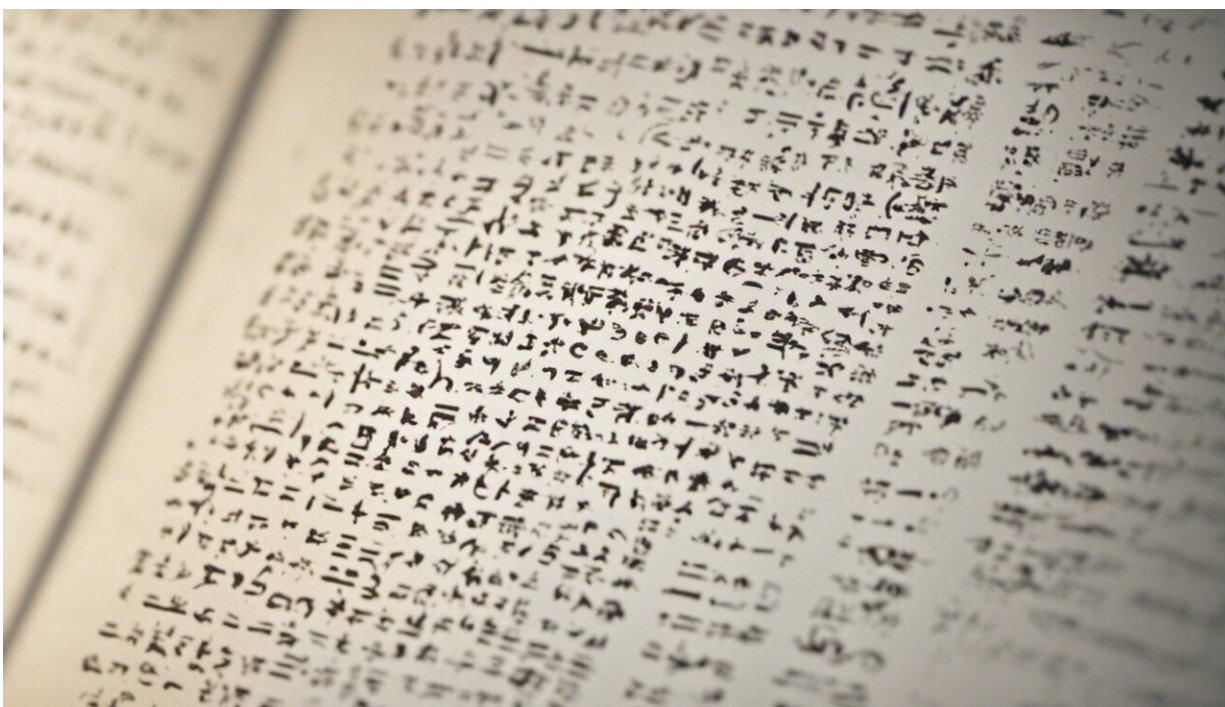


Disadvantaged students starting courses in 2022 are worse off as a result of COVID, and universities must support them

August 31 2022, by Shardia Briscoe-Palmer



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The A-level results received by students in 2022 should be celebrated as an example of resilience and hard work. The achievements of this cohort have been made despite a global pandemic which affected both their GCSEs and A-levels. They have faced government [U-turns](#) over

assessment, and knowledge gaps in their learning.

What's more, a [record number](#) of applications to [university](#) in 2022 have come from [students](#) from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, this welcome development should not hide the fact that the pandemic has had a [disproportionate impact](#) on people from deprived areas and has widened educational inequalities.

Universities must recognize that the [disadvantaged students](#) in the 2022 cohort will have had very different educational journeys to their wealthier peers, and that many will face additional challenges as the cost-of-living crisis bites. They must plan accordingly in order to help their students transition into [higher education](#).

Educational inequalities which affect students on their way to university are far from new. Institutional [racism](#) in education, including in curriculum content, affects how young people experience school. Working-class students face [barriers to education](#). These are all issues that universities already recognize, but meaningful change is slow in how they support these students.

Barriers to education

Now, the pandemic has reversed progress made in [closing disadvantage gaps](#) and has made a bleak situation worse.

The gap between the proportion of young people from areas which historically have a high level of attendance at university and those from areas with a low attendance rate [is larger](#) than it was before the pandemic. Thinktank the [Education Policy Institute has found](#) that rising levels of persistent poverty among disadvantaged pupils have contributed to little progress being made in closing the education gap between poorer

and more wealthy students.

In addition, [a significant number of teaching days were lost](#) during the pandemic due to school closures and illness. Many young people feel that they have [fallen behind](#) in their studies. Universities have been advised by [The Sutton Trust](#) to identify gaps in their students' knowledge at an early stage in the [academic year](#) and provide support—though this may be additional work for an already stretched university teaching staff.

Cost of living

What's more, not only have this cohort faced an impact on their learning over the past few years, this will now be coupled with a [cost-of-living crisis](#) felt by many.

Universities can expect to witness a significant number of students struggling financially over the coming year. The [cost of student accommodation](#) has been steadily rising, and the cost of food and energy is going up.

Students living away from their parents outside London in 2022/23 are eligible for a maximum annual maintenance loan of [£9,706](#), up from £9,488 in 2021/22—an increase of 2%. By contrast, prices in August 2022 are [up 10.1%](#) from August 2021.

There are things universities can do to [reduce some costs and support students](#). They could make use of more set texts that are available online, and increase the number of laptops for loan. But the wider societal problem remains.

More students may need to have part-time jobs to cope with the increased cost of living. The need to access employment is a challenge

faced by [students from poorer groups](#).

The need to work will have an impact on learning, which may clash with teaching timetables and disrupt additional course activities. [Students with caring responsibilities](#), who face challenges in juggling their studies with home life, may be particularly affected.

Students hoping to defer a year, to work and save or wait out the cost-of-living crisis, will be met with a lowering of the repayment threshold for student loans. This means that graduates will start paying back their student loans once they start earning £25,000, rather than the current threshold of £27,295. This could see applicants who start in 2023 [repaying back more](#) in the long run for a longer period of time.

While educators are faced with immediate concerns regarding the students beginning university in autumn 2022, there may also be a ripple effect, possibly stunting equality, diversity and inclusivity initiatives across the sector. The absence of diverse voices within the classroom will impact the [knowledge](#) and opinions shared at universities.

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