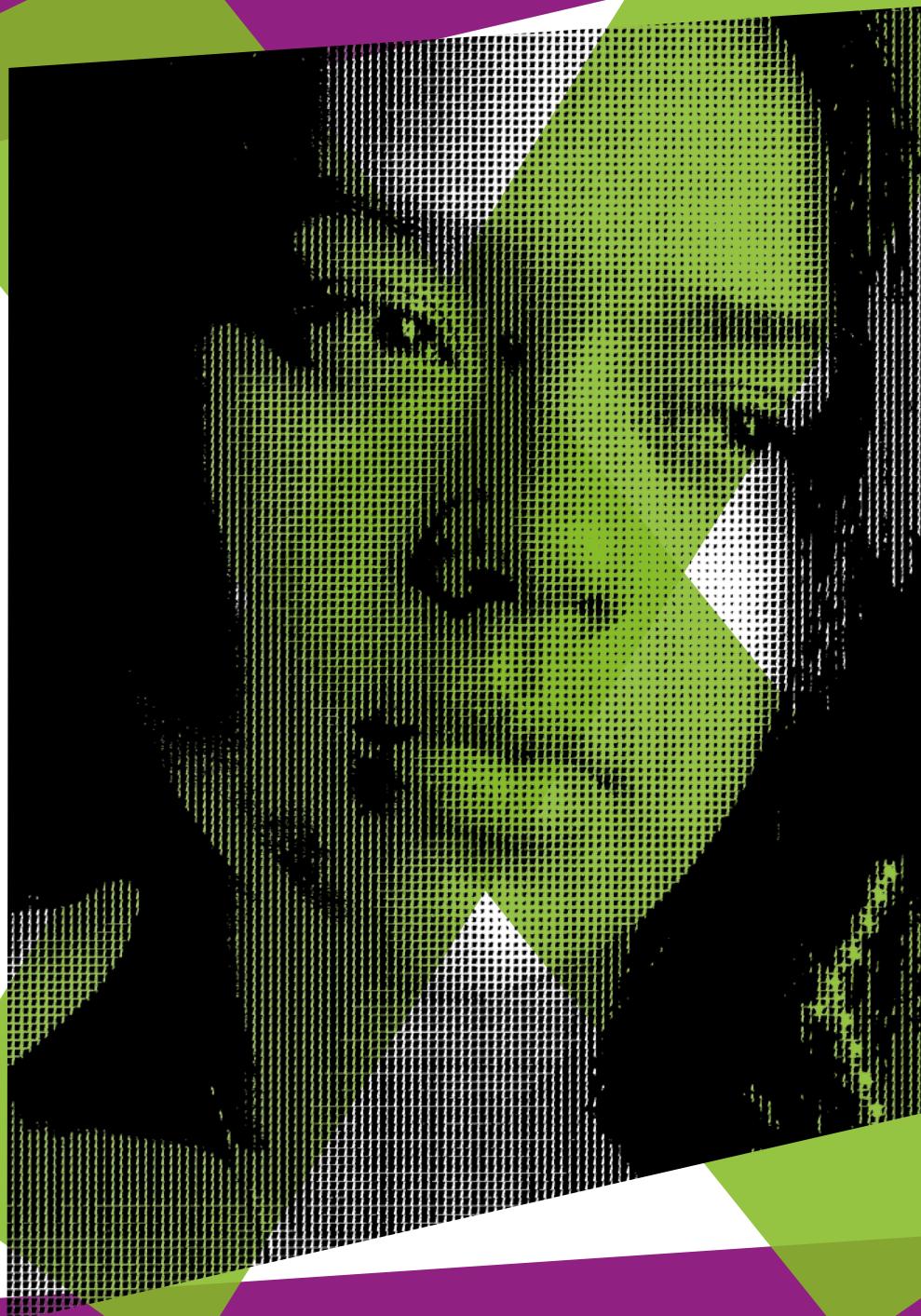


Class dismissed: Getting in and getting on in further and higher education

Report of the NUS Poverty Commission
Executive summary



POVERTY
COMMISSION

nus
national union of **students**

■ ■ The Commission took a collaborative approach to identify both problems and potential solutions."

Class dismissed: Getting in and getting on in further and higher education

NUS established the Poverty Commission to bring issues of class and poverty in post-16 education to light – and to ensure the focus was on post-16 education as a whole rather than undergraduate study alone. This document summarises the findings and recommendations arising from initial research into these areas.

In a society where class still determines too many outcomes, and poverty is on the rise, it is more important than ever to understand the barriers to accessing – and excelling in – post-16 education for working class people, and the ways in which poverty affects students' ability to enter and succeed in tertiary education.

The Commission took a collaborative approach to identify both problems and potential solutions. There were two main strands to its initial fact-finding work. First, we asked students, students' unions, academics, further and higher education sector agencies, trades unions, and business, charity and campaign groups to submit evidence on income and post-16 education. The call for evidence was launched in October 2017 and closed in December, and we received 66 responses in total. Second, we asked 12 individuals from these same groups to act as commissioners and hear from experts from a range of organisations. Over three full days, the commissioners heard from 13 witnesses discussing issues relating to finance, education and the way institutions and education itself is structured. The evidence received was then synthesised into the main report.

Following the announcement of the Government's review of post-18 education and funding in England in February 2018, and given the recent Diamond Review of education funding in Wales and the student support review in Scotland, this Poverty Commission report will focus on England, while drawing on the experience of the nations. Therefore references to 'the government' refer to that based in Westminster other than where stated. Further specific work for the nations will follow, along with additional analysis for liberation groups and others as required.



Key findings

The evidence submitted to the Poverty Commission demonstrated a clear link between class and poverty in tertiary education. Further, the evidence showed that – in different ways, and not always intentionally – the result of this link is a ‘poverty premium’ endemic to further and higher education, which means that students from working class backgrounds often pay higher costs in order to access post-16 education as a consequence of class and poverty. This ranged from direct costs such as higher interest charges on student loans or commercial debt to indirect costs such as higher transport or accommodation costs arising from having fewer opportunities and choices than better-off students.



Our key findings include:

Student income

- Student income across tertiary education is inadequate, particularly in further education, and the sources of money available often fail to keep pace with inflation. Significant proportions of students report that they struggle to make ends meet.
- Average student expenditure routinely exceeds the income available through student support, and working class students are more likely to have to rely on part-time employment or other forms of debt to make ends meet, while being less likely to receive support from their families.
- Some groups cannot access any form of student support, with particular problems for some part-time and distance learning students as well as asylum seekers and migrants.
- Debt aversion is a significant issue for working class students, affecting not only their decisions to participate in further or higher education but also where and what to study.
- Under the current arrangements, student debt is regressive and the poorest students graduate with the highest student loan debt.
- Institutional bursaries and hardship funds are patchy across England, with working class students less able to rely on help from their families or savings if emergencies occur.
- Apprenticeship pay is inadequate. A significant proportion of apprentices are paid less than the legal minimum wage, while apprentices cannot access additional support for study costs, such as childcare.
- Other student workers often rely on insecure and low-paid work, and working class full-time students are more likely to work more than 15 hours per week, the recommended limit.
- The benefits system does not adequately support student claimants, with confusing rules around student income resulting in many mistakes, and disabled students facing cuts to benefits that limit their ability to study.
- Benefits rules mean young people undertaking apprenticeships may see family benefit claims reduced compared with those entering further education.

‘The evidence submitted to the Poverty Commission demonstrated a clear link between class and poverty in tertiary education.’

- Student support for undergraduates is paid termly, an antiquated arrangement that makes weekly and monthly budgeting difficult.
- The official Government data on student income and expenditure is limited – little exists on further education and postgraduate study, and data is often delayed or not kept up-to-date.

Student expenditure

- Rising costs of transport and cuts to bus services make it more difficult for working class students to participate in tertiary education.
- Fees for access courses can mean that many working class students pay an additional year of fees to gain qualifications, in addition to the opportunity costs of an extra year of study.
- Student hall rents routinely exceed what is affordable given the maintenance loan available to students, and institutional strategies to ensure affordability are rare.
- Working class students, and other student groups including international students, can struggle to find a guarantor to rent in the private sector, leading them to use private schemes with exorbitant fees and interest rates.
- Childcare funding is inadequate and provision on campus for student parents is limited. Working class students can struggle to plan ahead because of timetables being issued late and face large deposits on childcare before they receive student support.

‘Addressing issues of class and poverty across further and higher education requires a wide range of actions.’

- Apprentices’ childcare costs can exceed their wages and apprentices can find it difficult to understand their entitlement to support.
- Course costs are not transparent and students and apprentices from working class backgrounds often find costs hard to manage, especially where items are compulsory.
- In research submitted to the commission, a significant proportion of students reported experiencing periods when they could not afford food or heating.
- A lack of funds means that working class students struggle to afford to participate in extra-curricular activities, which can lead to isolation from other students.

Structures of education

- Educational disadvantage starts in primary and secondary education, and there are clear links between poverty and child development. After a period of decline, child poverty is now rising and will increase future disadvantage for working class students.
- Experiences in school can have a significant impact on students’ attitudes to education. This can influence whether working class students feel that further or higher education is something ‘for’ them, reinforced by societal assumptions about their aspirations.
- Bullying contributes to truancy and disengagement in school, which is strongly linked to sustained disengagement with education and training.

- The relative health of the labour market and the perceived worth of further study will influence working class people’s participation in post-16 education.
- A range of social barriers prevent many individuals from engaging with education and lifelong learning, including lack of access to the internet at home, poor health and insufficient English language skills.
- Bereavement can disrupt access to education, and working class students in particular may not have the financial or emotional support they need in the aftermath.
- A range of barriers prevent prisoners and ex-offenders from accessing education, including requirements to disclose convictions on application forms when these are not relevant to the course, and inadequate information, advice and guidance in prison on educational opportunities.
- Low-income students are often more reliant on commercial debt, or carry forward such debt from before their course, which has both a financial and a psychological impact than can disrupt studies.
- Working class and Black students are more likely to commute to their educational institution, and can have restricted choices if particular subjects or qualifications are not available in their local area, or if public transport networks are poor.
- Approaches to student information, advice and guidance may assume that individual students need higher aspirations – rather than looking at how institutions can change to remove barriers to education.
- The dominant culture of higher education is middle class, and working class students can be made to feel they do not ‘belong’, ranging from feeling disconnected from their peers to being bullied by other students because of their class.
- Working class students are more likely to leave their course before achieving the final qualification, with other intersections including race and disability affecting course retention.

Key recommendations

Addressing issues of class and poverty across further and higher education requires a wide range of actions from government, the further and higher education sectors, and from NUS and students' unions.

For the UK government

Ensure students have the money to live

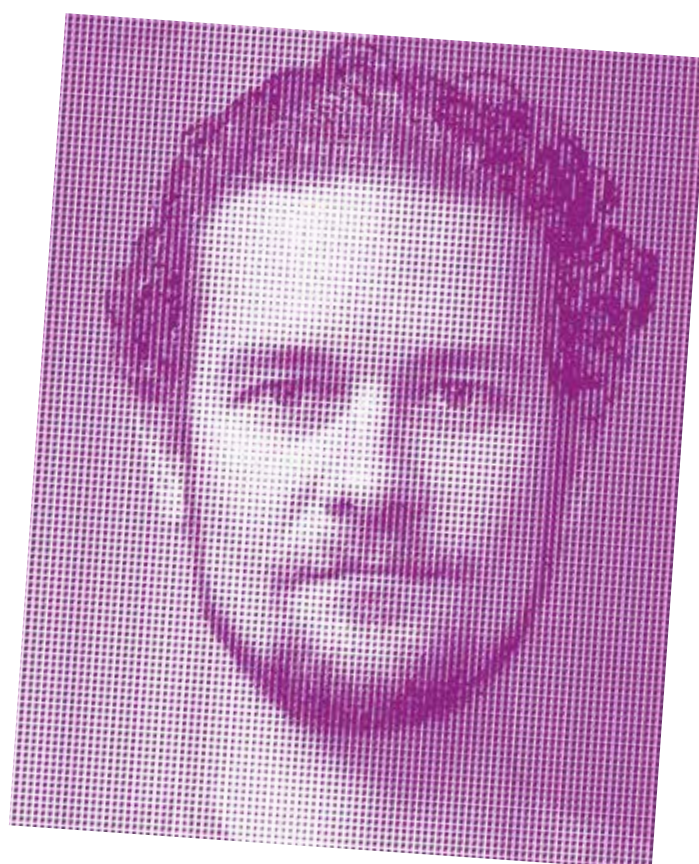
- The review of post-18 education and funding should create a minimum living income for students across further and higher education.
- The review must fundamentally reduce reliance on student loans to finance studying, and reduce the interest rate on any loans that remain.
- The Government must reinstate grant funding across further and higher education, including maintenance grants for undergraduate students, education maintenance allowance (EMA) for young further education students and NHS bursaries for healthcare students at significantly improved rates.
- Means testing must be reviewed to ensure a fair system and clear expectations of the parents and partners of students.
- Student support across all different levels of study must be pegged to inflation, to ensure that it retains its value over time.

Ensure students and apprentices are paid a fair wage

- The apprenticeship minimum wage should be increased, and apprentices should move on to the appropriate age rate after six months.
- Minimum wage rates for young people under 25 should be brought up to the same rate as the National Living Wage for those aged 25 and over.
- The National Living Wage rate should be increased to the real living wage, as set by the Living Wage Foundation.
- The Government should ensure compliance with minimum wage laws, especially for those apprentices being exploited by employers.

Ensure the benefits system enables students who need extra support

- The Government should undertake a full review of the articulation between the student support system and social security system to ensure students with additional needs are fully supported.



- Support for families with young apprentices should be reviewed to ensure parity with students in other forms of further education.

Ensure students are able to budget effectively

- Student support should be paid monthly or weekly to enable students to budget more effectively.

Ensure student parents in further education have access to support

- Care to Learn childcare funding should be extended to provide cover for apprentices and the upper age limit should be increased to 25 years old
- Childcare funding should be made available to adult learners.

Ensure we have accurate and current data on student income and expenditure

- The Government should ensure timely publication of future Student Income and Expenditure Survey reports, and ensure that work on the next edition begins immediately.
- Equivalent data must be collected and published on income and expenditure in further education and postgraduate study.

Ensure that barriers in children's early years and prior to entering study are removed

- Greater investment is required in early years education, parental and primary outreach to support working class students into tertiary education.
- Ensure there is more action on tackling bullying and education on improving personal relationships in primary and secondary school.
- The Government should provide more funding so that all families can access the internet.
- The Government should restore funding to teach English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and enable refugees and asylum seekers to access funding and support to progress in tertiary education.



'In a society where class still determines too many outcomes, and poverty is on the rise, it is more important than ever to understand the barriers to access.'

For the further and higher education sectors in England

Ensure the costs of educational participation are fair

- Education providers should develop a strategy to reduce the costs of studying as far as possible, including conducting full audits of course costs associated with studying and apprenticeship programmes, from reading lists to accommodation, and considering ways to reduce or remove costs for students from low-income backgrounds.
- Education providers should be transparent about the costs of study for individual programmes to enable students to plan and budget accordingly.
- Higher education providers should include measures to ensure access to affordable accommodation for low-income students in institutional access and participation agreements.
- Education providers should develop guarantor schemes for students who do not have family support to enable them to access accommodation.
- Further and higher education providers should work with local childcare providers to secure preferential rates for student parents, as well as more flexible childcare options.

Ensure students can access extra support if needed

- Further and higher education providers should ensure they have well-funded and well-publicised hardship schemes.

Ensure high-quality work opportunities for students who want them

- Each education provider should develop a student employment strategy, which prioritises students for suitable internal jobs, and ensures that external job opportunities have appropriate hours, living wages and good employment conditions.
- Education providers should work with employers to secure paid internships for working class students.

Ensure that people who are in or have left the criminal justice system can access education

- Remove compulsory criminal offence disclosure from course application processes where this is unnecessary.
- Include better advice on accessing tertiary education within the prison system.

Ensure greater collaboration on access to further and higher education

- Further and higher education providers should collaborate on access to study at a regional level, including mapping subject and qualification availability.

Ensure information, advice and guidance meets the needs of learners not providers

- Change institutional approaches to information, advice and guidance to address institutional barriers and avoid the automatic assumption that prospective students should increase their aspirations.
- Support school teachers to develop conversations with their pupils about their future academic career.
- Ensure sufficient access to student money advisers in all education providers.

Ensure greater access to part-time education

- Expand options to undertake individual course modules so learners do not have to commit to full degree programmes to participate in higher education.

For NUS UK and students' unions

Ensure we campaign effectively on student transport

- Use local elections and other influencing opportunities to ensure local authorities use their powers under the Bus Services Act 2017 to ensure accessible and affordable local transport for students.

Ensure we have a new model of accommodation provision in higher education that works

- NUS must develop a new model of student accommodation that meets the needs of contemporary students and ensures true affordability for students using not-for-profit and cooperative approaches.
- NUS must develop a definition of educational affordability that does not inadvertently promote increases in loans for students.

Ensure students' unions address class in their activities

- Students' unions should develop interventions that help students understand each other, value differences and work towards a shared language that addresses stratification by class.

Ensure we close the gaps in our evidence

- NUS must carry out further work where we have identified evidence gaps in relation to low-income students, such as postgraduate and healthcare students, and ensure some of our existing work is kept up-to-date, including our Accommodation Costs Survey and Pound in Your Pocket research on finances.



■ ■ My vision for the UK is that no working class person's story is against all odds."

Shakira Martin, NUS President

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