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## PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

**Project Title: Beginning university during SARS-CoV-2 restrictions: How can the University of Edinburgh meet the needs of students belonging to a Widening Participation group?**

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**Project type** (delete as appropriate) :

**A Research Project** (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

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**Principal Investigator : Donna Quinn**  
**Schools/department : Medical School**

**Team members (including Schools and Departments) :**

**Dr Jessie Paterson (School of Veterinary Studies)**  
**Dr Alan Jaap (Medical School)**  
**Dr David Hope (Medical School)**

**For further details, please contact: Dr David Hope**

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

**Report (maximum 1500 words)**

**What did you do?**

The COVID pandemic had a significant impact on higher education. A mass-transition to online learning was rapidly undertaken, and students went through long periods where they could not physically meet other students or staff.

The impact of the pandemic on Widening Participation (WP) students has been a particular concern. WP students have historically been under-represented in higher education and may have been especially vulnerable to any adverse educational issues caused by the pandemic.

We undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with staff and students from the medical and veterinary schools, generally of an hour in length. These interviews explored the social and academic challenges WP students experienced during the COVID pandemic: especially those who begin their experience of higher education during lockdown. We particularly discussed teaching restrictions, the difficulties of maintaining engagement, and the broader impact this had on their wellbeing and academic performance.

We transcribed and thematically analysed the interviews and compared staff and student responses. To further triangulate the data, we approached members of a WP student steering group – designed to support incoming WP students within the medical school – and identified any



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topics “missing” from the interviews. We then approached staff members with a significant track record of supporting WP students, again to see if they could identify any issues not discussed in the interviews.

### **What did you find out?**

We identified a number of important themes in the interviews. These were:

**Finding connections** – WP students of both the medical and veterinary school faced additional challenges in terms of forming networks with peers and tutors/staff. Traditional methods of meeting others were less successful online than they would have been in face-to-face teaching, though did improve once in-person teaching resumed.

**It's all so new** – Most students were surprised by how different the teaching and learning styles are compared to their previous education. An uncertainty of how to best learn and revise the material was common. Finding a balance between studies and personal lives was a key theme.

**Fitting in to an existing university structure** – Some students expressed concern about meeting the expectations that the university has set out and pressure to prove oneself and their place on the course. This was most prominent among Home-domiciled students from a WP background.

**Getting on with it/ Flying under the radar** – The vast majority of students interviewed stated that seeking further guidance for academic matters or pastoral matters from university staff would be a last resort, and instead adopt a preference to be independent and manage difficulties by other means.

However, we also noted limitations in the interview data. Very few interviewees highlighted any financial challenges related to the COVID pandemic, and few self-reported academic difficulties. This contrasted sharply with the feedback from our Student-led Widening Participation Group and routine discussions with WP students and the staff who support them.

We drew two conclusions from this. Firstly, students volunteering to undertake additional work to support the university – in this case, interviewing with us – were generally financially better off and more academically successful than the average student. Secondly, due to the sensitivity of discussing financial matters, those with specifically financial concerns found it difficult to reach out to us.

While this finding was, to an extent, anticipated, the sheer absence of financial issues in the student interviews concerned us. It suggested attempts to engage students on sensitive non-academic topics might fail to identify problems, and systematically misreport student concerns. Our staff interviews, WP student working group, and engagement with WP support staff, helped triangulate our evidence and ensure financial issues were adequately highlighted.

Our triangulation with other data sources therefore proved extremely helpful and gave us a much more comprehensive picture of how students were doing. We intend to reproduce this method of triangulation in future investigations.

### **How did you disseminate your findings?**



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We have generated a set of guidance documents. The findings of this report are being discussed at the relevant school committees, and some of the work has been highlighted at the University of Edinburgh Learning and Teaching Conference 2022.

**What have been the benefits to student learning?**

The project has demonstrated the need for a multi-pronged approach to identifying WP student issues. The establishment of a student steering group was particularly beneficial in ensuring the WP experience was properly represented.

The outcomes of this project have highlighted the resilience of WP students during a very difficult time, and some general work for the future on ensuring student belongingness and supporting their ability to reach out to staff when in difficulty.

**How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?**

With the guidance notes provided, we believe schools can reproduce the work here quite straightforwardly.

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