

The future of higher education today

Episode 2: First in my family – Transcript

Lauren Harper: Hello! I'm Lauren Harper, and this is The future of higher education today.

We bring people together to talk about the big questions facing higher education, its future and its purpose. Today we're asking: who goes to university?

We all know that going to university can change your life. But who goes to uni? What are the barriers for people who never assumed they go? And how do we decide who has the potential when not everyone has the same start in life?

Let's look at the latest figures. Just 28.1% of pupils who qualified for free school meals went on to higher education by age 19. That's compared to 46.8% of all other pupils. The Higher Education Policy Institute tells us that two thirds of students are the first in their families to go to university.

But people whose parents went to university are 50% more likely to go to a Russell Group university compared to these first-generation students. We look at the figures around first-generation students because they're more likely to have had lower household incomes and they are less likely to have gone to a private school. But it's not a perfect measure. And it's not just about giving people the opportunity to go. It's also about their experiences once they get there.

On the show today, we're hearing from Amy Solman about her experience as the first person in her family to go to uni.

Amy Solman: When I was younger, I never thought I would go to university, because I just thought: 'I'm not smart enough, because I live in a little flat.'

Lauren: We'll also be speaking to Chris Hale and Dan Hurley from Universities UK to ask why it's so important that everyone has an equal chance.

Chris Hale: I left school at 16. I went to sixth form college for a little bit, but I was one of these people at that age that education was not my primary focus really.

Lauren: Hi, Amy. Thank you for joining us today. Can you tell me a bit about your university experience and what you're currently doing?

Amy: Yeah, sure. So my name's Amy. I am a second year PhD student with Queen Mary, University of London and the Natural History Museum. I am studying the microbial ecology of glacier surfaces. I've been able to travel to the Arctic and work on glaciers and work with these amazing scientists from around the world.

And, you know, on top of that, it's extremely challenging. You're basically your own project manager for three and a half years. But I say on the whole, I really, really enjoy it and I'm so excited for the last year and a half of the process because I really feel like I'm finding my feet now. So yeah, it's been just an amazing journey so far.

Lauren: What would you say inspired you to first go into your undergraduate subject?

Amy: Well, so I started my undergrad in environmental science about 11 years ago now, and I wasn't really planning on going to university at all because I didn't know what I wanted to do, which is a completely legitimate way to feel when you're 18 years old. And I thought, well, you know, I don't have any money and I don't have any connections, and I want to get a good job and I want to earn enough money, that's going to mean that I can live where I want to live.

And I thought, well, even if I didn't end up using my environmental science degree for something specifically in the sciences, I thought that it's still a degree that would make future employers sit up and listen and see that I could apply myself academically at a high level.

Lauren: What did your family think when you first discussed the idea of going into university, it being that they hadn't gone to university?

Amy: My mum was totally over the moon. She was so, so happy and I think that she really understood the implications of going to university and that what that would mean for someone of our socioeconomic background, because it's something that she always wanted to do and she never got the opportunity to do it in the way that I was able to do it.

And with my dad, he just didn't really come from a generation that really understood what university was, where it could take someone. I think other members of my family kind of didn't really see the point and maybe thought it was a little bit self-

indulgent because just no one in our family had ever been. They were just completely unaware of what was possible.

And they would say to me, like, what are you going to do? Like, what are you going to do with this? And I'd say: 'I'm going to be a scientist. I want to be a scientist.' And I just think they just didn't really understand that that was something that we could do, I could do.

Lauren: Would you say that you found any other barriers?

Amy: As I mentioned before, finances were a big issue. They still are. If you're going to do higher education right, maybe you've still got a bit more scope in your undergrad to work while you study. But you know, essentially your study should be a full-time job. And then, you know, you're trying to work as well and you want to do as well as you can in your course. And that's really, really challenging.

I certainly found when I got to master's level and I had to take a year off work, I was 28, 29 years old, something like that. And I took a year off work to go and do my master's and I had to have so much money saved up to kind of get me through that process.

And also, you know, there is a psychological aspect. I did do my undergrad twice. My first time I dropped out. My second time I stuck with it. The second time was the environmental science, but the first time I just couldn't mentally handle it.

And I don't think it was necessarily the pressure from the course, but the pressure was kind of really moving from being a teenager into adulthood, being away from your family, being away from your support system and around all these new people. And they could be the nicest people in the world, but you can still feel isolated, you can still feel lonely. I think that not having close family members that have been through that process, you don't really know what to expect.

Lauren: And if you were to go back now and look at your undergraduate journey, well, even now, I guess even in your postgrad, do you think that there's any support that you could think of that would have helped you?

Amy: Definitely one of the main challenges is the emotional and psychological strain this process can put on you. These are feelings everyone has, you know, to differing degrees. Everyone's going to be affected by that. And I think cultivating an environment where those discussions are every day and they are encouraged is so, so beneficial.

And recently, I've been having some slight struggles and I end up speaking to one of my student colleagues and he said, 'oh, my God, you know, I feel exactly the same way.' And suddenly it was like, 'whoa, okay, that's fine. Then it's not me. It's not my fault. I'm not, you know, it's just part of the process.'

So I think from the point of view of what universities can do, it's really investing whatever time and resources and compassion is needed to make sure that every person knows that it's okay to feel however they're going to feel about stuff, and they just need to talk about it.

Lauren: Why do you personally think it's important that people that are first generation students get a chance to go to university?

Amy: Being the first person in your family to go to university, I suppose depending on how far you take it, maybe it does kind of change things for your immediate family. If when I have a family, I'm going to be able to teach them so much more and hopefully open them up to more opportunities than my parents knew about, to even encourage me to do.

I think more of a global scale, having a more kind of equitable workforce in terms of the socioeconomic backgrounds of the people in higher positions, in positions of power who are going to influence science and policy and politics. The people who are at the helm of these sectors shouldn't all come from Eton, you know? We've got to have a more socioeconomically diverse workforce in those areas, because it will make us better.

If you're only selecting from this small pool of people that come from families who've been in education forever and ever and ever, and they're all top professors and this, that and the other, you're not accessing all of the amazing talent that is in families who just don't know that they can access things and they don't know that they can do it.

I mean, when I was when I was younger, I never thought I would go to university. I never thought I would even do my undergrad, let alone do a PhD, because I just thought: 'I'm not smart enough, because I live in a little flat, and those kinds of things are for people, you know, my friends that live in big houses and, you know, they have real Christmas trees and they go on two week holidays to Barbados. It's for those type of people, not for us.'

You can do it, wherever you from, you can do it. And that's really important.

Lauren: I completely relate to everything you just said that I think you just you said it so well as well.

So thank you so much for that, Amy.

I'm also going to introduce Chris Hale, who has been listening along to Amy. Chris is our Director of Policy here at Universities UK.

Chris: It's really interesting listening to Amy's experiences because I had some very similar experience. I left school at 16, I went to sixth form college for a little bit, but I was one of these people at that age that education was not my primary focus really. And I went there because I didn't really know what else to do. And I left and I got a job and I worked for my dad for a bit.

My dad was a boatbuilder by trade, actually, but he set up his own business and worked in painting, decorating, those kinds of things. I worked for him, did various jobs, and it wasn't until was in my mid-twenties that I kind of started saying I want to do something different. And that's how I then started saying, 'Well, university might be an option for me.'

Lauren: Yeah, my experience I think was very, very similar to both of yours and obviously when I was a little bit older, tried a vocational course fast, actually, I think I was kind of a bit done with education. I think at that time I just wanted to break, so I had that break away and I think going when I was a bit older was actually a lot more helpful.

Chris: Sometimes I think, well, you know, I was a painter decorator, I was doing various manual jobs, and I don't want to sort of paint that as some sort of negative thing, because I think there's many people that, you know, lead very fulfilling lives that don't go to university. We're not all on that same journey.

So I just want to emphasise that was my journey and that was how I defined my success and what I wanted to do, but I think we need to be careful. Sometimes we have this sort of idea that it's for everyone and that we should encourage everyone to do it because they're going to realise all these sorts of things that we've been talking about.

Amy: Oh, I completely agree. This idea that university is for everyone and it's totally going to just work and that's for you, and you've got to be as educated as you possibly can – academically educated – it's just not true. And I think people should never be afraid to say, you know, university isn't for me, or maybe it's not for me right now.

Chris: No, I think that's why we probably need more flexible system, because I think sometimes there is a lot of pressure that age to make decisions, which a lot of people are some people are ready for, but a lot of people aren't. I think there will be lots of people that university is not right for them. But I also think that everyone, if they want to go to university and I've got the ability to go to university and getting those benefits, I'm going to invest it and then should be able to do so.

I think the other dimension is, is an economic one. I mean, as a country, we've got a productivity problem. We absolutely have to be making the most of everyone's talents and everyone's abilities if we're not tapping into those. And I think the challenges that we have as an economy, as a country, to be able to prosper, to tackle all those things like global warming and the economic challenges we've got, the productivity challenges, we just won't be able to do it.

So we have to broaden that pool of people that we're bringing through, that we're giving the opportunity to get higher skills, higher education and the opportunities that come from that.

Lauren: From a policy background, Chris, I think I was wondering what you see as the biggest barriers to education and people accessing higher education that maybe come from non-traditional backgrounds.

Chris: Yeah, I think I mean, this isn't to sort of say that universities don't have a responsibility, but I think there's responsibility in the education system as a whole and a lot of challenges and issues that we see are in schools, around attainment and people realising their potential.

And I can't remember the exact figures, but the biggest determinant of whether you're going to go to university is your family background and whether your parents have read to you as a child and those kinds of things.

So I think some of the barriers and some of the issues are there in the education system now. Now universities can, they're at the end of that process, but they can also, and they do they work with schools, to think about how they can use the skills and capabilities and the resources that they've got to be able to help address some of those challenges.

And you see all sorts of partnerships at universities have with schools, whether that's setting up their own academies, or whether it's people going in trying to help support attainment or using their research expertise to really think about how we can improve teaching practices and those kinds of things.

So I think universities have a responsibility, but I think that there are some big challenges in terms of how we fund schools, how we think about schools, how we think about progression as well, for those different points.

Picking up on Amy's points, I think the one of the other things and again, I shared many of the similar experiences personally, is I think the sort of cultural mindset sometimes as well, and the points that were made earlier about, you know, 'it's not for me'. And I think that's not just about educational attainment. That's about mindset and how people think about themselves.

And I think schools have started to improve that. And some of it relates to careers, advice and information and guidance that people are given, but I think that's a big barrier as well, because a lot of it comes down to the way people see themselves and their place in the world.

And my third point would probably be around money. Yes, there are perceptions about fees and funding and all of those kinds of things. I think we have a system which is free at the point of entry, so technically it's not barrier. But I think for some students, I think there's sort of 'money in the pocket' issues: 'will I have enough money to eat, will I have enough money to pay my rent?'

For some students they don't have to think about those things, but I think there are certain groups of students that will be thinking about those things very keenly, and particularly if they're maybe older, they've got caring responsibilities or they're that local and they're commuting and they're trying to hold down a job as well.

Amy: It's interesting that we're talking about money and that keeps coming up. I cannot overstate how much of a barrier that is. Once you start getting to master's level and above, that's when the financial barriers really start to kick in. If it wasn't for the very, very generous support of my mum and dad who had nothing – they just gave me everything they had and they still didn't have two pennies to rub together – I wouldn't have been able to do this.

Lauren: Obviously a big topic at the moment is the cost of living as well, and I think that's going to obviously have a knock-on effect as well to access. It will be interesting to see the approach from both government and universities to deal with that increase.

Chris: Yeah, and I think also, I think government's doing this at the moment, and whilst we are here to advocate for universities and say why universities are important, I think the government very legitimately is saying, well there's a question

of proportion of people who go to university, but it's a significant portion of people who don't, and what could we do for them as well?

So I think it's not just about young people coming through at 18 or a little bit older. It's also about people who are in work at the moment who've missed those education opportunities and what the government can do for them. And I think there are some big challenges around things like adult careers advice and the support that people get.

I mean, the government very helpfully developing something called a lifelong loan entitlement at the moment is a more flexible system that people can access funding to develop their education at higher levels. But without good advice and guidance that sits behind that, are they're going to be making the right choices about taking out that or using that investment in a wise way?

So I think there some big challenges there about the sort of support that people are getting.

Lauren: Thank you so much to both of you. Thank you, Amy, for sharing your experience, and being so honest and open. And thank you, Chris, as well. It's been great having you in and being able to feed in your personal experience as well, which we really appreciate, because is really good to hear that.

Earlier on we spoke to Amy Solman about the challenges she faced entering higher education. Joining me is Dan.

Dan Hurley: Hi Lauren. I'm Dan Hurley, I'm Assistant Director of Policy at Universities UK and I lead our work on admissions and access.

I was first generation actually, and I put the fact that I ended up going to university – which was 100% the right choice for me – I put that down to having good careers advice at my school. There was nobody in my family who'd had experience of a university.

And actually I remember on the day when I mentioned to family members, parents, grandparents that I was considering university, you just caught a glimpse of the puzzled faces and the response was: 'Why on earth would you want to do that? Go and get a job and work in a bank, have a job for life, and that's you sorted.'

So actually, without the kind of support and advice I'd got from careers advisors and teachers at school, I would no way have even considered that university was an option for me, and that was life changing in my case, and for lots of other people,

especially first generation students. But I think when we talk to universities and to young people in schools now, the importance of careers advice is as important as ever.

Yes, we've seen schools and others make strides in providing decent careers advice to allow people to make truly informed choices. We've still got really strong gaps in participation at university between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Careers advice and sort of shaping and raising aspirations remains a priority. It has to.

Lauren: And could you tell us a bit about how the cost of living crisis has been affecting students?

Dan: We've been doing some opinion polling with students recently and actually the results are quite stark. Unsurprisingly, most people are concerned about cost of living. There are strong implications for people's ability to pay their bills. People are worried about their mental health and wellbeing being impacted by the cost of living crisis, and there are also wider implications about fuel costs travelling to university and from placements if that affects you also.

I think one of the things that we're clear on is that there is definitely a need for more action to support students to ease some of these costs of living pressures. And that's not something that any one party or organisation is going to solve by ourselves. There's definitely a role for universities, I think, in being really proactive and putting interventions in on the ground to do what they can to ease some of those cost pressures, and we're speaking from members a lot at the moment about what some of these interventions look like.

But I think there's also a role for government to really sort of consider what the state of financial support looks like at the moment. We're in a situation now where in real terms the value of the maintenance loan is the lowest it's been for seven years. We've seen double digit inflation rates as well. We've got questions about some of the future of hardship funding, which actually was something that the government did work with us on during the pandemic and actually really did help a lot of students out.

So there's a lot of things that need to be considered, and I think we'll need to work as closely together as we can to really deliver in students' interests.

Lauren: What other emerging challenges are we seeing affecting students when it comes to entering higher education?

Dan: Well, I think overall, universities are doing a really good job in widening access, widening opportunity. We've got a more diverse student population year upon year, and we're seeing more and more students who were on free school meals when they were at school now accessing university. So I think there's lots to celebrate. But that's not to say that there's still not a lot of work to do.

I think in the broader scheme of things, universities in England have really engaged with the Access and Participation Plan agenda that the Office for Students has set them.

I think an emerging challenge is slightly linked to the pandemic, really. I think the impact of pandemic disruption on education, even pre higher education, is still there and we're still seeing potentially varying attainment gaps in young people before they even apply to university. Different types of schools have been impacted differently during the pandemic. All of this has knock-on implications for readiness for higher education and the kinds of support that young people might need as they start to consider university.

One change that we know is coming up is the Office of Students wants to look again at the focus of access and the plans and one of the new priorities that the government's also really keen on is whether universities are doing enough to raise pupil attainment within schools.

But I think it's definitely going to be a real challenge for universities to really get to grips with levelling up opportunity within the state school sector in particular, particularly after such a disruptive period we've had over the past few years.

Lauren: And with the pandemic, what would you say you've seen change in terms of students entering higher education?

Dan: I think universities have been really mindful that the pandemic affected young people in different ways or to different extents. I think if you were to look at pupils in the independent school sector, for example, they probably missed fewer school hours than those in some state schools.

So some of this does have implications for subject knowledge, and that's one of the areas that I've been really impressed with universities, linked to the pandemic, is they've stepped up their efforts to support those transitions into higher education. We've really seen developed plans to address gaps in subject knowledge if people are lacking confidence in particular areas, such as support for student wellbeing, which we know is in growing demands from people across the student population, and also just preparing people even more so for what life at university is like.

I think that's actually one of the things that we've seen really develop even further since 2020, and really to the benefit of students. Particularly if you are, for example, a first-generation student, then you don't really have that network to draw on to say or to ask: 'What is university life like? What can I expect?' We all might be able to talk to our school or something if we're that age, but there's nothing quite like maybe friends and family giving you that sort of trusted experience.

So I think universities' own work in that area has really stepped up and it's been really positive to see.

Lauren: Do you think we've got enough provision to support more people wanting to go to university or maybe older people wanting to go to university?

Dan: I mean, I think it's fair to say not everybody who applies in any year will get a place. Some universities and some particular courses at the most selective ends of the of the sector are oversubscribed. I think we're really mindful that the demographics are shifting in a way that the percentage of 18-year-olds applying to university is going up too.

I think one of the messages that we've got this year is there is lots of choice throughout the sector. Universities are places to welcome anyone with the talent to succeed. And that means anybody of all ages, for example, to take your points about mature students in particular.

Lauren: Thank you so much for speaking to us today. Dan, it was really interesting to hear what you have to say on the subject. So thank you so much and thanks for sharing your experience.

Dan: Thank you, Lauren.

Lauren: Everyone on this podcast today was a first-generation student. We've heard how transformative and life changing going to university was for them. It's not going to be the right choice for everyone, but it's important that anyone who has the ability and desire to go has the opportunity and the support to do so.

While there are more people from different backgrounds to any degree, students are still facing a lot of challenges and barriers, including the current cost of living crisis and the effects of the pandemic.

If you'd like to hear more about the experience of being a first-generation student, I wrote an article about my experience, which you can find on Universities UK's website, and in the description of this podcast.

This was The future of higher education today. Thank you so much for listening and thanks to Amy, Chris and Dan for sharing their experiences and insights.