trent area.
- 30.2% of neighbourhoods in Stoke-on-Trent are classed in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods nationally, placing the local authority **14th overall in the Index of Multiple Deprivation.**

Our diverse student population

- Our students have well-established and distinctive characteristics.



Commuter Students: The majority of our students (59.1% full-time) commute to the University.

The background of the slide is a photograph showing a large pile of rubble and debris, likely the remains of a destroyed building. In the upper left, there is a wooden structure, possibly a door or window frame, partially visible. The rest of the image is filled with broken concrete, twisted metal, and other unrecognizable fragments, suggesting a scene of significant destruction.

Low Participation: 48.8% of all student groups covered by the APP plan are drawn from POLAR4 Quintile 1 & 2, including 51.26% of full-time students and 42.69% of our part-time students.

A significant number are from the **most deprived groups** as measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children (IDAC) index. 24.51% of our students are from Quintile 1 of the index.

Mature students: 50.5% of all student are classified as mature on entry, including 35.1% of full-time and 88.8% of part-time students.

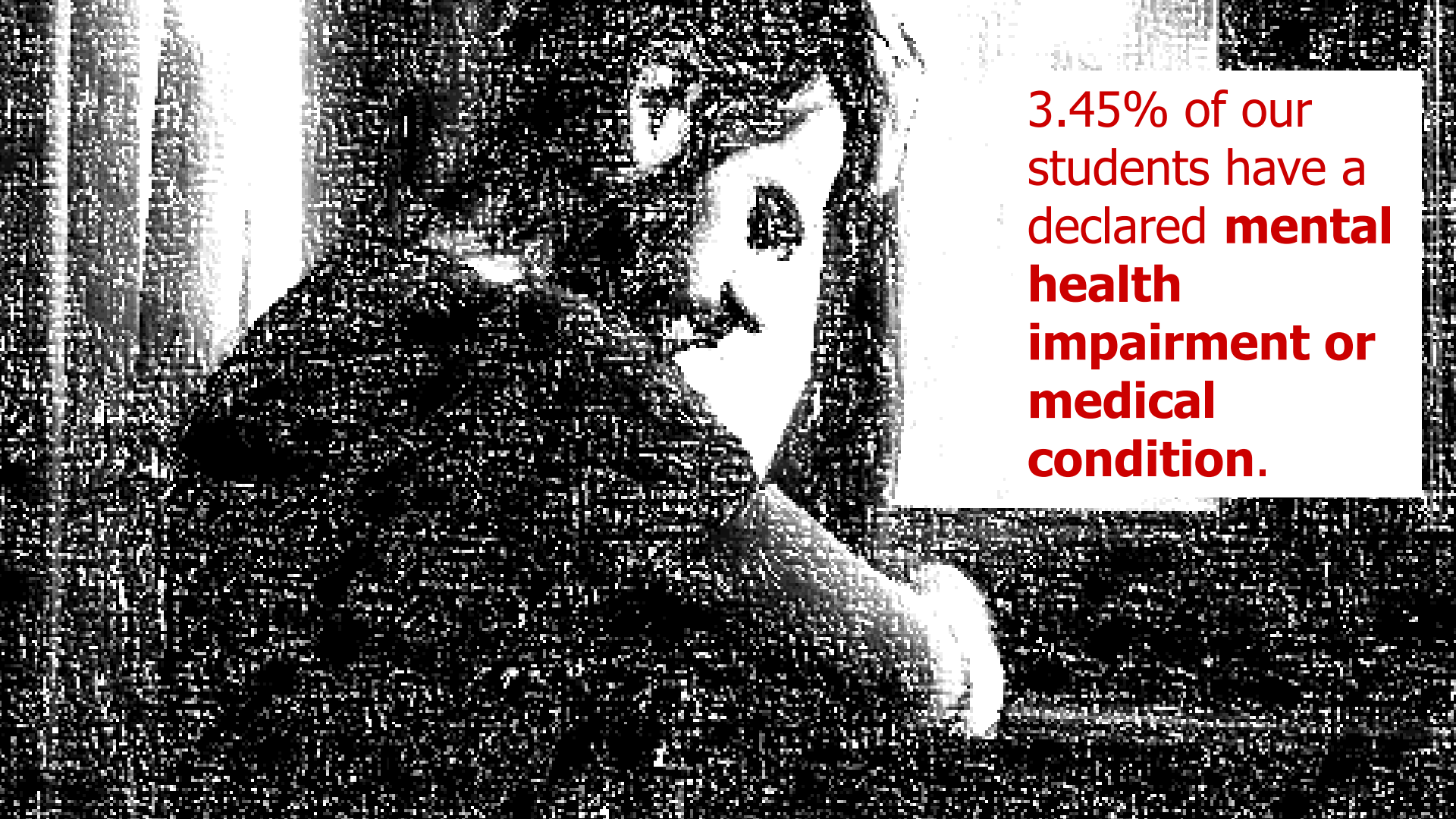




Black Asian Minority Ethnic : 17% of all student groups are from a BAME background, including 19% of full-time students and 12.2% part-time students.



- **Disabled students:**
15.9% of all students have a declared disability



3.45% of our
students have a
declared **mental
health
impairment or
medical
condition.**

Student Journey Project

- Building on our Student Journey Project the University has reviewed and developed its infrastructure to support students throughout their lifecycle.
 - This project has covered every aspect from outreach and recruitment through transition to university, retention, supporting academic success to the development of wider employability attributes that lead to employment or further study.
 - Interventions have been designed to make improvements for all students with bespoke journeys.
-

What we've done so far: the directorate perspective

- Small face to face programmes ran in 2018/19 and 2019/20, with an online version operating in the pandemic year of 2020.
- This year the team is offering a programme of support sessions in both face to face and online contexts via the Skills Bridge programme.
- Aim: to provide a trailer or taster for the more comprehensive support offered to new students in Welcome Week.
- Through collaborative work with the Student Success Co-ordinator and staff across Student and Academic Services the pre-entry provision is planned and advertised as part of a supportive framework.

Our immediate incentive

- Our students are non-traditional and therefore they may need more, maybe non-traditional support.
- It could be argued that *all* students joining HE in 2020 and 2021 have had a non traditional route: thinking here about the huge impact of the pandemic in making those joining us right now feel unprepared for University.



What we're doing now

The aim is to offer the **Skills Bridge** to help students joining the University feel more confident in their ability to

- **Develop the required academic skills**
- **Create and access the relevant support network relevant to them personally to succeed as they make the transition to higher education.**

What we're doing now: academic skills

The Academic Skills component includes:

- an **online guide** aimed at all pre-entry students, highlighting key resources which are helpful to consult in order to build confidence in academic skills before beginning their course;
- a **2 hour face to face session as part of the Skills Bridge day** providing opportunities for students to meet and make contact with Academic Skills Team staff, be provided with guidance on some key academic skills, and have a space in which to discuss concerns, ask questions and meet other students.
- Students interested in discussing academic skills support in more detail can also book in a **pre-entry appointment (either on campus or online)**.

What we're doing now: student support skills

The Student Services component includes:

- **Workshops at feeder colleges** encouraging students to disclose disability/mental health conditions on their UCAS application- leads to effective support being put in place early.
- **ASD transition** residentials allowing students who are on the autistic spectrum (and their supporters) the opportunity to familiarise themselves with university life at a time which is quieter and less overwhelming.
- **Commuter events** creating the opportunity for those who are not on campus full time to make friends with their peers, learning how to make the most out of their university experience as commuter students.

What we're doing now: student support skills

The Student Services component includes:

- **Orientation events** highlighting Student Support.
- Opportunities allowing students to receive **advice/guidance specific to their circumstances** for example relating to their sexual orientation, if they are parents, carers, care leavers, estranged or from ethnic minority background.
- We have created **resources and workshops** on imposter syndrome – especially in the light of Covid and the effects of undergraduate students not taking exams.

What we have discovered

- Feedback from students suggests that the student response is that meeting University people before their studies begin makes those feeling unconfident and anxious feel more “at home” in their first formative weeks at University.
- Meeting people like themselves is crucial.
- **You are not alone!!!**



Feedback from 2019

- The next slides show anonymised responses from 2019 student feedback on the joint events we ran that year.
- Real students reveal how they felt about the academic skills element of the pre-entry workshop.



Student feedback: what will be different about studying at University?

Higher level of
understanding /
research

Opportunity to
change career
path

Thorough
learning

More intensive;
need to do
more!

Focused on my
subject

Subject content
will be more
complex / more
to learn

Student feedback: things I didn't feel clear on before this workshop

| | | |
|--|-------------------------|---|
| When it's ok to ask for help / how often we can do this | Referencing | Assignment preparation / layout |
| What resources do I need before the start of the semester? | Writing skills / essays | What to do if I can't make it into Uni (sickness absence etc) |
| Balancing assignments | Preparing for success | Best practice on completing assignments |

Student feedback: after today I feel clearer about

Reassured that there is support and advice available. Know where to find help

The services I can engage with in academic studies

How to use the library and access help and support

Clearer on points for academic writing and completing assignments etc

Who to go to for support

The library website and their services I didn't know were there

Where to access help and support during my course

Understanding how to use the website / library tools

Referencing

What is expected from writing

What is expected from presentations

How to phrase and reference

What we plan to do next



- With consent, we plan to track the students who will attend the 2021 Skills Bridge sessions throughout their University journey.

What we plan to do next



- Intend to try to ascertain if the experience of attending these initial pre-arrival sessions makes those who came along more resilient and, therefore, more likely to continue with their studies.

Coming to University can feel like a journey into the unknown but if you know that lots of others are making the same journey with you and that there are lots of people there to help you, it increases confidence and resilience.



References

- Images taken from Pixabay- with thanks to the many creators of work on Pixabay.



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