

## Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis (Royal Society of Edinburgh Seminar Series)

Educational Crisis, with LGBTQ+ Students Unions Panel and representatives from Universities of Strathclyde, West of Scotland, and Queen Margaret.

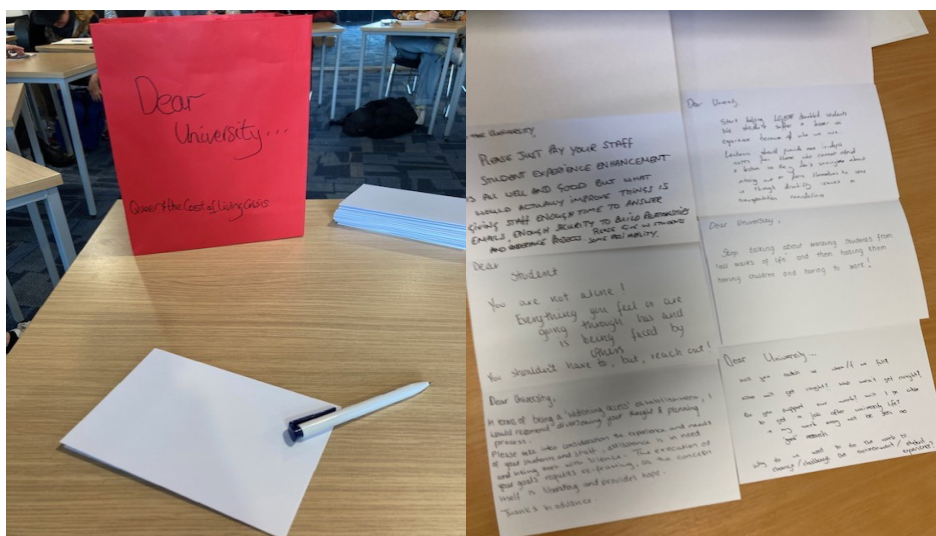


Photo: Educational Crisis Post box and Postcards completed by participants.

The below conversation took place as part of the Royal Society of Edinburgh funded Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis Seminar Series. This Series is part of Yvette Taylor's RSE Personal Fellowship on Queer Social Justice.<sup>1</sup>

**Yvette Taylor (YT):** Welcome everyone and thanks to panellists for participating in this Queer and the cost of living crisis seminar series; today's seminar on Educational Crisis sits within February's LGBT History Month – and we may wonder about who, or what and where, has progressed as out universities and workplaces celebrate LGBTQ+ inclusion – or not. There's often an array of activities, that might be otherwise absent during the rest of the calendar year; flags might be strategically placed, and we might have a sense of what's changed, and what's stayed the same during our own educational journeys. I'll share some of mine, which I've written about in [Working-Class Queers: Time, Place and Politics](#) (Pluto, 2023):

As an undergraduate, I attended university in a different socio-political climate, benefitting from a full maintenance grant as a student from a working-class background. I live with the sense of getting into higher education just in time before escalating costs from the New Labour period onwards,

<sup>1</sup> Other series' transcripts available here: <https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/183555017/Guyan-Taylor-RSE-2023-Queer-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-data-in-as-crisis.pdf> ; <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/queer-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-political-crisis> ; <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/queer-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-queers-through-crisis>

notably through the notorious Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalitional government pact of increased tuition fees, positioned as part of a debt-absorbing investment in oneself. I imagined a different future in going to university – and still believe universities can offer access to and realisation of different futures. But my sense of optimism isn't wholly tied to individual financial return. Queer-feminist educators have always insisted on learning as socially transformative, as a commitment to social futures, rather than as a static essence, or as an investment in individual future selves (ourselves).

As a student in the '90s I attended a 3-day long *Marxism Now* conference in London, with regional representation from across the UK: I opted into the Glasgow bus trip to London and benefited from the free place and free lunch. I experienced London cosmopolitanism, going into LGBTQ+ venues with some trepidation, before returning to the conference space and hearing some of the Left's political greats, such as Tony Benn. I remember other, maybe queerer spaces, in classrooms and corridors on the edge of campus, and I remember giggling at the (over)use of 'comrades' as participants politicised identifications, in some of the same and different ways conveyed in frustrated badge-wearing at feminist conferences. In many ways, the move in and out of conference space (held in prestigious university premises) and scene space (lacking prestige, investment, or capital) represented the cross-over and disjuncture between queer-left agendas. As a young working-class person, I optimistically hoped for a future, which over the past two decades has been increasingly at odds with and disconnected from mainstream political shifts and, often, from queer or left politics. Looking back and forward, through events, data, and career changes, embodied in the queer-feminist researcher (me) causes pause, disappointment, and hope. So I turn to you, the panel, to share your contemporary experiences of higher education, including through the current cost of living crisis. Over to you.

**PARTICIPANT 1:** Hello everyone, hi. I, when I got the email from Yvette I think what I have looked at, and I'm going to speak to a bit, is like the experience of university and its response to crisis. And I was thinking how I could best do this and how it would make the most sense to talk through it. And something, the first thing that stuck out to me, which is, appears inconsequential, but recently when I was home and it was like, do you know the bad storms that happened a few weeks ago? And it was just a tiny little line in that, which was that 'the weather's really, really bad, everyone be careful, it's super-dangerous. But by all means try to get to university, it's going to be open as usual, and if you can't make it you need to get in touch with your lecturer and tell them that you can't do that'. And it just felt really uncomfortable and had no care in it, and just felt very like individualising of responsibility given the circumstances, when the entire country was kind of saying to be careful and stay home and stay warm. And that, thinking about the weather as a crisis that's so external to the university, and that feeling of like being individualised, and whose responsibility is it to be cared for? Essentially that's what I was thinking.

And it also struck me that being in the university as an early career researcher, or a PhD student, and all these different levels of like in and out of academia, that like what did that say about the relationship with the staff getting that email? So, if the university's open as usual but you're coming – universities have staff all over the country, but like 'you still have to get to work, we're still a business, we're still open'. And then I was thinking about like students as like customers and employees, and then that made me think about my time as a tutor and how that is a particular time of strangeness, of being inside and outside the university as an employee, as a consumer of the university, in their eyes – and quite literally – and as a student, and then thinking about the UCU strikes. And that was quite complicated in that the response to the strikes as crisis and the response to immigration as

crisis – as an international student – was a really strange position to hold. And like as an Irish person, as an Irish national, I don't pay fees, so I'm not an international student in the terms of having to pay fees and having all of these restrictions.

And actually that was another email that I got last week that really sat uncomfortable with me, through the international department, is that they were like going out to international students basically saying 'we're looking, it's LGBTQI+ month, we're going to have loads of celebrations, loads of events happening. Welcome, inclusive, this is fantastic'. And then the next line basically was saying that the NHS surcharge had to be paid by all international students if they wanted to retain their visa, 'and here's how you pay it. Here's why it's more, and here's how you have to like do it'. And it just felt like what kind of inclusion is that, and what kind of an in-or-out-or-what? Like where do people stand in relation with these different identity markers in the university? Yeah, so that felt like two very complicated emails to get over the past month, representing, the insider-outsiderness of like being in academia.

Then I was thinking about the strikes and being an international student and working with other international students as a tutor. During the time of the strikes, it was really difficult, because I don't have a visa, I don't have work hours, parameters on my working ability, of how much I can make, how many hours I can work. But other people who are tutoring with me do have those parameters on them. Which was very complicated because I partook in the strike, but then those people didn't, couldn't, and then would take, essentially would take the classes, including my classes, which on the outside, from the outside, looks really like anti-strike action and not collective and really like against what we're all standing for. But they're in such a vulnerable position that like they have to get this money, and you don't get your pay checks validated and your hours don't add up the same way, one of my colleagues in particular had just quit another job at the university because they were over the threshold. So, when it came to the strikes they were just in a really messy position, with how much money they could make and how much hours they could do.

So being Irish in Scotland allows me to see all of these things happening and allows me access into all of these emails and my peers' experiences, while also being treated as if I'm from Scotland. But then in another interesting way, in how we stand, or how I personally stand in two different places with the university, is when it comes to funding. I have a self-funded PhD, but that also means that the university doesn't, within its new parameters of care doesn't include me. I can't get leave for mental health, I can't get maternity leave funded by. If you're funded by an external body you can apply for leave, and the external body won't cover your stipend, but the university will, they'll step in and take over those charges. But they've set the amount that I give them, and in return I don't get that care. I don't get maternity, I don't get, I can't take leave under the same consideration of who is deemed to be a better consumer or a better in whatever they're thinking about PhD students are.

So like it's always wavering and it's always changing and the relationship of being Irish is similar to being Scottish, but it's just not quite Scottish enough, but then it's also not international, in the fact that I have all of these privileges and I don't have to meet the same thresholds, and then all of the funding gets as messy, as I said, because you don't have the support. But I also don't have to adhere to like these different administrative things. I'm going to stop there.

**YT:** Thanks so much. That was really helpful, and really helpful in terms of looking at the different categories of students and their implicatedness across different places, whether as local or international or far away from approximating the 'good student'. And, so thanks for that. I was wondering too – and this is something that we might think about – do we expect the university to be a special or a different place? Do we expect it to be a different kind of employer - and you've invoked

care in that language – and if so, where does that sit in the university? Who does that care work? And I know you might be looking back at me, but we might be also looking to each other! So where does that care work go now, and beyond ourselves? Let's carry on the conversation.

**PARTICIPANT 2:** Yeah. I think, similarly, when I got the email asking to speak, or just give some thoughts, I think my first thought was actually going to an edited collection that you done Yvette, [\*Queer Precarities In and Out of Higher Education\*](#). In that there was, it's a collection of work – whether it's research-based or people's own experiences – and for me I think that book sort of pulls back the veil on a lot of issues, a lot of issues that maybe I wasn't aware of. You know, going, I think undergraduates maybe – or in my experience anyway – as an undergraduate, university's this sort of happy place, quite prestigious place, you know? Everyone, there's like no issues, everyone gets along kind of thing. And I think that book really opened my eyes to a lot of issues. I maybe I didn't realise some of these issues until I came into my PhD. So, I think that book was quite informative, and was quite sort of a cause for pause.

I think the other thing – and piggybacking off what was said about funding – I remember I went to a reading retreat in Manchester last year with other PhD students, other academics from universities, and it was specifically a reading retreat around sexualities. So there was academics and researchers there specifically researching about sexualities. And there was a conversation there about how that kind of event is quite unique, you know, and how they've been able to get funding specifically for a sexualities reading retreat. Usually a reading retreat or a writing retreat or a conference would have any numbers of other kind of categories, and sexualities would come under that. So, they were saying that it was quite unique for the organisers to get funding specifically for a sexualities event. And it made me think as well, you know, who gets funding in universities? Where does funding go? What does that say about the sort of, maybe any hierarchies of subjects or hierarchies of work kind of idea? You know, what does that say for, you know, research that gets published? So yeah, those were sort of the two things when I first got the email to sort of think about, you know? And, yeah I've drawn a blank now.

**YT:** That's okay. That happens to me too. What I was thinking was, when you were speaking, was about the penguin. Do you remember?

**PARTICIPANT 2:** Yeah.

**YT:** Do you want to tell the story of the penguin?

**PARTICIPANT 2:** Yeah. I think it was maybe a couple of months ago now, Yvette held an imposter syndrome sort of workshop at the university, and sort of one of the tasks, or activities, was to think about yourself as an animal, and what animal you might be in the university, and what does that say about yourself? What does it maybe say about the university as well? I chose a penguin, sort of the idea being that, you know, I'm sort of plodding along in university, and if I fall hopefully I can swim, you know? What does that say about me? Is university a place that maybe we feel you belong in? What does it say about the university, you know, that, you know, that, are there people that swim? Are there people who sink? Who are the people that sink? Who are the people that swim? Yeah.

**YT:** Yeah.

**PARTICIPANT 3:** Yeah interesting. It's almost like there could be other birds as well, so who flies? Like because penguins can't fly, so yeah it's a really interesting analogy. I liked it.

**YT:** We had a lot of different animals in the room, and I think we had a lot of robust animals, who were like 'well I'll just keep going and I'll just keep like running ahead'. And I think that, it makes me

pause on something that you raised [participant 2]. In many ways the people in the room, we are *in* the room, we've become qualified likely at university, or are becoming qualified at university. So, we might be the success stories, however personal and real we feel our own failures too. And I think that talk about being an imposter was about occupying both of those positions – success and failure – at the same time. And I think you rightly drew our attention to that as personal and embodied, but also as disciplinary. Where does gender studies or sociology fit into the university? Are some disciplines, and hence some subjects, some people, more valued than others? What animal would you be [participant 3]?

**PARTICIPANT 3:** Probably a dead fish at the moment. Nah. I don't know. I don't know. I like elephants. I don't know if I'm an elephant in the university, but I like elephants, they're kind. What animal cares for others? And it's the animal that I would be.

**YT:** We're going to get sidetracked by animals now aren't we?! So are we ready to move on? And [participant 4] did you want to keep us going with the conversation?

**PARTICIPANT 4:** Yeah., I'm Christie, I'm from Queen Margaret University, and thank you Yvette for inviting me today. Yeah, when, the prompts for sort of education in crisis, it's kind of like what of my experience wasn't education in crisis to an extent? Like I started as a direct entrant like during COVID, so that was distance learning, and then once that year was over UCU strikes started back up. You know, I did public sociology at Queen Margaret, so unsurprisingly sociology staff, heavily involved in strikes, you know? So it was very, a big impact, and I was speaking to yourselves earlier actually as well, that another aspect too is staffing has been a big thing in our experience, in terms of, you know, staff coming and going and clear, clear pressure on them. But like a lot of, you know, in our department staff are away for a year, come back for a bit, you know, lots of different things. But from a student experience it's definitely been like I don't even quite know who works here at times. Like I don't really. And that has been quite notable and significant.

And care is a really interesting one, it's something I'm really interested in, and I think is a really big question. What you were saying Yvette, about like is the university a different, you know, is it a different employer? Is it a different workplace? It's just a job, it's just work, but at the same time [] my experience of education has meant so much. You know, I came to education as a mature student, you know, I'm in my late thirties now, because of my struggles with mental health, because of my struggles throughout life, and like I loved it. Like it makes my heart sing at times. And I've kind of been writing a bit about that. Is it that kind of idealism and enthusiasm that makes us get so invested – I wouldn't even go as far as saying overly invested, but, you know, I think there's really big feelings involved, and that's what I'm quite interested in sort of sociologically, is kind of the emotional impact and emotional experience of all this kind of thing.

And care, yeah it's who performs the care? Who do we expect to perform the care? How do we interpret, you know, like for example one of the things with lack of staffing is emails are quite a difficult one for us, in, you know, not, people just don't email back sometimes and there's a lot of that. And certainly throughout my undergraduate a lot of my co-students would experience, like would express that like 'I just feel like they don't care. Like they don't care about us, like they don't'. And that was one of the big things I really tried to talk about a lot. I got quite involved in the sort of UCU strike stuff, about trying to speak with other students of like 'no, I think they really do care, really, you know, people are going on strike, you know, they're not earning wages, they're not, you know, they are putting themselves out there'. But for some student experience it just feels like 'okay yeah, well my class in cancelled again and I don't know what's going on'. And disappointment after disappointment after disappointment.

And, as I say, I got a wee bit involved in sort of, you know, we had a bit of an informal solidarity group around the strikes, which was, you know, buoyant in a way, that it felt really important for me to take the cares that eat me up inside, try and take them into a more public space. But it was also really, really hard, and I think the same, similar people end up being the ones who are very visible, and similar people, you know, certain people seem to do these roles, and I think you could see these things along similar lines of inequality and expectation and pressure.

So yeah, sometimes when I was writing all this stuff down I was kind of like 'so why have I stayed? Why did I stay in with it?' But I think it is, there is an aspect of hope, an aspect of fulfilment to being in higher education that really matters a lot to me. But yeah, I think it's been a really hard slog, and I think at the moment I feel we've all been pushed very far apart from each other, and aspects of like staff-student solidarity are difficult because everyone's just struggling so much, and it's difficult to even know what the picture is, you know, yeah. So that's where I'm kind of at with my experience of education in crisis just now really. And I'm actually on a deferral right now, partly because of my own struggles, but partly also because of what's going on with my university at the moment and stuff. And yeah, it's a difficult thing I think. So yeah, I think I've kind of turned around, I'm not sure if I had any clarity to what I was saying there.

**YT:** Yeah. Well I think what I picked up on as well is this use of the word hope. As somebody who's in the university a longer-term - and it's not, I say that not meaning that I've arrived necessarily or not meaning that has been a smooth path or a journey - but having been in universities a longer-term, UCU action, and I know what strikes you're referring to, about the most recent, but they have been on repeat ever since I've been in higher education, as a student and...

**PARTICIPANT 4:** Mmm, wow.

**YT:** ...as staff. So, in that context of these being kind of forever issues, what does hope look like? Does hope mean finishing our degrees? Does hope mean having a job? Does hope mean maybe we'll be able to get some students together in a room today? Does it mean PhD graduation for a couple of us? Like what does hope look like in that?

**PARTICIPANT 4:** I think it's a really good question. I think I'm not sure, and I think that's part of, I don't know, like of being in education. It's learning yourself and being like 'well what do I find meaningful and what can I, how can I navigate a path of finding things that are meaningful and that fulfil the need for me to have a job and for life?' I mean I would've said, you know, a couple of years ago a hope would've been very much a kind of trad, I would see from the outside a traditional academic journey of 'I want to do it, I want to do the PhD, I want to do this stuff'. Now I'm in more doubt, because I'm like 'well can I...', not can I fit, because I don't think it's about me, but is it an environment in which I can exist? And is it the environment for me? But yeah, hope, I think meaningfulness, and for me hope relates to meaningfulness and belonging probably.

**YT:** Yeah, that we can think about that and about where that hope may be. And with, kind of like I don't want to drop the ladder in being too critical of higher education. As somebody who critiques higher education, I want to be mindful of that. But I also want to make sure that students at all levels understand that there's other ways of having meaningful place or contribution, and beyond the university careers too. Shall we carry on?

**PARTICIPANT 5:** I liked the idea when [participant 1] said about identities, so when I read emails about when you're estranged and they tell you about pantry to help you, where as someone who lives two trains away from university it's not really possible. So, and also I had a kid during my third year of university. I gave, I remember going to uni one week thirty-eight weeks pregnant, coming

back two weeks later, and a student went to me 'I don't mean to be rude but were you not pregnant?' And I went 'yes, I gave birth a couple of days ago. I am here'. And I remember the uni wasn't really helpful. They tried to push part-time instead. Since I was five education was my thing, I hadn't been out of education since I was five. I went to college, straight to uni, and now I'm doing my postgrad. And so education was a very big part of my identity, it was something that was for me. Like I have five siblings, so I like, it's a level of pettiness where I can turn round and go 'mmm, smarter than all of you combined!' [laughs].

But no, when I think of my crisis I think of when it came down to crisis it's not very helpful. Pantry's a good idea but I'm a uni student, but not confined to the uni campus itself. And I think my issue is when there is a crisis they're not helpful. Masters funding for example, I thought I struggled with undergrad funding, with trying to pay rent, buy stuff for a newborn, and in Masters it's less than half of that. But then they don't expect you to work at the same time, or they say you shouldn't be. And they forget that some people have lives outside of uni, you have responsibilities, and for me my crisis is their idea of an ideal student. They say they want all walks of life, but when it comes down to it when you're working-class, you're a single parent, you don't, you're not in a space where you can live five minutes round the corner from campus. You can show up, you live with parents, not everything's like that. And I think when they think of identity for students they think of an eighteen-year-old, living with parents, they don't need to pay rent, they don't need to work. Whereas realistically that's a very small percentage of uni students.

And even sometimes if you did live with parents, it doesn't mean your parent's going to pay. Because I remember they tried to ask for my dad's work, like his money, to decide how much I would get. And I remember saying 'I don't live with my dad. He's alive, I don't live with him'. And uni I would think would help, but they made it more difficult, because they expect you to show up and then, like I remember you were speaking about emails where it's cancelled, you're saying that 'oh we still want you to show up'. But if it's cancelled like you're forgetting that my trains are worse, so if I'm having to go on campus but my first train's cancelled I'm not taking a bus, because that means I'm travelling for three hours. And also I've got someone who I need to care about as well. And I think that was the biggest issue for me when I had a newborn, who luckily slept very well so I managed to get a first class degree, I just think my crisis is it's not about just me, and unis seem to forget that it's not, you're not doing it for you, you're doing it for other reasons. And I can't drop everything.

So when I think of crisis it's not just my crisis, it's someone else's crisis. And some unis just aren't very understanding of that aspect of I have a life outside of education. It doesn't mean I'm less interested. I do actually enjoy education, it gives me a sense of belonging, it's something I enjoy, but it doesn't mean it's something I can drop everything for. And that's it done.

**YT:** Yeah, thank you so much. That was really helpful. And I hear you on, I remember the maintenance grant that I got and you had to do a means test, and it's quite shaming in itself.

**PARTICIPANT 5:** Yeah. I remember they told me that, when I asked about funding for Masters they went 'you don't get the lone parent grant but you do get childcare money', And I remember going 'so at least one of us could eat?' And I thought it was just insulting, because she's not the one that needs the money.

**YT:** Yeah. And I hear you, I hear you in terms of that very powerful talking back. I think I really remember every year we'd have to, as students who got grants, stand up in a separate queue to get our maintenance grant cheque, and we had to enrol before, which involved at that point seeing a tutor. And you would see your tutor at the beginning of the year, and I would always have to go

there, to then go join the queue to get my cheque. And I was standing outside my tutor's office and he was in with another student and they were talking about her skiing trip, and I was getting angrier and angrier. And this conversation was overrunning, and I was like 'I have to get to the queue to get my cheque!', and I eventually kind of just burst in. And I mean in bursting in angry you step on toes and people come to think of you as that angry, out of place student, and it's kind of reinforcing isn't it? So, across time I hear echoes of those journeys. Shall we continue?

**PARTICIPANT 6:** Just to introduce myself, I'm from UWS, the Paisley campus. I'm a first year undergrad doing social sciences. I came straight from high school and freshly eighteen. I just kind of wanted to sort of bring back the approach of my own identity crisis that I'm going through at the moment. Because I don't have as many responsibilities. As an autistic person entering the uni it was really unsettling, and I didn't really feel so supported, in the way that I felt I could adjust naturally towards the environment. When I entered in September, we'd just come off a cyber-security attack, so everything was unclear, and that was just sort of like the blame, the scapegoat for everything was just, 'we can't really tell you your timetable. We can't tell you when you're expected to be on campus. We can't tell you where your lectures are because we can't get access to anything'. So you just had to go by word of mouth. And that has sort of remained until this semester I'd say. You still hear echoes of lecturers sort of being like 'well the cyber-security attack, COVID...'. I wasn't impacted by strikes in university, that was sort of my exam leave that happened. One of the biggest crises at the moment is funding for university. Recently we had bars and cafés shut down. They couldn't afford it. And that really has impacted myself. I live in Glasgow, I travel by bus because it's free bus travel, it takes me about an hour to get to campus. So being there is probably like the easiest, most cost-efficient way to sort of connect with my peers, which is something that I feel is the most important to sort of survive the struggle of academia. And shutting those down has just sort of stripped back the experiences that queer and trans plus people should be getting, to get to know each other, to be able to like to relate to each other. So far, I'm also part of the LGBTQIA+ Society, I'm one of the executives. So far we've only had a few nights out in Glasgow for like drinking events, which just isn't as accessible for like dietary requirements, for recovering addicts, and for like the demographics of our students. We are a wider access university, so we have lots of mature students, lots of people with like needs for their disabilities, who just aren't getting seen. And it's really hard to communicate that when, in my eyes, the society is the entirety of the voice for the community. I don't think, the society's only been running for a year in February, the twenty-eighth. That'll be the first year of the society. And we've already taken on so much just from September, from me being here, for things like getting trans people the things they need to transition, to go by like their names and stuff that they want. And it's really set an unclear path for me, because the society is the only way that I can relate to other people.

In high school there was nobody queer that I knew, and so going into higher education I just sort of thought, there's going to be more people like me. And that wasn't the reality that I was faced with. So I'd say the biggest educational crisis that I personally experienced was just the expectations and reality of higher education.

**YT:** Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing, and thank you for starting your work with the LGBTQIA+ Society. What are your hopes for the society in your institution?

**PARTICIPANT 6:** More members, more funding – we're lacking in funding.....more representation. But more understanding I'd say. So we did something for AIDS Day on December first, but it was just sort of expected that we were to show up out of hours, that we were on campus to sort of hold stalls that people would understand. In Lanarkshire it was a bit easier because they have more connections with like the NHS. But for Paisley there was just a stall that was left with a few like pens and stuff



trying to promote it. And cross-campus representation is what I'd like to see, by at least the time I graduate, because at the moment it's a conversation all the execs are having, where there's lots of representation on Paisley, maybe some on Lanarkshire. We don't have any communication with London campus or the Dumfries campus, and Ayr just doesn't get spoken about enough. And as someone who is, also comes under the disabled category I've definitely noticed that. We don't have a disabled society so you don't see representation of...

**PARTICIPANT 7:** Hi. So I'm also from UWS. I'm in my last year of accounting undergrad. So I left school and I went to college for a year. Then I went to Dundee University for three years, then I moved, during COVID, to UWS and started accounting. So I've done a few different places, and during COVID joining was really hard because nobody had any communication, that you applied through UCAS. And I never, I got a rejection through UCAS, and then the uni phoned me up and said they'd made a mistake and offered me an unconditional. So, it just felt a wee bit of a mess from the start. I pay for uni because I done uni before, so it kind of angers me, because we are very rarely in. I've not been in since, the eighteenth of January is my last week that I was in. And it's very, you don't get a lot of support. And like you had mentioned we had the cyber-attack. And I waited, I had done exams in the May and I still, I just got them back in the start of January, and you're going into our fourth year. Like a lot of people were leaving in third year to go workplaces, so it was a lot of stress added onto your dissertation year.

And I feel that the uni, they don't care. It's very much like it doesn't impact them. They still get paid even when they're, like because I remember saying to my dissertation supervisor, 'would you be able to like look at some stuff for me?' And he was like 'oh well I suppose I could because I am getting paid the full holidays anyway over Christmas'. ..... But it's very, you can tell there's not a care within the university. And the same with the society. I was one of the ones that helped start it back up, and I moved from Dundee University to UWS, and there was nothing. And I expected there to be some sort of society for us. And it was hard to get it, the ball rolling, because the uni didn't really want to help. But I thought they would maybe try and use it more to like promote them, but they didn't care enough. It was very much like the students who needed it, that was, they could find it outwith the uni. It wasn't a big society for them.

Whereas the accounting society, they're all huge, whereas we struggle to try and get members, we struggle to try and keep it going, even nights out. Not many people turn up, like we try and get engagement with it, but it's just, I think it'd be good if the uni actually tried to focus on things more instead of trying to make it more of a business. And like knowing I pay for uni it angers me because I'm very rarely in, you don't get like any attention, and you're paying a lot of money like to be there for nothing. And you're expected, like we were saying, not to work, you're expected to be full-time. And like I've got a mortgage, I've got a full life outside, and you're just expected to show up and be there when they want you. And they cancel classes. I have to drive up and it takes me like forty minutes to drive, and they'll cancel classes like half an hour before the class starts. And you're already left and parking's expensive in Paisley. The Ayr campus, they don't pay for parking. I don't know about the rest. But Paisley it's extortionate. I think like it's like three pounds an hour or something. You're there some days like full days, if you're in. And even then like the timetables, it took us ages to get our timetables back after like going in in September. It's just, it's been chaos the full four years I've been there. And I kept thinking it was going to get better, but it's just not.

**YT:** Yeah, yeah. Thanks so much for sharing. I think lots of different universities say – and a couple of people have said this – that they're all about widening participation, but as soon as you break that down, into the travel, into the exceptional circumstances - which in Scotland bad weather is not really exceptional is it – into the infrastructure and the IT support systems, I mean the basic

expectations that your work will get marked and we'll feedback. As a member of staff, I would also insist on that.

**PARTICIPANT 7:** A lot of our lecturers that were like chartered accountants who then went into teaching, they've all left because they just couldn't be bothered with the way it was going. And we have to, we get accredited for your chartered accounting exams. So that's why even with strikes and that it can impact us, because they need to show up so that the accredited bodies will still give us those marks. So they had a lot of pressure with that,

**YT:** I imagine we'll return to some of these issues as well in conversation, but is it okay if I come to your side?

**PARTICIPANT 8:** Yeah. So just brief introduction. I'm actually the Black Asian minority ethnic representation of the Strathclyde LGBT+ Society – it is such a long name – LGBT+ Society. I often joke about being like the minority of minorities. My friends keep telling me like 'go on dating apps and stuff', and I'm like 'I can't. I'm Muslim, genderfluid, bisexual, potentially have autism, ADHD, disabled. I will get hate crimed'. But like living within all these like minorities it feels like I'm just like on the edge of everything. I am very fortunate to have like a small group of friends that I met the first society meeting, and I'm very fortunate I have them. But beyond that like we've been very closed off from everyone else, and like we're always talking about it. All of us suffer with a different kind of disability, and there's never any like support.

So I struggle with depression and anxiety, and that results in the worst mental breakdowns ever, where it's like I can't even leave bed, can't even eat, and the university just doesn't do anything to support that. Like I'm still, they put up the lecture notes a day before, they don't. But like the lecture notes are functionally useless without the lecture. And I understand that, they want people to attend to lectures. But I'm kind of lucky that none of my breakdowns have happened during like semester time, but I'm worried that one day it's going to happen and I'm going to miss the lecture, and using the notes isn't going to be enough to understand it. And I have friends in my history class and my social policy class. I don't have anyone in my law class, which is like my primary subject, and so I can't get anyone there to record it for me or make notes and send them to me. So, I'm very much forcing myself to come in on terrible days. And even though coming in and I record them I don't end up paying attention because obviously I'm depressed. Why would I want to pay attention to this?

And like I applied, so I moved after I turned eighteen, like September, when the queen died. My mum came down the day of the queen's funeral and, as she likes to say, adult-napped me, took me up here. And I took like a year to finally like register everything that had happened in the last ten years of my life, which included the first of many mental breakdowns. So when I applied for the university one of the first things, I got accepted the day after the submissions closed, which was ironically my birthday, and then a week later they emailed me. So it was like 'do you have, you mentioned you have disability requirements. Put them in and we'll make like, you know, accessibility arrangements'. And so I filled that in. And then I did the registration in September and they were like 'yeah, fill in this disability form for', and I'm like 'I've already done this, but okay'.

So I redid it, and by that point the amount of stuff that I had to list had exacerbated. And then nothing, radio silence for months. I only had my meeting with our disability and wellbeing support staff on Monday. I have went through an entire semester of just struggling, barely scraping through. I had to do, I had to put extensions on everything simply because I just couldn't handle the note making, the stress. There was no support in place. Like even in the extension request it's just like 'I've had a really bad mental breakdown. Can I have an extension?' And they were like 'sure'. There was

like, people read it because like there's a name at the bottom saying this person has accepted the request, but like there was no support or, and no one like reached out saying 'you've said this. Are you okay? Do you need extra help?' There was nothing like that.

So I've been kind of left to try and, the swimming analogy, try and swim, but the irony is I can't swim. So I'm just slowly, slowly sinking, and it's just, I've only now just got an email about, so the stuff we talked about on Monday, about like having someone to like help me like make sure I make progress, because I have not done anything this semester. I kind of sit in the lectures, record it, and very intensely zone out. Because like it's just not for me, that's not how I learn, and there's no support in place. And even the meeting that we had, it felt like the support that they've offered me I've taken it, but like one they said it's going to take anywhere between eight to twelve weeks. That will take me all the way up until the end of the semester, so that's an entire year I'll have gone without any support, any help. And knowing my luck it's just going to start all over again next September.

And also like it just felt like they didn't, the accessibility arrangements were very like set. So it's like everyone has different needs, everyone has different requirements, but like these were very set. So this is your option one, two or three, you've got to pick from these. And there wasn't any room to like suggest something else or to ask for something else. And one day it's going to all fall down on my head. I'm the opposite. I study here but I live an hour commute on the bus. My mum's house is halfway through..... But like my mum has MS, so she doesn't work but sometimes she just has really bad episodes, and so I'll often go home, I'll like stop over halfway, go in and check on her, help her, occasionally make her food, before coming into uni. But like there's never any, like I've got so many things to do, plus I have to pay rent and I have to pay for food, which is like, until, I've only, I applied for my adult disability payment last June, I only got it this week. So up until then I was like basically floating on the SASS and student loan payments. But that oftentimes wasn't enough, and I was like going through this month thinking, I can't spend too much money because if I spend too much money I'm not going to be able to pay my rent, I'm not going to be able to buy groceries.

And there was like just, there's no like, no one tells you where the support is. They're like 'there is support', but like it's hidden away in a corner. I have no idea how to access it, or if I could even access it. And it just feels like just one struggle on top of another, and the university is like 'yeah, cool, deal with it'. I don't, I'm just kind of like trying to push through and hopefully get, hopefully, the arrangements are done sooner rather than later. And I hope I don't have to start this messy process all over again. It's just very, very difficult, because the university, like you've mentioned, they use a society as like 'this society deals with this stuff'. And so like we, our society the year before I arrived arranged the trans and non-binary swim at our union, but they had to like push for that because the university just wouldn't give it to them. Any representation we have comes from our society, not from the university. They can fly the flag as much as they want, they haven't done anything to be honest beyond approving a thing or two. There's like just nothing.

**YT:** Thank you. I know your story is shared closely in the room, and I know that sometimes you have to know what supports are out there to be able to access the support, so it becomes a circular loop. And I hope that you're finding some way through it, and I know that we can keep these conversations going after today. We can keep in touch and I can share some of the things that I've learned in navigating university webs, and try to find my way through them. Thank you.

**PARTICIPANT 3:** Thanks. So I'm from QMU as well, and I think I'm pretty much going to wrap up what everybody else had said, it seems like it. So being a mature student, coming to university when my kids are also at university, is an interesting experience. And we were talking about, on the train, about how universities expect you to support yourself, but how do you do that when you're

supporting your children? Because that's the other thing, is universities expect students to be supported by parents, but when you are the parent of a student and a student yourself who then is doing the support, and where does the support run out? However, I think for me my main focus when talking about crisis is similar to what's been talked about, is going through the different – I think you [Yvette] said before when is it a crisis if it's not, if it's so continuous? Like it's not a crisis at that point, because a crisis is supposed to be a point and there's supposed to be an endpoint. And it doesn't feel like it because, as you were saying, you know, we had strike action in college, COVID, lockdown, university strike action, I'm trying to think what else, marking boycott. Do you know?

Like it just feels like there's like one thing after another. So at what point is that the crisis, or are we just living in, it's not a crisis, we're just living in what is something that's set up to be that way. And you said about using the data breach or, what was it, what happened? The cyber-security thing as an excuse. And it feels like the universities, or higher education, does that a lot, where when things aren't working there's some external crisis that's the excuse for it not working, rather than the decisions that are being made by them. So, you know, as a student I support strike action – always have done, always will do – it *did* impact us negatively. Decisions were made without any consultation. So, for instance I got my grade for my university degree, my degree overall grade, without my dissertation marked. And they said to us 'don't worry, it'll get marked, and they can't take the mark away from you'. And I'm like 'that does not help, that doesn't help'. But there's this assumption, because there is no consultation, that that's a good thing. And I'm thinking, so you're going to give me my mark and I could potentially be in a position where I would've been actually on a lower grade, and you think that I'm going to be happy that I'm on a high grade. I'm not going to be happy about that.

And to me that really shows a lack of consultation, a lack of understanding, a lack of diversity in the decision-making process, because they don't understand the drive for some people at university. They're not understanding that the drive for me, and many other people, wasn't just getting the mark at the end of it. It was about that mark being justified, your work, getting the feedback. I mean I have always said I prefer a low mark with good feedback than a high mark with no feedback, because that's what makes you better, that's what teaches you more. And there was just a complete and utter like voidness of that understanding.

And then like because of their processes with like, you know, that UCU were going against, which is like insecure contracts, end of casualisation, this failure to understand that that impacts the diversity of our staff, that then impacts the diversity of our students. And being in a room where they were like 'yeah we're going to look at student engagement and enhancement', and I'm talking to a tutor about this, and she's going 'but I don't understand. I give short-term contracts, that's a good thing, I need to use them'. And I'm like 'yeah, you need to use them, but when the universities are using them for the sake of using them'. Like I understand when you're trying to cover maternity leave or illness, I get that, there's a need there, but when it's being used as an actual like tool of employment there's only certain people that can go for short-term contracts, and they're not the people that I grew up with. They're not the people that recognise me, that have experienced life the way that I've experienced it.

I couldn't go on a short-term contract, I couldn't not know that I'm going to have a job next month or in a few months' time, or even have the anxiety of thinking, right I've got six months on this contract. When do I need to start looking for a job? Because I can't go a month without wages. Like and there's a real lack of understanding about how that impacts diversity within higher education. And we talked about widening access and, you know, opening the doors to different types of people and diverse student bodies. But there's no point if that environment becomes so uninhabitable for these people

because there is no diversity, there's no understanding, there's no shared experiences. And you talked about imposter syndrome, which is bad as it is, but if you have this environment that's so toxic it just gets worse. And it's not the individual's issue, it's the institution. And the institution's constantly blaming a crisis.

**YT:** Yes, thank you, and thank you very much everyone, for sharing, for your thoughts, words and cares. I think everybody's sort of posed the question, if the university is not for us then who is it for? Who is it working for? And in what ways does it have to change? Just to end the recording, can I thank everyone again, and thanks to the RSE.

[End]