

Meet our Speakers...

Professor Liz Thomas, Lead of the Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice (CRESJ), University of York

Professor Liz Thomas has been researching student diversity, experiences and equitable outcomes for twenty-five years. She is committed to using research to improve policy, practice and equity. In 2023-24 Liz worked with a number of institutions to develop a whole provider approach to student success. In 2024-25 she worked with the Technological Higher Education Association Ireland and the seven technological higher education providers to explore whole provider and whole sector approaches to enabling commuter student engagement and success. Liz has published several articles on commuter students.

Mature and Commuter Student Experience at Loughborough University

Professor Hilary McDermott, Professor of Psychology Education Loughborough University

Professor Hilary McDermott is an experienced academic, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Programme Leader for Psychology at Loughborough University. Hilary is an established teaching specialist and was awarded National Teaching Fellow in 2022. Hilary is also committed to the Student Experience and much of her research is student-focused with the findings from student projects being fed directly to the university Student Experience Team

Financial support for low-income commuter students

Debbie Lindsay, Student Money Advice and Rights (SMART) Team Manager University of East London

Debbie has over 20 years of experience working in higher education, including 16 years with the University of East London's Student Money Advice and Rights Team (SMART), which she currently manages. She has extensive expertise in supporting underrepresented student groups and developing initiatives that address financial barriers and promote social mobility. Under her management, the SMART team was recently awarded Team of the Year 2025/26 by the National Association of Student Money Advisers (NASMA) for their exceptional efforts in supporting financial wellbeing across UEL, which is recognised as making a real difference to student lives.

Exploring the Impact of the University of East Anglia Mature Students Network on Student Awareness, Belonging, and Engagement.

Gemma Standen, Widening Participation Officer for Mature Students
University of East Anglia

Gemma is a Widening Participation Officer for Mature and Commuter students and Associate Tutor in Education at the University of East Anglia (UEA). She supports students longitudinally across their educational lifecycle, from pre-access to university through to completion, offering a range of programmes to help people navigate opportunities. Having studied at university as a mature student, commuter, and lone parent of twins, Gemma developed a strong sense of equity that now underpins her advocacy for students from underrepresented and marginalised groups. She is currently completing her PhD alongside her roles, with her research focusing on student motivation, experience, and continuation. Gemma has also recently released a chapter called 'supporting mature students longitudinally across the academic lifecycle' and has a forthcoming chapter due in late October on centring the needs of commuting students.

Callum Perry, Academic and Teaching Partner (Library)

University of East Anglia

Callum is a PhD student at the University of East Anglia. His background is in Education and Social Science Research Methods, with interests in student identities and belonging, academic skills, and higher education inclusive practice. Callum's previous research has explored sense of belonging within mature and commuter student groups, academic skills and peer learning. Callum is interested in social science research methodologies and has used opportunities such as this research project to use a blend of reflexive, creative and traditional methods to enhance ways in which social science research can explore and highlight student voice and experience. Callum has been involved in national work around student voice, including being a TEF student panel member overseeing the introduction of student submissions. Callum has a forthcoming book chapter, along with colleagues, exploring sense of belonging in academic communities due later this year.