

Evaluation of the Robertson Scholarship

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Robertson Trust

The Robertson Trust is a grant-making trust established in Scotland in 1961. The Trust's vision is "for a fair and compassionate Scotland where everyone is valued and able to flourish". To achieve this The Robertson Trust funds and supports third sector organisations and communities with the aim of improving the lives of people experiencing poverty and trauma in Scotland, and building evidence to inform policy and practice. The Robertson Trust's 2020-2030 Strategy sets out how the organisation will achieve its aims.

1.2 The Robertson Scholarship

Each year the Robertson Scholarship supports around 700 young people, including around 150 new starts each year, aged 16 to 25 from a range of under-represented groups to overcome socioeconomic barriers to accessing, participating in and benefiting from a university education in Scotland. So far, the Scholarship has provided financial support to over 2000 young people. The aim of the Scholarship is to improve access, retention and graduate outcomes for these young people.

The Scholarship offers financial support in the form of a bursary of up to £4,250 per annum to each undergraduate Scholar. The maximum amount is offered to those living away from home and those who are care experienced or estranged. A lower bursary of £3,000 is offered to those remaining in the family home while they study. The bursary is match-funded by some institutions, some of whom match-fund out of existing Scholarship funds. The bursary does not impact on other funding the student might be eligible for, such as Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) maintenance loans and bursaries, or family support. The Robertson Trust also provides students with additional financial support in the form of discretionary funding for those experiencing financial hardships. Since 2020, the Trust has also provided a bursary extension for some Scholars to continue with their postgraduate studies.

The Robertson Scholarship offers Scholars a range of support in addition to the bursary. This includes Journey to Success, a 4-year self-development programme which aims to build self-confidence, presentational and other career-related skills. The Scholarship also provides Scholars with personal and leadership development opportunities, third year internships and networking at different points in their studies. Scholars can access supportive professional networks and mentoring, including via a network of Scholarship alumni, as well as support with their mental health, social engagement, and managing family relationships and responsibilities. For a detailed overview of resources and access to The Robertson Trust's Scholar's Handbook and Graduate Options Handbook, see the Trust's Linktree. Opportunities include¹:

¹ For a detailed overview of resources and access to The Robertson Trust's Scholar's Handbook and Graduate Options Handbook, see the Trust's [Linktree](#).

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- A Welcome event and induction to help Scholars build peer support networks. The residential event is held at an Outward Bound Trust centre. During lockdown, this was held online.
 - Leadership development: second year Scholars have the opportunity to become Ambassadors to support their first year peers.
 - A series of mandatory personal development training sessions.
 - Career Pathways and internships help Scholars access work experience and make professional contacts.
 - An annual gathering is held to celebrate the success of Scholars.
 - Giving back: each Scholar is expected to participate in a placement with a registered charity of their choice before graduation.
 - An Alumni Network encourages Scholar alumni to mentor current scholars.

Scholars are expected to attend the welcome event and two self-development training sessions each year, as well as writing a short report describing how they are progressing at university at the end of each academic term.

1.2.1. Scholarship eligibility

To be eligible for the Scholarship, nominees must: be resident in Scotland at the time of application; have applied to a Scottish University; be 16-25 years old accessing a programme of undergraduate study which is their first degree; and be eligible for SAAS support. The Robertson Trust Scholarship is aimed at students from backgrounds currently under-represented in higher education, including those who are:

- From schools with lower than average rates of higher education participation
- From households with low income
- From Black and Asian Minority Ethnic groups
- Disabled
- Have lived experience of care
- Carers
- Estranged from their family
- From Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- From military families.

These population groups have been of interest to the Trust for some time, but an application review in 2021 meant that data were collected more explicitly to allow the Trust to better record Scholar's information. In 2023, 175 Scholars joined the programme from a wide range of backgrounds. Table 1.1 below shows that the majority of Scholars were Young Carers, from an ethnic minority background or were care experienced. The table demonstrates how the Trust's monitoring processes have developed in recent years. Until 2020-21, The

Robertson Trust focused on young people who were young carers, care experienced, estranged or who were from a travelling community. In 2021-22, eligibility criteria for the 2020-21 intake were reviewed and, in light of this, expanded to include students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, disabled students, those under kinship care or from a military family, Ukrainian refugees or those who had recently received leave to remain in the UK.

Table 1.1: Scholarship in-takes 2019-20 to 2022-23 by student background (The Robertson Trust’s monitoring data)

Population groups	2022-2023		2021-2022		2020-2021		2019-2020	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Young carer	58	33%	43	31%	38	26%	42	28%
BAME	44	25%	41	30%				
Care experienced	41	23%	32	23%	21	14%	29	19%
Disability	27	15%	17	12%				
Estranged	13	7%	8	6%	2	1%	5	3%
Kinship care	6	3%	3	2%				
Military family	3	2%	1	1%				
Ukrainian refugee	3	2%						
Recent Leave to Remain	2	1%	1	1%				
Travelling Community	1	1%	1	1%	2	1%		
Total in that year	175		137		147		148	

Prospective Scholars apply to the Scholarship via a nomination from either their school teacher, college tutor, third sector organisation or university staff who help The Robertson Trust to identify and nominate suitable candidates.

In 2021/22, 80% of graduating Robertson Scholars achieved a degree classification of 2:1 or above.

1.2.2. This research

In March 2023 The Robertson Trust commissioned the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) to undertake research to evaluate the Robertson Scholarship. This report outlines the findings from this research.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of this evaluation was to understand what impact, if any, the Robertson Scholarship has had on the Scholars who received it. This work aligns with the Trust's 10-year strategy (launched in 2020) which focuses on reducing the impacts of poverty and trauma for people across Scotland.

The objectives of the evaluation were to explore and understand:

- which elements of the programme contributed to the biggest changes, and for whom
- how the programme is perceived externally by university staff and school contacts
- understanding the potential for changes to the programme that would respond to the different external contexts in which The Robertson Trust operates in and have the greatest impact on poverty and trauma.

The findings from the evaluation will be used to inform future developments to the Robertson Scholarship.

2.2 Research design

To address the research aims and objectives, ScotCen conducted a mixed method study. This included:

- A policy and bursary review (Appendix A)
- Four participatory workshops with six current and former Scholars (Scholar Research Consultants) held between April and October 2023 to inform the research design, suggested improvements and outputs
- Focus groups and paired interviews with 18 current and former Scholars. These were held in May and June 2023
- A focus group with eight staff from seven universities' widening participation and scholarships teams which took place in September 2023, while a teacher was interviewed in June 2023.

To ensure the research was designed and implemented in an ethical manner, an application was submitted to NatCen's Research Ethics Committee (REC). Ethical approval for the research was granted by NatCen REC in March 2023.

This report outlines the findings from all elements of the research.

2.2.1. Policy and bursary review

To explore the changing context in which the Robertson Scholarship and Journey to Success programme operate, ScotCen conducted a brief review of the Scottish policy literature. This review focused on published literature and statistical releases in relation to widening access, retention, attainment and graduate outcomes. This included key reports, publications and statistics from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Fair Access Commissioner and the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), among others, as well as academic research articles.

As part of the review, ScotCen identified other bursary and self-development awards offered by independent funding organisations like The Robertson Trust that support students to enter higher education in Scotland. For each of the scholarships and bursaries, the target groups, eligibility criteria, and the nature of the awards (e.g., levels of funding, and additional types of support such as mentoring, training etc.) were summarised. The policy and bursary review can be found in Appendix A.

2.2.2. Scholar Research Consultant participatory workshops

Recruitment of Scholars

To recruit current and former Scholars to participate in a series of four participatory workshops, The Robertson Trust circulated an invitation to their database of Scholars. The invitation asked anyone who was interested in taking part to contact ScotCen directly using the contact details provided in the invitation. Scholars who contacted ScotCen were asked to complete a short screening questionnaire. We sought to include Scholars from a range of under-represented groups that are eligible to apply for the Scholarship. Both current and former Scholars were invited to participate in the workshops. Former Scholars were able to reflect on their experiences of the whole programme, including impacts post-graduation to assist the co-design of recruitment materials and topic guides.

Conducting the workshops

Nine current and former Scholars expressed an interest in becoming Scholar Research Consultants, six of whom went on to participate in the workshops. Scholar Research Consultants were paid in recognition of their time and expert contribution for each workshop they attended. Each workshop lasted approximately 90 minutes. The first three workshops were held online during the early evening using MS Teams (by the request of the Scholar Research Consultants). The final workshop was held in person at the ScotCen office. The workshops were run by two members of the ScotCen research team. Further details about each of the workshops can be found below:

Participatory Workshop 1: Through facilitated discussions, the Scholar Researchers identified key themes to be covered in the focus group discussions with Scholars.

Participatory Workshop 2: Using the ideas developed by the Scholar Research Consultants in Workshop 1, ScotCen drafted a topic guide for the Scholar focus groups which was shared with the Scholar Researchers in advance of Workshop 2. During the workshop, Scholar Researchers provided feedback on the draft topic guide and suggested changes to improve it.

Participatory Workshop 3: ScotCen presented emerging findings from the analysis of the Scholar focus groups. Scholar Research Consultants provided feedback on these, including the extent to which the findings reflected their own experiences, whether there were any gaps and their thoughts on how the programme could be improved in the future.

Participatory Workshop 4: Designed to enable the Scholar Research Consultants to inform the development of outputs to disseminate the research findings, the workshop explored how best to communicate the findings of the research to a range of stakeholders, e.g., young people and staff in schools, current and former Scholars, university staff and Robertson Trust staff and trustees.

2.2.3. Focus groups with past and present Scholars

Sampling and recruitment

To recruit current and former Scholars to participate in the focus groups, The Robertson Trust circulated an invitation to their database of Scholars. The invitation included an information sheet detailing the aims of the study. The invitation asked anyone who was interested in taking part to contact ScotCen directly using the contact details provided in the invitation. Scholars who contacted ScotCen were asked to complete a short screening questionnaire.

Across all focus groups, we aimed to include young people from schools with lower than average rates of higher education participation; from households with low incomes; from Black and Asian minority ethnic groups and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; disabled young people and those from military families. As Scholars' engagement with, and experiences of, different elements of the programme may vary depending on which point they are at in their university journey, we aimed to include Scholars across all stages of the programme from first year to alumni Scholars.

Scholar focus group participants

In total, 18 Scholars participated in the qualitative research. Four focus groups were convened, two paired interviews with care experienced and estranged students were held, and one Scholar took part in an individual interview. All of these were conducted online using MS-Teams.

To preserve the anonymity of the participating Scholars, we have not provided a numerical breakdown of their individual characteristics. However, the 18 participating Scholars included:

- Scholars from all degree year groups
- Scholars from 10 different universities, studying a wide range of different courses

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- Both current and former Scholars, and both undergraduate and postgraduate students
 - Care experienced and estranged Scholars
 - Those with caring responsibilities
 - Those from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds
 - Those from low income households
 - Those who attended schools with lower than average rates of higher education participation.

The number of participants was lower than was initially anticipated. Seven focus groups with four to six participants had been planned. Multiple emails and reminders were sent to Scholars by The Robertson Trust over a month-long period. The exact reason for the low participation is unknown. However, it is likely that the timing of the research played a factor. While the focus groups were moved from April/May to avoid study time and the exam period, this meant they were held in late-May and early June. It is possible that fatigue and the onset of summer jobs made it more difficult for Scholars to engage with the research.

Conducting the research

All focus groups lasted approximately 75-90 minutes and were arranged at times convenient for participants; some were held in the evening, while others were held during the day. All Scholars who took part were given a £25 Love-2-Shop voucher as a gift for giving up their time. With the consent of participants, all focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Research materials

The topic guides were developed in consultation with the Scholar Research Consultants and The Robertson Trust. The Scholar topic guide covered a range of themes, including:

- Experiences of hearing about and applying for the Robertson Scholarship
- Exploring the different types of support accessed through the Robertson Scholarship, experiences of these types of support and how they might be improved
- Impact of the Robertson Scholarship had on Scholars.

The university focus group also explored widening participation and scholarship staff's perceptions as to awareness and knowledge of the Scholarship and the Journey to Success Programmes, and whether and how the scholarships have impacted on retention, university attainment and graduate outcomes. The school teacher interview explored awareness and understanding of the programme and whether and how school staff feel the existence of the Scholarship has impacted on their pupils' decisions to apply to university. We also explored what, if anything, The Robertson Trust could do to increase awareness of the Scholarship among staff and pupils.

2.2.4. Focus groups with university and school staff

To understand how the Robertson Scholarship and its associated Journey to Success programme are perceived externally, we sought to undertake two focus groups: 1) with staff in universities and 2) with school teachers to explore their knowledge and awareness of the programme, their views of the impact the Scholarship has on the young people they work with and their thoughts on how the Scholarship and the Journey to Success programme could be improved in the future.

Sampling and recruitment

We sought to recruit six to eight members of staff each for the university and school focus groups.

To recruit university staff, ScotCen emailed heads of widening participation in Scottish universities inviting a representative to take part in a focus group. The invitation included an information sheet which detailed the purpose of the research and what participation would involve. We sought to include staff from ancient, pre-92 and post-92 universities to ensure a breadth of institutions with differing proportions of students from under-represented backgrounds.

To recruit school teachers, The Robertson Trust sent an invitation by email to existing school contacts across Scotland inviting them to participate in a focus group. Those interested in participating in a focus group were asked to contact ScotCen directly to register their interest.

University and school staff participants

Eight members of staff from seven universities took part in a focus group. Staff worked in a range of roles, which included the provision of both pre-entry and post-entry support for prospective and current students. Representatives from both widening participation/access and Scholarships teams took part. Staff from both 'ancient' and more modern universities took part.

In terms of the school focus group, response was much lower than anticipated. Two teachers responded to requests to participate in a focus group, one of whom went on to be interviewed individually. As with the Scholar focus groups, the timing of the focus groups is believed to have been problematic, with Scottish schools moving to new timetables in June which meant teachers had little time to become involved.

2.3 Analysis

The transcribed focus group and interview data were managed and analysed using qualitative analysis software NVivo. Analysis involved several stages. A draft analytical framework was drawn up by the research team. The analytical framework was then set up in NVivo and piloted with a few transcripts and any amendments to the framework made. Each transcript was coded, so that all the data on a particular theme could be viewed together. Emergent patterns and explanations for individuals and categories of respondent holding particular views were explored and tested.

Scholar Research consultants supported the analysis of the focus group data. In the third workshop, ScotCen researchers presented the emerging findings from preliminary analysis to them in order to gather their views and ensure that issues had not been missed.

2.4 Strengths and limitations of the research

This research has several strengths and limitations.

2.4.1. Strengths

The study's qualitative methodology enabled the collection of rich, in-depth data with Scholars and university staff. The data provide insights into a wide range of views and experiences of the Robertson Scholarship which can aid The Robertson Trust in future developments of the Scholarship. The qualitative research is combined with a policy and bursary review which sets the context for this research.

A strength of this research was the involvement of Scholar Research Consultants. Their involvement aided the design of topic guides to ensure the research asked the right questions and explored all relevant themes. The Scholar Research Consultants also reviewed the emerging findings and provided feedback on any gaps in the research. This was an important quality check on the findings.

2.4.2. Limitations

The research came at a challenging time of year for both Scholars and teachers, with Scholars sitting exams and teachers finishing up the academic year. Despite significant effort to recruit Scholars and teachers, the research team struggled to recruit the number of participants we hoped to take part in the research.

This research study focused solely on qualitative methods. A limitation of qualitative methods is that it is not representative of a wider population. Therefore, the prevalence of views and experiences which a quantitative survey would provide cannot be determined and some perspectives may be missing from this research.

3. Accessing the Robertson Scholarship

3.1 Awareness of the Robertson Scholarship

There are a range of ways via which prospective students can access the scholarship. These include through teacher nomination, university diversion and recommendation or direct contact with the Trust.

Participating Scholars had heard about the Robertson Scholarship in a range of ways. Some were told about the Scholarship through their school or university, while others found out about the Scholarship through their own online research while looking for financial support to attend university. A wide range of people informed participants about the Robertson Scholarship, including:

- High school staff, for example, a pastoral care teacher, head of year or deputy head teacher. They were informed either individually or as part of a larger group of students within their school.
- Admissions or widening access staff at universities and colleges.
- Robertson Scholarship alumni.
- Support workers.

3.1.1. Accessing the Scholarship via schools

A common view amongst the Scholars who participated in the research was that the Robertson Scholarship was not widely known about among young people or school staff. Scholars shared that they knew other people at their school who may have been eligible for the Scholarship but were not told about it. There were Scholars who were aware that applicants had to be nominated by their school to apply for the Robertson Scholarship. Participants thought this approach was limiting because it not only relied on staff's knowledge and awareness of the Robertson Scholarship, but also relied on school staff knowing which pupils would be eligible. Participants reported feeling fortunate that they were told about the Robertson Scholarship but concerned that other eligible young people may have missed out on the opportunity.

“I'm quite thankful that I got at least told about it in a sense. I was just lucky. [...] I think it's quite a shame, in a sense, that it's not as well-recognised within schools. It's not as widely told to other people to see if they are eligible. So, I think that's something that's missing within schools and that could be improved, in a sense, to allow other people to know about it. I know for a fact that there are loads of other students in my year group that would've applied that were also eligible, but probably missed out that opportunity.”
(Robertson Scholar)

“It does seem like a secret underground organisation, which loads of people should be able to apply for, know what they have, and know that they have options. I imagine that

some people don't know about it, and they don't go to university because they don't know about it. That makes a huge difference in somebody's life.” (Robertson Scholar)

Only one teacher participated in the research, therefore it is unclear as to whether there are variations in how schools advertise the Scholarship. The teacher said that instead of approaching pupils who they felt may be eligible for the Scholarship, their school informed all of its pupils about the Scholarship and encouraged pupils to put themselves forward to their teacher if they believe they are eligible. The teacher said they took this approach as some young people did not wish to be identified as one of the groups which are eligible for the programme.

“I suppose we could target individual kids, but I feel that it's fairer to open it to all of them and then look at the criteria because the criteria is quite clear. So it might mean that they don't fit the criteria if they come to us.” (Teacher)

Scholars who found out about the Scholarship through their high school, stated that they were informed of the Robertson Scholarship in sixth year. Some participants felt that waiting until sixth year to advertise the Scholarship excluded students who may have left school at fourth or fifth year for various reasons, but were academically gifted.

“We heard about Robertson Trust through school, the tail-end of school, by one or two teachers. I'm just wondering for those students who are academically-bright and who have, for whatever reason, disengaged with the school system, due to a chaotic home life or something like that, circumstances, how are The Robertson Trust making sure that there's an awareness there that they exist, and that individual could benefit from the support that they provide? It does seem a bit like a hidden gem at the minute, and it just, it would be good to know that, the need is obviously there, like I've said, but that The Robertson Trust are there as well.” (Robertson Scholar)

A teacher interviewed as part of the evaluation echoed the views of Scholars, suggesting that teachers may not be aware of the Scholarship. The teacher said they had ‘happened upon The Robertson Trust by accident’ when a pupil asked to be referred. The teacher expressed concern that there may be some pupils who miss out as a result of their school/teacher not having heard of the Scholarship or not realising that specific pupils may be eligible.

3.1.2. Accessing the Scholarship via universities

There were Scholars who only became aware of the Robertson Scholarship through their university. Care experienced Scholars believed that they were informed about the Robertson Scholarship by the university because they had stated they were care experienced in their UCAS application. Others were directed to the Robertson Scholarship through their university either because they had applied for another scholarship offered through the university or because the university identified them as likely being eligible for the Robertson Scholarship. University staff reiterated that they would direct applicants who may be eligible for the Scholarship towards The Robertson Trust.

“She was a widening access person at [name of university] [...] She sent an email saying, 'There's this scholarship you can apply for'. I went down to the open day and I think because I had put, 'I'm care experienced' in my application, I can't remember, on I think it was UCAS, that's how I got the email. That's the only reason why I found out about it.” (Robertson Scholar)

“If I'm supporting a care experienced or estranged student who is going to have accommodation costs and basically have no other support other than their SAAS funding, at the early stage I would very often contact The Robertson Trust and then help link that student in with a direct application often supported by their school. That's one way of doing it. [...] And there are a certain number of scholarships that we will have that we can push them towards The Robertson Trust fund, usually, like I said it would be care experienced or estranged students who are going to have those accommodation costs.” (University staff)

3.2 Understanding of the Robertson Scholarship

3.2.1. Eligibility criteria

While university staff had a good understanding of who was eligible for the Robertson Scholarship, and what support the Scholarship offered, Scholars' understanding of the Scholarship varied.

There were Scholars who were unaware of the full range of eligibility criteria for the Robertson Scholarship; they only knew that they were eligible because of their own experiences (e.g. care experienced, disabled, low income). Other Scholars were aware that the Robertson Scholarship was available to people aged 16-25 “that suffer certain hardships”. Care experienced and estranged Scholars suggested that the age criteria may exclude students from some backgrounds who often enter university at a later age. Scholars suggested this could also impact on their ability to access the bursary extension for post-graduate studies.

“The age that they have - they offer support from 18 to 25. Why is it 25? Is that the age that a neurotypical person, when they stop being a young adult? People with ADHD, people with any adverse life experiences, it's probably delayed. It's 28, it's maybe possibly 30 before their brain is fully developed. In my head it's like, why don't you just, for a specific group you could say for care experienced people it could be a range up from 18 to 30? If you think about it, I wasn't 18 coming out the door because of what I experienced in life. I wasn't coming into uni straight out of - even when I think about it, I wouldn't have been able to cope as well. I needed that time to find my inner peace, a little bit more of a space to grow.” (Robertson Scholar)

University staff had a good understanding of who was eligible for the Robertson Scholarship and were very positive about the breadth of The Robertson Trust's eligibility criteria, noting how well it ties in with universities' own widening access criteria.

“The Robertson Trust are very quick to update their eligibility criteria even with discussions in the sector around maybe access and WP criteria, The Robertson Trust tend to be throughout the heart of that and I know their criteria changes, it’s essentially getting wider each year. So again, they’re very acutely aware of actually the young people they’re working with and actually tapping into that as a source of information and developing their programmes.” (University staff)

University staff were also of the view that The Robertson Trust criteria are actually wider than universities’ own widening participation eligibility criteria. The participant quoted above went on to suggest this means there may be some gaps in terms of demographic groups which The Robertson Trust supports but which may be missed by the universities, placing an emphasis on universities to be more proactive.

“I think The Robertson Trust have a much wider criteria now which includes, I think children and young people from Gypsy Traveller Roma families now. I think that’s something that has come on quite recently. Not every university has their pledge in that area, so there could potentially be gaps where we could support them and it might be the case that we just need the university to be more proactive in outlining all the support to all the scholars at the induction stage.” (University staff)

3.2.2. Understanding the range of support offered

All Scholars who participated in the research were aware that the Robertson Scholarship included a bursary when they applied; however, few knew about, or had limited knowledge of, the additional support offered by the Scholarship. Some Scholars shared that they did not realise the level of support and opportunities the Scholarship could provide. Only when they received the Scholarship did participants recognise that a programme of support was available. Other Scholars said that they only found out about additional support available through the Scholarship when they had reached crisis point. Scholars who were informed about the Robertson Scholarship by former Scholars were most knowledgeable about the additional support offered through the Scholarship.

“It’s kind of a shame that it’s not sold more to you before applying. You are told that it will benefit you financially, but you don’t really find out about the list of other benefits that come along with that, and opportunities and experiences that really are once in a lifetime, especially for those struggling financially.” (Robertson Scholar)

The primary reason Scholars applied for the Robertson Scholarship was for the bursary. They were concerned about the financial burden of going to university and they thought the bursary could help alleviate the financial strain. While the bursary alone did not cover all Scholars’ costs, the value of the Robertson Scholarship bursary was higher than a lot of other funding Scholars were aware of.

“It was the financial aid that really appealed to me, because I was like, this is incredible, I can actually financially viably be able to go to university. Still have to work three jobs alongside it, but this could work if I was able to get it, so it meant a huge deal to me. I’ve applied to a lot of jobs and lots of different funding things throughout

my life, but I have to say this was one of the ones that meant the most to me if I got it, because of how significant it is.” (Robertson Scholar)

While the teacher and university staff participants noted the importance of both the funding and the additional elements of the Scholarship programme, they were unaware of the detail of the various elements making up the Scholarship. Staff generally did not have a high level of understanding as to what the Scholarship entailed, other than the bursary. What university staff knew of the support provided by the Scholarship tended to come from the Scholars themselves rather than having been communicated via the Trust. While they did not know the full extent of support on offer via the Scholarship, the teacher and university staff knew that it was valued by Scholars.

“I heard kind of snippets from students around like the Leadership Program and the mentoring but I wouldn’t be able to tell you what the full programme is kind of each stage programme, or I wouldn’t be able to go into that level of detail. But what I have heard is from students who’ve come back and worked at the university and they’ve said it was amazing and that there was like a Graduate Network, like an Alumni Network as well that’s fantastic. Everyone speaks in really glowing terms but I wouldn’t be able to say week to week or month to month what actually the program entails. All that I know is that it’s really well received by the students and makes a difference.” (University staff)

“I found out about it through supporting students, they just tell me, ‘aye, The Robertson Trust did this for me and they did that for me’, and I’m like, it’s jaw dropping some of it, it’s incredible, internships. Like I said, if somebody needs kind of counselling support and the university is just not set up to provide them they can go to The Robertson Trust to provide private support, link them in with folk, its things like that, that really dovetails I suppose with what the university is doing. I think The Robertson Trust understands what the barriers are for students or where there’s maybe additional support is required. They seem to me to be good at plugging those gaps.” (University staff)

One member of university staff said that when discussing the Scholarship with prospective students they emphasise that it is not just about the financial element, the Scholarship offers more than funding.

“I feel that I need to let folk know that, that there is the Outward Bound stuff and there are all the other opportunities that come with it, like the mentoring they’re doing, again I found about them through working with students, kind of internships and maybe linking folk in with like private counselling and stuff like that, if the university is not set up to do that. I found out about that through the Student Support. It’s all wonderful but yeah, it’s not just a scholarship where they’re getting money; there is a certain expectation that they participate in this Journey to Success Programme. I think it’s key that we let students know that from the outset so that they can make informed decisions.” (University staff)

3.3 Scholarship application process

Overall, participants said they thought the Robertson Scholarship application form was straightforward to complete. For some, this was because they had received support from school staff, scholar alumni or support workers to complete or review the application. Others completed the application on their own and found it similar to UCAS or job applications, and as a result they did not have to start from scratch. Despite knowing they were eligible for the Robertson Scholarship because of their personal circumstances, one participant did not feel they needed to share these experiences in detail in the application form.

“I knew it was targeting people that had certain experiences before attending uni, but I didn't feel pressured to pour my heart out to them or give them every single detail - which I appreciated.” (Robertson Scholar)

“In terms of going through the application process, yes, it was fairly straightforward. It was quite similar to some of the other university application processes we did. So, really just you went on from that and expanded upon some of the things that I had written, but yes, it was fairly - it wasn't too complex in terms of what we had to do.” (Robertson Scholar)

Participating Scholars provided some constructive criticism of the application form. The open-ended nature of the questions was perceived to be open to interpretation. While some Scholars said they liked having the freedom to interpret questions, others found it daunting because they were not confident that they were answering the questions correctly. Scholars also found it challenging that the questions in the application form covered a lot of the same information they put in their personal statement, and it was unclear to them if they could use this same text in the application form. Finally, there were Scholars who found the application time consuming to complete, however, they thought it was worth it for the benefit they received from the Scholarship.

“Something that stood out for me was how detailed it was. There were quite a lot of questions that encouraged you to go into a lot of depth, but they were quite, you could interpret them as you wished. I think one of them was describe a time where you've shown resilience or leadership or something, and you could choose the scenario and make it as personal as you wanted to, as you were comfortable with. So there was freedom in the application form. I enjoyed filling it out, even though it was time-consuming, but we knew that it was going to benefit you in the long run if you were successful especially.” (Robertson Scholar)

The amount of support, or awareness of support, available to Scholars to complete the Scholarship application form varied. There were Scholars who were offered support from school staff, support workers or family while others were not offered any from their school and were concerned their family members would not be able to advise, given they had not attended university. Scholars reported inconsistent access to support. There were participants who did not think support would have been available to them via their school and they did not know that The Robertson Trust could provide application support. Regardless of whether

participants needed support to complete their application, they all thought it was important that support was available for anyone who needed it.

“I didn't feel like I needed too much support, to be honest, but they did make it very clear that I could ask for support if I needed to ask for support. Also, I think it's important to say my school didn't help me out too much, but they were the person who actually referred me to this agency that obviously recommended The Robertson Trust.”
(Robertson Scholar)

The teacher who was interviewed as part of the research also said the application process was relatively straightforward. However, they noted that the application has now moved online and there had not been an option to save the application and return to it later. The teacher added that they did not hear whether their pupils' applications were successful and that it would be beneficial for the school to know the outcome of their pupils' applications. They felt that this 'good news story' could help the school promote the Scholarship to prospective students. The Trust are currently in the process of adding in a question to next year's application asking applicants if they agree to information about the outcome of their application being shared with their nominator.

A participant in the university staff focus group questioned whether the school-based application form still required three referees, suggesting that this can be an additional barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The request for additional references was removed when the application form was reviewed in 2021.

University staff identified issues around the timing of the application process, which participants variously described as 'squeezed', 'time pressured' and 'tight'. This meant that some universities were providing back-up funding to students due to timetabling issues around the time when applications have to be submitted to The Trust.

3.4 Improving access to the Robertson Scholarship

Participants identified a number of ways in which The Robertson Trust could improve the awareness, understanding and access to the Robertson Scholarship.

3.4.1. Increasing awareness and understanding of the Scholarship

To increase awareness of the Robertson Scholarship, Scholars would like to see it better promoted in schools, colleges, universities, online and via social media. Scholars said it was important that the Scholarship was promoted in a range of ways to ensure that those eligible for the Scholarship heard about it. For example, the Scholarship should be promoted in schools to all fourth, fifth and sixth years to ensure young people could make informed choices about whether or not to apply to university. Assemblies were one suggested route to promote the Scholarship. Promoting the Scholarship online, on social media and at colleges was also suggested to be inclusive for young people who were home schooled or left school at the end of fourth or fifth year. Participants said it was important that young people found out

about the Robertson Scholarship as soon as possible as it could influence their decisions on whether they apply to go to university at all. The teacher wondered if it might be possible for pupils who believe themselves to be eligible to contact the Trust and ask them to notify their school.

“I feel like if a lot of pupils maybe knew about it before they even applied for university, it might incentivise more people to apply for university because they may just think the financial hardships and everything else that comes with it is outwith reach. Whereas say if they spoke at assemblies or got current scholars to go to schools and speak at assemblies and show their own experience, it may incentivise more people to go to university and make use of, maybe not even The Robertson Trust, but it may make people realise that there's other things out there that they can apply for that can aid them.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I think that might be helpful that perhaps if a pupil knows about it that they can send a request that then goes to the school. I don't know the easy way of doing it, but if a teacher doesn't know about The Robertson Trust, the request has to come from the school, but if they meet the criteria as this person did, are they being disadvantaged because maybe a school didn't know about it because of perhaps the area they work?” (Teacher)

University staff suggested better promotion of the Scholarship and the ‘success stories’ of those who have passed through the Scholarship could help counteract this, for example via a newsletter or information about the programmes or activities.

“I don't think you get to hear about the success stories of it much either as a university. I know The Robertson Trust fund it but we don't hear anything much about how successful they are and all the good things that they do.” (University staff)

Participants thought it was important that anyone applying for the Robertson Scholarship understood both the range of support the Robertson Scholarship can offer them, and the conditions of accepting the Scholarship.

While the research participants felt the balance of mandatory activities was about right for the benefit they received from the Scholarship, they knew of other Scholars where this wasn't the case. Participants shared examples of other Robertson Scholars who had found it difficult to participate in mandatory activities in addition to their studies and paid work. Clear information about the Robertson Scholarship would enable people to make an informed decision about whether or not to apply.

“I think just giving out more information as to what the Trust is so that people are more aware of what they're getting themselves into - especially since some of the people that applied with me from my school aren't in university anymore or with the Trust. It's just because of the amount of commitment it required, so obviously I don't mind it, but I know some people, that can be pretty time-consuming for them. So, I think they need to be more aware of that beforehand.” (Robertson Scholar)

Some university staff also raised concerns about how the level of commitment expected of Scholars is perceived by, and communicated to, prospective students. They recalled Robertson Trust applicants who had turned down their Scholarship offer because of concerns about these expectations. The Outward Bound Trust residential was described as a ‘barrier’ and a ‘turn off’ for some care experienced students in particular, who were already worried about starting university and were then expected to participate in the Outward Bound residential.

“I’ve had a few [students who turn down the Scholarship], they don’t want to...I mean, they’re starting university, never mind going away and actually being with strangers that they don’t know for a week. So I think that’s a big barrier, even though they come back and it’s a positive thing for the ones that do go. I think in the onset just actually that being like a major part of the scholarship that they need to do.” (University staff)

Scholars suggested The Robertson Trust, current and former Robertson Scholars should have an active role in promoting the Scholarship. This could include visiting schools, colleges and universities to give presentations and providing both young people and institutions with promotional materials on the Scholarship. Where possible, it was suggested that presentations and promotional materials should be given directly to young people so they do not need to rely on being told by institutional staff. Where this is not possible The Robertson Trust should be supporting school, college and university staff to share information about the Scholarship to ensure it reaches all young people who are eligible for it. Presentations and promotional materials should provide clear information on:

- Who is eligible for the Robertson Scholarship
- The range of support the Robertson Scholarship offers
- The range of opportunities offered by the Robertson Scholarship
- What Scholars are required to do as a Robertson Scholar (e.g. mandatory training sessions, 6 monthly reports).

3.4.2. Supporting scholars to apply for the Robertson Scholarship

Scholars highlighted ways in which young people could be better supported to apply for the Robertson Scholarship.

Participants thought it was important that application support was promoted and offered to all applicants. Participants thought this support should be offered by The Robertson Trust to make sure everyone has access to it. One participant suggested that current or former Robertson Scholars could be recruited to support new applicants. Support could include reviewing CVs or application forms.

“I think the application is fair, but I think there should be someone, like if they employ someone to kind of help people who maybe have dyslexia or additional support needs who don’t have anybody to help them. Not all schools are supportive, if you get what I

mean, with applying. My pastoral care teacher was just really bad with me by the end of school. I don't know what happened, she just kind of didn't help me with UCAS or anything, and I had to rely on my [support] worker to help me, to be that support, to advocate for me, to help me get that support through school. I think the application process is fair and it's good, but there should be additional help for people who don't have the support to help them.” (Robertson Scholar)

“If there was a possibility for other Scholars to review it, like the people who have already went through the system - like us, basically - who have already seen it and say, 'Oh, this is what is not working, this is what's working.' I think that it's really important to have Scholars also involved in it and see what could be improved.” (Robertson Scholar)

Providing further guidance or examples of the sort of information each question in the application is looking for, was another suggested improvement. In particular, participants would like clarification as to whether it is okay to use the same examples in the application form and the personal statement. Participants felt there was quite a lot of crossover.

“If I was gonnae change it from their perspective I'd probably just clarify, depending on what they're wanting, either saying that, 'It's okay if you repeat examples.' Just to clarify for instance if it's okay that there will be some changes, or if that's not what they're wanting, then say, 'Specifically clarify, use different examples that aren't in your personal statement,' depending what they're hoping to seek.” (Robertson Scholar)

Some participants said they had not decided which university or course to do by the time they had to submit their application. They would like there to be greater flexibility to change their university or course after submitting their application.

“I think for me personally, I got told to apply for it before I'd actually picked what university I was going to, so I feel like it shouldn't just stop once it's been sent away. If I changed my uni plan, for example, I should be able to go back to that [...] I feel like it should be easier to update that, like if I want to go to college instead of uni, for example.” (Robertson Scholar)

Finally, as teachers may be supporting multiple pupils' nominations, and given the time pressures school staff are under, the participating teacher suggested it would be helpful to be able to save the application rather than having to do it in one go. The teacher also suggested it could be helpful to have 'a wee video' for prospective applicants outlining how best to put an application together.

4. Support offered by the Robertson Scholarship

Overall, the Robertson Scholarship and the Journey to Success programme were very well received and highly valued, both by current and former Scholars, and by school and university staff. The breadth of under-represented groups covered by the Scholarship was welcomed. Scholars, especially those who were graduates, spoke of the pride they felt in being awarded a Scholarship and felt a strong sense of being part of a ‘family’ and a community through the Scholarship.

“I think it's a real privilege to be involved with The Robertson Trust, regardless of being from a disadvantaged background. I think you should be proud of where you're from. I think you've got to know where you've come from in order to know where you're going. The Robertson Trust, they'll steer you in the right direction and give you a boost when you need it in many different forms. So yes, really, I'm very proud, yes.” (Robertson Scholar)

In the sections below, the different elements of the Scholarship are outlined: the financial support; social support; mental health support; and support for progression. Each of these is explored in turn, to consider the ways in which these elements impacted on Scholars' university experiences, the elements which were felt to be working well, and those which participants suggested could be improved for future Scholars.

4.1 Financial support

This section explores Scholars' views and experiences of the bursary. Scholars can receive up to £4,250 per annum, depending on their living situation (those who live at home during university receive £3,000 per annum). Some Scholars receive half their bursary from The Robertson Trust, with the other half match-funded by their university. As outlined in Section 3.1 it was this aspect of the Scholarship which participants were most aware of initially. This was also the part of the Scholarship which was said to have had the greatest impact. This section explores the ways in which the bursary has impacted Scholars, as well as discussing their perceptions of the various elements of the bursary before considering their suggestions as to how the bursary might be improved for future Scholars.

4.1.1. Impact of the bursary

The bursary was welcomed by all participating Scholars. It was used in a variety of ways to reduce the costs associated with being a student. In some cases, the bursary allowed Scholars to avoid taking out a student loan. Others used it to pay their rent; to reduce the number of hours of paid work they undertook; to pay for travel between home and university; to buy books; to pay household bills; to buy equipment; pay for counselling and medicine; or to save up to move out of the family home. By reducing their costs, the bursary was said to provide ‘a wee safety net’ which helped to reduce the worries and ‘stress’ associated with students' finances.

“For me personally, it's just been having that safety net. I've told myself I'm not going to take out a loan. I forbid myself to take out a loan so I don't need to pay it back later. So, having that extra bursary as well as my SAAS bursary, it's like a lot more reassurance. I don't need to turn to a loan, for example, I don't need to do this. It's a lot less pressure on me to do all these things to afford my university year.” (Robertson Scholar)

“The first year was really helpful because I was just able to enjoy my first year. I worked for a wee while at [name of workplace], but I decided that I didn't need to work there, because it was night shift and I was like, I'm not doing night shift anymore. It really helped with just staying afloat. I didn't have to worry about anything, I could just go through uni and money wasn't a big focus.” (Robertson Scholar)

Worrying less about their finances had a range of additional benefits for Scholars. Some pointed to the affluence and privilege backgrounds of some of their university peers, contrasting this with their own limited finances, noting that the bursary helped to ‘level the playing field’. Scholars from care experienced and estranged backgrounds in particular, but also those from low income households, emphasised how important the bursary was to them in terms of being able to make the most of, and participate fully in, their university activities and experiences. They noted how other students were able to draw upon the financial support of their families while they were not.

“At university you meet people who are from quite wealthy backgrounds. In order to support or equalise the playing field in doing lots of things, if it wasn't for the presence of the bursary then there'd be a lot more emphasis on pursuing a part-time job, which is what I would have to do and to build skills and things, but also puts lots of stress in terms of you're spending time that you could otherwise spend - not even studying but just enjoying yourself, relaxing, whatever and if you get a bursary then there's a lot more pressure and you might not be able to pursue the same activities as people who have better financial support.” (Robertson Scholar)

Being able to work fewer hours in paid employment meant that Scholars had more time to focus on their studies, which further helped to level the playing field for those who had experienced challenges before reaching university. Scholars said that as a result of the bursary they believed they had done better at university than they might have if they had not been financially supported.

“I probably wouldn't be as successful at university in passing and things, because I would too busy worrying about money, trying to get a job [...] Whereas The Robertson Trust helped lift that kind of barrier, so I just need to worry about uni. (Robertson Scholar)

Having funding to buy books, equipment and pay for travel all helped Scholars focus more on their studies and participate in activities that they would not have had time to do if they had to undertake more hours in paid work. These included activities that helped Scholars develop their CV such as volunteering, internships or being an Ambassador.

“For me personally, it saved me from having to juggle having a part-time job and uni. I'm more able to focus on just the uni aspect, so for example I've used the bursary money to help me buy textbooks for uni, which are so expensive. Just more like academic stuff it's helped me with, like things that I need to study and everything, making study life more easy. Especially at the time when it was online, I was able to even purchase something to put my laptop on, to be able to sit well and just kind of type away and things like that. It's helped me in that aspect because I know for a fact that if I was to have work and uni, I wouldn't be able to work well academically, because I'd be focusing more on my work and being able to always go there. Transport and everything takes ages to get to places, so that all has saved time for me to just focus more on studying.” (Robertson Scholar)

Having more time to engage with their studies and worrying less about money was said to have positively impacted Scholars' mental health.

“What I would say is that The Robertson Trust has really impacted my mental health while at university in such a positive way. It allowed me to be in the position where I didn't have to work alongside my degree, which I suppose for me was really important, especially during COVID times and everything.” (Robertson Scholar)

As a result of being able to reduce their hours in paid work, Scholars also said they had more time, and more money, to be able to socialise with their peers. Scholars spoke of being able to make closer links with their friends as a result of the bursary and not having to work so many hours during term-time.

“Being able to have that freedom to have that time to go and socialise, and to be able to afford to socialise, because the events are really expensive as well; being able to do that, I think my life would honestly be a very stark difference to what it is now without it.” (Robertson Scholar)

As part of the focus groups, Scholars were asked what impact, if any, the Robertson Scholarship had on their decision to go to university and where to study. Participants gave a range of responses. Scholars were concerned about the cost of going to university and without the financial support offered by the Scholarship bursary there were participants who said they would not have been able to go to university. Some said they may have tried to find other bursaries or scholarships but they were unsure how to go about finding and applying for these.

“If I think about it, the funding was such a big thing because I don't come from an affluent family. [...] a lot of my education has been about surviving and hasn't been about thriving. That was a big sort of pull for going to [name of university]. It opened up my world a little bit.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I didn't know back then either - just about scholarships and what's out there. So, I would've probably just kind of let it be, I suppose. Maybe I'd look into what the university has to offer, but honestly I have still a very limited knowledge of what's out there and what other programmes there are.” (Robertson Scholar)

For some participants, the Scholarship influenced their choice of university. Scholars shared that the Scholarship enabled them to choose a wider variety of universities to apply to because receiving the Scholarship bursary made it possible for them to move to study, or study in a more expensive city. Others chose their university because it advertised the Robertson Scholarship and the match funding they would provide.

“I feel like it strengthened my certainty of going [to university]. I knew I was going to go, I'd got into the schools that I had applied for, but it helped me pick a larger variety of [universities]. I could pick the best [university] for me without having to worry about finances, to a point.” (Robertson Scholar)

“For me it definitely did, because actually I needed a lot of financial support. [Location] is just so expensive and there's just so many different things, even the books and everything else. The Robertson Trust bursary was just so important, and it also helped I think guaranteeing me to get extra financial support from [name of university]. They have this sort of partnership agreement where they match [funding]. [...] it's just so, so helpful. I think for me at that time I just wouldn't have had the sort of flexibility to be able to apply for a job or to be able to have that sort of security to do what I want to do if it wasn't for this, so it really influenced my decisions. [...] it made all the difference in the world whether or not I felt secure coming.” (Robertson Scholar)

There were participants who said the Robertson Scholarship had no impact on their decision of whether to attend university or which university to go to. Participants said if they had not received the Robertson Scholarship, they would have applied for other Scholarships or would have worked more hours to enable them to financially support themselves at university.

While receiving the Scholarship did not influence every Scholar's decision to attend university, it did influence participants' experiences at university. Scholars noted that they would have had a different experience of university – one which involved having to work more, or attending a local university. Participating Scholars included those who lived with their parents and commuted to university, and those who had moved away to study. For those who had moved away, the bursary was said to have had a significant impact on their choice of university, making it possible for them to move away and pay for accommodation.

“I think the other thing that was also really important was not only was the bursary useful, but also the fact that when you went to a further distance, within a certain limit, you would get more funding. Obviously, the further the distance, the more the cost when it came to travel, which then actually opened up the playing field of what other universities you could go to. Which I think is something that is really valuable, I think, because I think for lots of people if they don't have that financial backing, they say I can only go local, I can only go to my local college or university. Having that chance to say, you know what? Let's take the risk and go further out, without that risk, it's a massive benefit.” (Robertson Scholar)

This was something which was also highlighted by the participating teacher and university staff. The teacher worked in a school where the majority of pupils, if they applied to university,

applied to a local institution to remain close to home. As a result, the bursary was said to help prospective students feel that moving away from home could be possible.

“It's the affordability of the halls, the affordability of living and especially the climate that we're in at the moment. I think it takes a bit of pressure off of... I think [pupils] felt guilty about applying for going away and the impact it would have on their families. I did stress that to one pupil. She was like, 'I can't afford it.' I'm like, 'You can never afford it. Technically if we all look at university we can never afford it. It's something that you just do and a lot of people do not have this and it's about the student loans etc.' But I think [the Scholarship] would just give them a bit of peace of mind for taking a bit of pressure off families at the moment.” (Teacher)

This view was also shared by university staff, who emphasised its impact especially on estranged and some care experienced students who are unable to rely on family support to assist with the costs of accommodation.

“Definitely, definitely the size of the awards is absolutely key for...I think particularly estranged students or care experienced students who are no longer, they're not care leavers. Basically, young people having to afford accommodation, it's one of the biggest barriers that they would face and The Robertson Trust genuinely makes going to university a practical possibility for folk. So that's life changing.” (University staff)

Scholars spoke of the financial independence and ‘freedom’ they gained from the bursary. This was the same both for those who had moved away to university and for those who lived with their parents.

“I think a big benefit of that as well is it really gave me a sense of financial independence and I never ever felt like I had to burden my family. I couldn't have been able to burden them because they didn't have finances to give me to, and I know a lot of people that got money off their parents and things to move out or got money to, like every month, to just live life. I know my mum and dad could never have done that.” (Robertson Scholar)

Scholars also noted the skills they had gained as a result of budgeting their bursary and SAAS support. The benefits of The Robertson Trust's one-year postgraduate bursary extension awarded to some Scholars who progress onto postgraduate study were also highlighted as something which helped to make postgraduate study possible. The Trust has a limited fund for 30 places each year for postgraduate funding that covers a bursary extension. This is advertised to 3rd years.

4.1.2. Perceptions of the Scholarship bursary

Adequacy of financial support

Whilst the Scholarship bursary support was welcomed and helped reduce the financial challenges faced by students, it should be emphasised that it did not remove these

challenges for Scholars, and some were still facing considerable financial difficulties. Overall, the Scholars who participated in the research continued to undertake paid work; some were working multiple jobs and working many hours per week – far more in some cases than the 12-16 hours per week recommended by universities. Scholars spoke of the ‘struggle’ of having to manage their spending very carefully. This was particularly difficult for those who lived in rented accommodation. Scholars referred to the rising cost of living in Scottish university towns and cities, particularly in terms of the cost of rental accommodation, the competition for flats and the difficulty of finding accommodation in some cities. They also highlighted the cost of living crisis and the impact this had on their ability to manage their finances. Scholars discussed the cost of living uplift which had been applied to the bursary.

“I used that little bit, I think it was like £60² we got additionally for the cost of living crisis; I used that to buy a heated blanket because I was having issues where I was living where it was freezing and the radiators were so expensive, the heating was expensive to put on.” (Robertson Scholar)

Scholars expressed mixed views with regards to the different levels of bursary awarded depending on their living arrangements; those living away from home received £4,250 while those living with their parents received a smaller bursary of £3,000. Scholars who had moved away to go to university welcomed this split, highlighting the higher costs associated with renting. On the other hand, others who lived with their parents noted their families’ financial hardships and Scholars’ need to help out financially with contributions towards rent, food and utilities.

“I don't know if they take into consideration that people at home, if we are from a background of financial hardship, that we do need to pay rent and we do need to contribute. We do need to pay groceries, we do need to help out with our siblings in a certain way. I do think if everyone had the same, it would be fairer. If I was living at home, I would have to pay rent, gas, electricity, Wi-Fi, food, and probably help with stuff towards my siblings. I'd be using the money for that as well, and I know that's not what it's for, but if your mum is single, or your dad or whoever, and they don't have any money and you have money sitting there and a child needs something, you're obviously going to give it to them.” (Robertson Scholar)

Monitoring how the bursary is used

Scholars said they appreciated the lack of monitoring and the flexibility afforded to Scholars in terms of how the bursary is used. Scholars said this flexibility enabled them to use the bursary to best meet their needs rather than be restricted. While Scholars used their bursary funding in different ways, all of the participating Scholars put their funding towards supporting their studies in some way.

“One of the things about The Robertson Trust; they give free reign over the bursary to students. [...] I think some students might use it to support sports that they couldn't

² The amount provided by The Robertson Trust was actually £250.

otherwise get, or equipment or things they need for their studies whether it's textbooks or just general things. But in all those things the similarity is that it's reducing the burden of an opportunity they might not have otherwise had. If you introduce something that's saying you have to spend it on this form of education, that would restrict a lot of the benefits that The Robertson Trust would otherwise give you.”
(Robertson Scholar)

Timing of instalments

Scholars expressed mixed views about the timing of their bursary instalments. The Scholarship bursary is currently paid in two instalments at different times to the SAAS bursary. Some liked the way the instalments were spread out; however, Scholars who were care experienced and/or estranged noted that receiving the bursary in this way made it difficult for them to manage their finances.

Scholars from a range of different backgrounds, noted the challenge of managing their finances over the summer, with no income from either The Robertson Trust or SAAS during this time. Those who undertook an internship noted how helpful the financial support associated with this had been. Others spoke of having to find full-time work to see them through the holidays and the exhaustion associated with having to work so many hours during the holidays.

“I also found that summer was the hardest. For instance, now that I've finished my fourth year, I can apply for Universal Credit, which is great. In third year, you can't. There's nothing you can apply for [...] so it was such a stressful time.” (Robertson Scholar)

Matched funding

Participating Scholars were funded both solely by The Robertson Trust and through match funding agreements whereby Scholars received half their bursary from The Robertson Trust and the other half from their institution. Although match funded Scholars were aware that their bursary was split between the Trust and their university in this way, some expressed confusion as to how match funded places worked. Additionally, some match funded Scholars believed that as a result of being match funded by their university they actually received less funding than they would if they were not matched funded. The reasons for this were not well understood by the Scholars.

“It's kind of like, if you're care experienced and you get that access scholarship, then you're technically overall getting less. I don't know, it's complicated. If I sat down and showed you everything then it would make sense. I hope it doesn't sound as if I'm complaining, but it's just more in the sense it kind of takes away that acknowledgement that care experienced young people need a bit more support and we have none from family most of the time and that sort of thing.” (Robertson Scholar)

Robertson Trust Discretionary fund

As noted in the introduction, The Robertson Trust has a discretionary fund available for Scholars to access. This was originally set up in 2018 to support Scholars in financial crisis but has been used to access development opportunities such as unpaid medical electives and neurodiversity diagnoses. It is available to be used at discretion of The Trust's team when Scholars report an issue to staff via the Scholar portal, in their progress reports or through requesting a meeting to identify what help is available. This is intended to enable The Robertson Trust to advise Scholars as to the range of support available at their universities in the first instance. The process involves a staff member logging the reason financial support is needed and asking finance to set up a payment. Demand for discretionary support has risen since it was first introduced in 2018. In 2023, a total of 285 payments were made to Scholars at 16 universities.

Some participating Scholars had received discretionary funding. This was used to assist with household essentials, or financial hardship experienced by Scholars during COVID-19 lockdown. Scholars who had accessed this additional support were very grateful for the help received. However, on the whole, participating Scholars were not aware that this additional support was available. Indeed, some only became aware of this as a result of discussions held with their peers in the focus groups. Those who had received it had heard of it via their interactions with Robertson Trust staff, either through catch ups with individuals or as a result of raising financial difficulties they were experiencing in their annual reports.

“I did get in touch [with Robertson Trust] and say, 'Look, I've been having financial issues' and things like that because it was just like too overwhelming. [...] Maybe I just didn't look hard enough or anything, but I didn't know about it until I was told about it or being told, 'Oh yes, we could support you if you really needed it'.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I found myself in quite a bit of a financial struggle. [...], and when discussing it, because they know how expensive [city] can be, [Robertson Trust staff member] just went, 'Oh, you know we have a discretionary fund, don't you, that you can get emergency money if you need it?' I think it's just these little things that they could really help out with, because the bursary, although it really does help me, just the rent [in this city] has been absolutely extortionate. I think it's one of those things that they have been really helpful with, because they take it into consideration, the contextual matters of it. I think it's something that they should discuss more, because it has helped me in such an amazing way.” (Robertson Scholar)

4.1.3. Suggested improvements

Scholars suggested a range of improvements relating to the financial support provided through the Scholarship.

While Scholars very much welcomed the financial support provided by the bursary, there was a view that this was not enough to compensate for the increased costs which students were faced with. This led some Scholars to call for the bursary to be increased in recognition of the impact of the cost of living crisis and the high cost of renting.

“I think they should definitely look and reassess everything, and understand that there is a cost of living crisis. Obviously we're incredibly grateful and we are so fortunate to have this help, and we wouldn't be where we are without it, but for people that are living in Edinburgh, St Andrews, in the city centre of Glasgow, rent is mental, and then gas and electricity for me is the one that catches me out. I'm trying to constantly save on that. I think they budgeted it previously before the cost of living crisis and didn't take into consideration the cities that we're living in when we go to university, so I think it would be good if they got together and kind of just reassessed the whole thing.”
(Robertson Scholar)

Linked to this, some Scholars (including those who lived at home and those who lived away from home) called for all Scholars to be given the same bursary regardless of their living situation, noting the need for Scholars living at home to help out with their household's costs.

Scholars also suggested they would benefit from greater flexibility around the timing of bursary instalments. Those who were care experienced and/or estranged noted that receiving the bursary in two instalments made it difficult for them to manage their finances.

“You could make an argument for care experienced students that maybe there could be an option to split the payments into four, because I feel like that would help me. I find with my budget, I'm not very good with budgeting. If you're saying to care experienced students you need to be great at budgeting, we're not going to be if we've not had those life experiences. The Trust [...] should offer a spread-out payment schedule [to care experienced students], because I find that works better for me and my spending. Instead of me worrying if I overspend or have to sell the thing back or whatever it is.” (Robertson Scholar)

Care experienced and estranged students suggested that providing workshops on financial management and budgeting could help students from these backgrounds to better manage their incomes.

Participating Scholars from all backgrounds highlighted the challenge of managing their finances over the summer, and suggested that either additional funding be provided or that instalments could be moved to cover that period.

“I think they should increase it to help throughout summer [...] it should be spread across a certain amount of payments, so we can budget better for the summer. They should also tell first years that in the summer you get nothing, so you need to really look and pay attention. What happened to me was I was in complete shock first year. I was like, what, all the money's gone? Where did it go? I knew where it went, it went to accommodation and food and my laptop and everything that I needed, but I was just kind of like, what do I do now?” (Robertson Scholar)

Several suggestions from Scholars related to the improvement of communication around financial support provided through the Scholarship. Scholars suggested that earlier promotion of the discretionary fund would be beneficial to help students know about its existence before

they reached a point of crisis, and providing reassurance to them that they can enquire about and seek support from it.

“I guess making it more known to people that this is an option and that it's not very - anything that they should be ashamed of, maybe. I guess in my own head being like, 'Oh, I shouldn't ask about this' because I don't like asking for financial support in general; I'm already on this bursary and everything. It's so bad for me to ask. I guess making you more aware and telling people that, 'Oh, it's okay to ask if you're really struggling. That is an option' and things like that.” (Robertson Scholar)

It was also suggested that further communication around matched funding and how this works would be helpful, as would improving communication around the availability of the bursary extension for Scholars continuing onto postgraduate level.

4.2 Social support

The Robertson Scholarship offered a number of activities and events which brought Scholars together to meet each other. These activities included: the Scholarship induction and residential, the Ambassador programme and a number of social events organised by both Scholar Ambassadors and The Robertson Trust.

4.2.1. Scholarship induction and residential

The Trust runs an annual Welcome Weekend which consists of a three-day residential induction hosted by the Outward Bound Trust for all new Scholars. Learning from this event is focused on creating a network of peer support before starting at university, and Scholars are able to meet others attending their own university. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the induction took the form of online information sessions.

Scholars who had attended the residential viewed it as a positive experience and valued the connections they made before starting university. The activities were said to have helped build Scholars' confidence and social skills. Participating in these activities also encouraged some Scholars to attend other social events organised by their university. Scholars said the residential provided them with opportunities to meet people from similar backgrounds and build a social network before starting at university; they particularly appreciated the opportunity to meet other Scholars from the same university, with some remaining friends with Scholars they met during the residential. These lasting friendships were valued by Scholars who were studying courses that were felt to be very demanding, which resulted in them not being able to socialise much during university.

“In terms of how it was beneficial: mainly before going to university, obviously a big change in life, you've got to go to a place where you don't know many people. It's a collection of students who all are from similar backgrounds and are going to a similar destination. It was just really nice to meet people from [my university] and just make friends through that.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I think I've made more friends from the Outward Bound than I have made in my full first year of university - which was really good to have done that.” (Robertson Scholar)

However, not all participants attended the residential, either due to personal circumstances or the COVID-19 pandemic. While this was seen as a missed opportunity, Scholars shared positive experiences of the alternative induction events. Scholars reported that the online induction sessions enabled them to virtually meet Scholars studying at the same university and they appreciated getting to know other students before starting their course.

“For the Scholar being online for the first few sessions, it wasn't bad, because I feel like everyone was cooperating at that time as well. Everyone had their cameras on and everything to talk, and it just felt like being on FaceTime with your friend, basically. It didn't feel awkward or anything, it was still good.” (Robertson Scholar)

4.2.2. Ambassador programme

The Robertson Trust Scholarship includes a Scholar Ambassador programme as a form of peer support for first year Scholars, and as a means for second year Scholars to develop leadership and team building skills through peer mentoring and training opportunities. Ambassadors attend the residential induction and act as a point of contact for first year Scholars to answer questions about university life and to organise group networking opportunities. Ambassadors also liaise with the Scholarship team at The Robertson Trust to update them on how first year students are getting on.

Participating Scholars' understanding of the support offered by the Ambassador programme varied and was informed by their own experiences in first year. Those who had good engagement from their Ambassador knew that the role of an Ambassador was to provide a source of support and information for first years and to organise social events. However, some understood the role of an Ambassador to be similar to that of a mentor, providing more in-depth support. Scholars who were in first year during the COVID-19 pandemic were less familiar with the role of the Ambassadors as in-person contact was not permitted. These Scholars said their only contact with Ambassadors was through a group chat.

Impact of the Ambassador programme

Scholars' experiences of having, and being, an Ambassador varied. Those that had engagement from their Ambassadors reported that it was positive and said it had helped them to make friends and navigate their first year at university. They appreciated being able to contact someone that knew more about their university and were a year ahead in their degree. Other Scholars said they enjoyed meeting Ambassadors during their residential. Having a positive experience with their assigned Ambassador during their first year of university encouraged some participants to go on to apply to become an Ambassador themselves.

“It was really good, because it's such an experience. I find with university it's so different from being at school and being at college as well. I liked college because it was like a preparing ground for it, but even university is so different with the style of

learning that's available there. It was just nice knowing someone who actually maybe knew more about the university, because they had sort of a year ahead of us.”
(Robertson Scholar)

However, there were Scholars who experienced challenges regarding their support from their Ambassador. Some described having little to no contact with their Ambassador or that communication from their Ambassador dissipated over time.

“Maybe the Trust could reach out to the Ambassadors and just make sure that they're at least trying to work something out, because yes, the first year we got that message in the group chat, it said one thing and then it was like nothing.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I'm not sure, but I think maybe the Ambassadors are there to help you through mainly your first year, so we've got a WhatsApp chat that our Ambassador would check in on us regularly, just send a message to see how we were doing. [They] would send emails also just to make sure we were talking and making sure everything was going okay. Then the Ambassador mainly scheduled meet-ups for everyone, so that was - that's what our Ambassador did for us.” (Robertson Scholar)

Those that were Ambassadors said the experience had a number of positive benefits. For example, being an Ambassador allowed them to build a stronger connection with The Robertson Trust that may not have developed otherwise. This connection made them feel part of a community.

“...I feel like more can be done on The Robertson Trust aspect to get students more involved in that aspect. I feel like if I hadn't have been part of their Ambassador programme and been well-connected through that, then I wouldn't have been as well-interlinked with The Trust.” (Robertson Scholar)

Being an Ambassador also helped them to build friendships with other Scholars. While Scholars received a number of benefits from being an Ambassador they raised concerns about the coordination of the programme. Participants reported there was a lack of guidance on the role and responsibilities of an Ambassador and shared that the support offered by Ambassadors was inconsistent. Some Ambassadors invested more time in the support and opportunities they provided to first year Scholars than others.

4.2.3. Other social events

Scholars discussed the social events organised by both The Robertson Trust and Ambassadors. Events and trips were organised to give Scholars the opportunity to meet other Scholars throughout their time at university. Additionally, Scholars shared experiences of attending in-person events organised by their Ambassadors to meet other Scholars within their first year groups.

There were Scholars who shared positive experiences of attending events organised by The Robertson Trust and Ambassadors. These included excursions and socials with a wide range of Scholars from different year groups. Participants described how the trips and events

enabled them to build stronger connections with other Scholars than they would have at university. The ability to build stronger connections was perceived as partly a result of participating in social and team building activities during organised trips. These events were inclusive of all Scholars regardless of year of study or university, which participants perceived as adding to the “connectedness of The Trust”.

However, there were also Scholars who were unaware of socialising opportunities organised by The Robertson Trust. Scholars said they would have liked to have participated in more social events, noting that it would have been helpful for them to know there were other students from backgrounds similar to their own at their university. Other Scholars said they had no need for more social events because they had made friends with students outwith the Scholarship, for example, through university societies. Participants said events were not always well promoted and in other cases were not available. For example, there were Scholars who said their Ambassador did not organise social events.

“I do feel supported, but it does again feel like an underground society, like a secret society that nobody is going to know about. It exists, people are getting supported, but it doesn't exist.” (Robertson Scholar)

The value of in-person meetings was emphasised by Scholars that had experienced the majority of events and social activities online. They had positive views on The Robertson Trust reintroducing in-person events. The importance of in-person social events was highlighted by Scholars as it was viewed as creating a sense of community; a Scholar described the Scholarship as “something that really thrives on personal connections and actually meeting with people”.

4.2.4. Improving opportunities for social support

Opportunities to meet with and get to know other Robertson Scholars was important to, and valued by, the Scholars that participated in this research. Participants shared that the events allowed them to build friendships and connections prior to and during their time at university. These organised activities were also helpful to Scholars in terms of building confidence and developing their social skills. However, there were also Scholars that had experienced challenges related to the social support available, which included a lack of in-person events and engagement from Ambassadors. Scholars therefore suggested a number of ways that the social support opportunities could be maximised as part of the Robertson Scholarship.

During focus groups, Scholars highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their experiences of social events and networking. Although Scholars did share positive aspects of the alternative online induction sessions, they still expressed a desire for in-person events. It was therefore suggested that an alternative trip at a later date would have been beneficial so that Scholars that missed the residential could still benefit from an in-person social experience.

“A virtual meeting is nothing compared to actually meeting someone in person and getting to know them. It's definitely taken a huge part of our experience away, and I

think it would be good if they gave our year of scholars an opportunity to have that experience.” (Robertson Scholar)

While the Ambassador programme had a positive impact on Scholars who received support in their first year, and on the Ambassadors themselves, some Ambassadors felt the support offered to first years was inconsistent (depending on the Ambassador) and confusing. To ensure that the support offered by Ambassadors is more consistent, participants would like closer collaboration with The Robertson Trust. For example, the implementation of regular catch-up meetings to create a more structured process and set goals to guarantee its success was proposed³.

Scholars who were/had been Ambassadors valued the experience and thought there should be greater promotion of the programme to encourage more Scholars to get involved. It was noted that being an Ambassador required a time commitment and it was suggested that offering a financial incentive could encourage more Scholars to put themselves forward.

One Scholar who had received support from an Ambassador suggested the programme could be improved by having two Ambassadors, rather than one, assigned to a group of first year Scholars. The success of such a suggestion would depend on uptake, with some universities having more Ambassadors than others. The participant said that it was important that a first year felt comfortable speaking to an Ambassador in order to access support. With two Ambassadors they felt this was more likely.

“As a first year, you're in an entirely new place and you're sat here with a stranger. You don't know who they're supposed to be, and it's like, is this a professional situation? Do I have to be here? Can I talk to them like a friend or are they like staff? Nobody knows, so if you have two ambassadors then I think that breaks the barriers a bit. That's just my suggestion.” (Robertson Scholar)

Finally, Scholars that had accessed social support offered online during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted a lack of social events. It was therefore suggested to have more events for entire year groups to allow opportunities to meet Scholars with different degrees.

4.3 Mental health support

As part of the Scholarship, The Robertson Trust have created a suite of support that includes access to private counselling, online ‘in-the-moment’ counselling through an external Scholar Support and Wellbeing Service, with the addition of the MyMindPal app. The support is designed to help Scholars, particularly those who have experienced trauma, access appropriate specialist and longer-term therapy which may not be available through their universities.

Due to the sensitive nature of this support, Scholars were reassured that they did not have to share their personal experiences of mental health support as part of the focus group if they

³ The Trust note there is a structured programme for Ambassadors; however, participating Scholars did not appear to be aware of this.

did not wish to. However, there were Scholars that chose to share and provided feedback on their experiences.

4.3.1. Awareness of mental health support

Scholars expressed limited awareness that mental health support was offered as part of the Robertson Scholarship. When asked about mental health support, most participants referenced mental health support directly offered by Robertson Trust staff. For example, after submitting progress reports and at points throughout the academic year, Robertson Trust staff would check in via email to see how Scholars were feeling. The Scholars who were aware of the mental health support available via The Robertson Trust, such as referrals to counselling and therapy, were those who had accessed this support. It was common for Scholars to find out about referrals to mental health services only when they reached out to The Robertson Trust when they were struggling with their mental health.

“[The Robertson Trust], at the end of the January report, they give you your feedback and they say ‘if you need any help, contact us’. I didn’t know specifically that they could refer you to therapists, psychologists or whatever, so I will be getting in touch with them about that, because I’ve been looking. If I can get it with my scholarship, I’m obviously going to try and get it from there.” (Robertson Scholar)

Scholars who required mental health support said that The Robertson Trust were helpful in finding appropriate support organisations and services to meet their needs. Where Scholars struggled with the initial support offered, the Trust found a suitable alternative that was more beneficial.

There were Scholars who were not aware of the mental health support offered through the Scholarship. While some said they would not have needed it, either because they had sufficient support in place or simply that did not need to access mental health services, others highlighted that they would have benefitted from such support.

4.3.2. Impact on mental health

Scholars experienced challenges to their mental health for a wide range of reasons. This included challenges related to past trauma, coping with the academic demands of university, financial worries and challenges associated with experience of care and family estrangement.

Scholars who were referred to specialist mental health support were largely positive about the support they received. The positive impact of mental health support was discussed by scholars in relation both to the support for personal growth they received and the fact that the support they received was free. One Scholar said that without this support they would have either had to pay personally for private counselling or would likely have been placed on a waiting list with their university’s mental health support services.

“I would’ve either had to be out of pocket for private counselling or maybe struggled to connect with a counsellor that I could get for free at the uni. So, I know that’s a bit more personal than the mentoring programme but it really is like an important thing, especially for the Trust to even consider that maybe students do need a different

personal therapy or counselling session is not something that a lot of other charities or trusts would even think about.” (Robertson Scholar)

In addition to reducing financial burden, Scholars discussed the benefits of accessing therapy and counselling. For example, Scholars shared how it had calmed their anxiety during the return to face-to-face learning after the COVID-19 pandemic and helped to make their lives at university easier. Other Scholars said mental health support had assisted their academic success by supporting their personal growth and motivated them to focus and achieve their goals at university.

“The [person] which I'm paired up with is absolutely amazing, and I think it's actually had a huge impact on my mental health, and just getting motivated enough to actually do the work and put into action what I've been wanting to do. I think it's been amazing, honestly.” (Robertson Scholar)

Additionally, as outlined in Section 4.1, the financial support offered by the bursary was said to be particularly helpful in impacting positively on Scholars' mental health.

When reflecting on the experiences of the Journey to Success programme more generally, participants highlighted their appreciation for the Scholarship and the range of support offered by The Robertson Trust.

“I genuinely think it's great. It's made, like I say, a huge difference financially and emotionally. I've got very little bad to say about them, and I really do mean that, because I know that this is anonymous and I can say what I want and it gets fed back anonymously. I genuinely mean that they are a really incredible organisation. They are really great.” (Robertson Scholar)

University staff also outlined the benefits of the mental health support provided through the Scholarship for those Scholars they knew had accessed it. They highlighted the lack of capacity within university's own mental health services, noting the 'huge impact' of The Robertson Trust in terms of being able to supplement this.

“I would say again there's limits to what we can do in terms of...if you're talking about students from these kind of backgrounds statistically they're much more likely to have long term mental health conditions, things that impact on their health and wellbeing and the universities' counselling, disabilities, psychological services are not always greatly set up to be able to support students with that kind of need and they're getting pointed back to the NHS and the student is then on a waiting list. The Robertson Trust, I've known them to plug those kinds of gaps with private counselling for example, for people, that again is life changing. So huge impacts, I definitely see that through supporting individuals, find out about it from their point of view, the kind of opportunities they've had its wonderful.” (University staff)

4.3.3. Improvements to mental health support

Given the limited awareness of the types of mental health support available through The Robertson Trust, participants shared that there could be greater promotion of what support would entail to increase awareness. It was suggested that advertising and sharing support available, such as mental health services, via the Scholar portal, in a general support guidance handbook⁴, or through a session hosted by The Robertson Trust for Scholars, would be worthwhile.

“I have not personally used their support for mental health services or anything. But I guess one thing that might be helpful is - I think again it's such a broad issue - but maybe what exactly they might do to help, as in clarify, that might make it easier for some people to go to them for support if they know what might be done.” (Robertson Scholar)

4.4 Support for moving on to post-graduation destinations

The Robertson Scholarship offers a range of opportunities and activities to support and prepare Scholars for their lives beyond university. These opportunities included training sessions, internships, networking events and volunteering. Participants shared their experiences of each of these activities.

4.4.1. Journey to Success Training programme

The Journey to Success training programme is made up of a series of five mandatory self-development training sessions designed to build the self-awareness and soft skills that contribute to success at university and beyond. Further details on the content of these sessions is provided in Appendix B, but broadly the five sessions cover:

1. Achieving Success and Accessing Support
2. Professional Communications
3. Recruitment Practices and Company Values
4. Building Personal Resilience
5. Preparing for Internships and Employment.

Scholars are expected to attend two training sessions per year in first and second year, and one in their third year. The sessions cover a range of topics, including writing CVs, job interview skill development, information on the importance and purpose of networking, building soft skills and supporting personal growth. The session in third year focuses on internships and competency-based interview questions.

⁴ The current Robertson Scholar's Handbook includes references to support available to Scholars to help with mental health. However, Scholars appeared unaware of this.

Originally delivered in person, during the pandemic all sessions were moved online. A hybrid model was introduced in August 2021 making both online and in-person options available to Scholars.

Scholars had mixed views of the format of the sessions. The frequency of sessions was viewed as manageable along with their coursework, and Scholars appreciated the interactive, discussion-based, nature of the sessions. The online and in-person sessions tended to be perceived differently. In-person sessions were described as being more enjoyable, and were seen as an opportunity to socialise with other Scholars and build connections; however, it was felt the in-person nature could be a barrier to commuting students. Scholars found it more difficult to engage with the content and contribute to discussion in the online sessions. Scholars also thought that online sessions limited interaction and acted as a barrier to connecting with other Scholars. There were participants that appreciated opportunities to attend sessions both online and in-person, so that they could choose what would best suit their schedules.

“The online one it's very easy to disengage, and it feels like you don't really know the people who are there. Once you're doing it in person, it's a lot more friendly and it breaks those sort of barriers.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I completely agree that there really isn't much socialising happening, besides the workshops and wee things that we have to do. Even when we're in them, it's like we get put into breakout rooms for five minutes or something, and that's like the only interaction we have with other scholars.” (Robertson Scholar)

Participating Scholars also discussed their views on the content of the training sessions, highlighting what had been helpful and what had been challenging. Scholars noted the sessions were not limited to building CVs and preparation for job interviews, but also covered topics linked to personal growth, such as confidence and imposter syndrome.

“I would say it's not employment focused, I would say it's self-growth focused. In doing that, it really helps your employability because you know so much more about yourself and you know how to talk about yourself, and you understand the world around you a lot better.” (Robertson Scholar)

The sessions were viewed as an opportunity to receive constructive criticism in a relaxed environment without fear of being wrong. There were Scholars that appreciated the content of training, highlighting that a range of topics were covered and were applicable to their coursework and desired careers.

“I think they're really helpful, personally, because it's just a very chill environment. Although it's new faces every time, sometimes familiar faces, there's no pressure to - again - spill your guts out. As well, I found it really helpful because for example the STAR method when answering questions, I'm currently doing that in some of my uni work. So, I've previously learned that and so I'm just like, 'Oh, I know what that is!' So, it's really helpful in that aspect.” (Robertson Scholar)

However, challenges regarding the content of training were also highlighted, with some perceiving the sessions to be repetitive and overly generalised. They therefore did not allow for greater depth and specificity regarding Scholar's degrees, and were not always tailored or applicable to some Scholars' degrees. For instance, those undertaking degrees in the professions (e.g., medicine, dentistry, law) did not find the training on building CVs and preparing for interviews as helpful because it was not tailored to their professional employment route. Additionally, there were Scholars that said the training content did not reflect their interview experiences when applying for internships. Participants also expressed difficulty with retaining information shared during training sessions.

The impact of training sessions was discussed in terms of both developing and improving Scholars' confidence and employability skills. This was viewed as not only helping them personally but also professionally.

“I think for me, the biggest impact that it had on my experience is, like I say, a lot of the training sessions are built on personal growth and skills, but that has really impacted my career in a positive way thus far.” (Robertson Scholar)

“Without the support of them as well, not just financially, their verbal support, their skills, everything they teach us is really important. I feel like just because we had setbacks in life or trauma or whatever, we're still, it puts us on an equal playing field as everybody else and gives us the opportunity to get jobs that we aspire to get.” (Robertson Scholar)

Scholars suggested practical changes to improve the training sessions. These included making changes and additions to the content of sessions, such as offering guidance on applying for traineeships, offering tailored one-to-one support for CV development, and introducing specific sessions tailored towards groups of Scholars studying the same course. Scholars also suggested having mock interviews to practise their skills when applying for posts, would be beneficial. Scholars said they would also like a wider selection of training sessions to be made available, so they can choose those that best apply to them. For example, a session around finances and budgeting skills was suggested, particularly for care experienced and estranged students. One Scholar suggested having workshops based on the issues related to the disadvantaged backgrounds of Scholars as a way to show “they are an organisation that prioritises helping impoverished people”. Scholars that discussed challenges with attending scheduled sessions suggested adjusting the timings to avoid clashes. Finally, Scholars who discussed challenges regarding retention of information from the training sessions suggested a range of improvements which included: recording sessions, follow-up sessions, emails with key points and tips or with practice questions or examples to support revision.

4.4.2. Networking opportunities

There are five Career Pathways available to Scholars providing mentoring and work experience across a number of different sectors. The Robertson Trust's partnerships with organisations, such as non-profits and law firms, provides Scholars with the opportunity to attend optional networking events to gain a better understanding of the career opportunities

available to them. These events tend to be in-person and involve meeting professionals to discuss progression opportunities available within the sector and attending presentations from organisations.

Scholars shared their experiences of attending in-person networking events that were relevant to their career interests. They found the networking events beneficial and said the events helped them to step out of their comfort zone and speak and build connections with people they did not know. This was challenging for Scholars, but it was viewed as an important skill to develop to help them find employment once they leave university. The opportunity to meet new people in their desired field of work also helped Scholars to build their social skills and confidence in a professional environment. Scholars said they were able to build a professional network ahead of their graduation and reflected that this would have not been possible without the support offered as part of the Robertson Scholarship.

“I think it was just so good that they were able to allow us to network because it's such an undervalued skill that you really need going into any profession. I feel like it really allowed me to be confident going into, for example, networking events [for specific profession], and be able to speak to people that I didn't know...” (Robertson Scholar)

However, not all participating Scholars benefitted from the networking events. Some said they had not attended the networking events because they were focused on fields of work that were not relevant to their degrees or career interests. These Scholars said they would have appreciated the opportunity to attend networking events that were more relevant to them.

4.4.3. Volunteering opportunities

Scholars were encouraged by The Robertson Trust to complete 30 hours of volunteering before their fourth year of university. This is referred to as the Giving Back programme and was a requirement for all Scholars.

There were participating Scholars that were at the early stages of their degree who had not started volunteering yet but expressed uncertainty as to what they should volunteer for. These Scholars felt that volunteering was left too broad which made it difficult to narrow down their opportunities. There were also participants that expressed a lack of awareness of what volunteering would entail.

Scholars who had experience of volunteering while at university spoke positively of their experience. Volunteering was viewed as an opportunity to do something applicable to their degree, enabling them to develop skills such as interviewing and gaining experience for their CV. Scholars shared that they would likely have not volunteered if it had not been a requirement of the Scholarship and Journey to Success programme.

“[...] so I did it last summer - which I think was quite good. I don't think I would've gone and volunteered out of my own free will if they hadn't pushed me and then it was a requirement. So, that was a very good experience. I volunteered at the [name of organisation], which was quite good. It was really good for [my degree] as well, which was nice.” (Robertson Scholar)

One challenge raised regarding the perceived requirement to undertake volunteering was the difficulty of balancing paid work with volunteering. It was therefore suggested that The Robertson Trust should reconsider the number of hours it suggests Scholars volunteer so as to accommodate Scholars who need to work.

4.4.4. Internships

The Robertson Scholarship offers a paid summer internship programme which Scholars can apply for in their third year of university. The Robertson Trust can fund Scholars for a maximum of 225 hours, the equivalent of six weeks full-time, of work experience. Options to intern at a wide range of organisations, such as corporates and charities, are made available to Scholars for application. Scholars that participate in an internship are also given a monthly bursary during their placement.

In focus groups, there were both Scholars that had and had not applied for an internship. Scholars in their first and second year of university expressed a desire to apply for internships in their third year because they viewed the opportunity as a way of helping them find a career after university and become financially independent.

Scholars who had undertaken an internship found the overall experience to have been beneficial in a number of ways. Internships were said to have enabled Scholars to gain relevant work experience and develop their social and communication skills. For some Scholars, participating in an internship gave them a better awareness of the career opportunities available to them, and helped boost their CVs. Scholars also shared anecdotes of other Scholars whose internships directly resulted in graduate job offers. The fact that internships were held in the summer was appreciated as it did not conflict with university class schedules and offered additional financial support at a time when they were not receiving other funding.

“I think it's just amazing for, regardless of the financial help, a lot of people wouldn't get into their sectors and get that kind of experience without the Trust doing the internship programme.” (Robertson Scholar)

The impact and importance of internships were also discussed in the Scholar focus groups. Participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity and reflected that they would have likely not had the experience or applied without the Robertson Scholarship. Internships helped Scholars consider how they wished to progress beyond university and were perceived as a way for Scholars' CVs to “stand out” when applying for work.

“Like I say, I'm on the internship scheme right now with a company that previously I would have considered my dream company, and the skills that they taught me allowed me to bag myself another placement next year. Which again is like a seriously dream position for me, and it's just stuff that I would have, at the time of applying, thought that I could never, ever do.” (Robertson Scholar)

While participating in an internship could have a number of benefits, Scholars also highlighted some limitations. There were Scholars who had to search for alternative internship

opportunities because the internships available to them via the Robertson Scholarship were not relevant to their degree. There were also Scholars that did not take part in an internship and expressed disappointment regarding the missed opportunity. For Scholars that did not apply because the internship opportunities were not relevant to their degrees, a suggested improvement was to have alternative or a wider range options where internships were not relevant to Scholars' desired careers, such as medical students undertaking an elective.

4.4.5. Mentoring programme

As part of the Robertson Scholarship and its Career Pathways, Scholars can apply to be paired with a mentor. This includes both the Alumni Mentoring programme which connects around 20 graduates with their younger peers each year, and the Royal Society of Edinburgh Young Academy of Scotland which matches 12 current Scholars with professional mentors. This form of support is not mandatory and if successful with their application, Scholars are assigned a mentor based on their area of interest. The focus groups included participants who had applied to receive a mentor, with mixed degrees of success.

Scholars who participated in the mentoring programme said it was a positive experience. Participants complimented the application process for the mentorship and said they appreciated being able to describe in detail what they hoped to gain from the experience. Scholars valued the opportunity to have a mentor while at university in terms of having the opportunity to speak to someone that had relevant experience in their desired field of work. Scholars said mentors had provided them with guidance and support for coursework, and increased their awareness and understanding of different progression routes relating to their degrees and how to navigate them. Mentors also provided Scholars with guidance on how to best fit in to their field of work and build connections necessary for their desired career. As a result of some mentorships, Scholars had a better understanding of career choices, were supported with applications and were encouraged to enter postgraduate education.

“I'd say for me personally, the mentoring programme has probably been a big one just because I've been able to reach out to someone at that current time, like if I have exams coming up and I need help revising, or I need an essay looked over by someone that knows the question. Then that's been really helpful for me personally.”
(Robertson Scholar)

“For me, I got paired with a lawyer and that was really great, because I have no connections to law, I know nobody involved in it, and studying it myself is quite difficult in terms of trying to apply for a traineeship in a few years. That's going to be very hard without knowing anybody, and so I got paired with [name of mentor]. [...] I've Zoom called with [my mentor] maybe three, four times, and [my mentor has] given me ideas of organisations to apply for that are involved in the field that I'm interested in.”
(Robertson Scholar)

However, not all participants applied for mentorships or were successful in their application. Reasons for not applying included not having mentoring options that were relevant to their degree or feeling that they did not need that form of support. A suggested improvement to the mentoring programme was to have a wider range of organisations involved so that Scholars

with different degrees can receive this form of support. There were also Scholars who were unsuccessful with their application and expressed disappointment that they did not have a mentor to offer guidance and support while at university.

4.4.6. Postgraduate funding

A one-year bursary extension for Scholars progressing to Postgraduate study was introduced by The Robertson Trust in 2020. Funding is available for 30 Scholars each year and consists of £4000 for each Scholar split into two instalments. In applying for the bursary extension, Scholars have to outline how the postgraduate course is a continuation of their degree; for example, post-graduate teaching qualifications, Bachelor of Laws, Counselling qualifications etc.

There was a great deal of interest among participating Scholars to pursue post-graduate qualifications. The Graduate Options Handbook is outlined on the Linktree on The Robertson Trust's Scholar Portal and is shared with Scholars at the start of 3rd year to explain the timeframe for applying for the extension. However, there was a lack of knowledge and awareness as to how to apply. It was therefore suggested that more information and guidance on postgraduate funding opportunities be shared with Scholars.

“So, I know that they do provide postgraduate support - and I have emailed them about it months ago - and then they said, 'Oh, we'll let you know,' and then they've not written back. Maybe there are some gaps there. They've not spoken much about the graduate studies in any of the emails or anything they sent us, which I think would probably - lots of people that would be interested, or at least even if some aren't, I suppose it would be worthwhile.” (Robertson Scholar)

The introduction of postgraduate funding by The Robertson Trust was viewed positively by Scholars. There were Scholars that had been successful with their application and those who were uncertain if they would be eligible based on the age criteria. Scholars suggested that the high levels of attainment which characterise Scholars makes it more likely that they may apply for post-graduate courses, particularly when given the fact a large number of professions require postgraduate qualifications.

University staff were highly positive about the opportunities for support to help Scholars progress beyond university, particularly in terms of helping care experienced and estranged students.

“The internship opportunities, the kind of networking side of things. They're [The Robertson Trust] fantastic for setting folk up when they're leaving university. That can very often be a cliff edge for folk that kind of support throughout their Degree, to be thinking about this kind of thing and developing the skills that they're going to require, the experience, work experience and the CV to go out into the working world straightaway because... I often see this through the lens of care experienced and estranged students who otherwise would be facing a cliff edge of all that funding support, accommodation support and then finishing university and that all stops. They've really got to carry on hitting the ground running because they can't go back, they're at their parents till they're like...like most other folk do until they get secure a

footing or a job etcetera. So that kind of side of things is absolutely wonderful as well, it's doing stuff that [the University] don't do in terms of the Widening Participation Team at the university, it's that dovetailing side of things again is incredible." (University staff)

4.4.7. General improvements to support progression

Although Scholars shared positive views and experiences regarding progression support, concerns regarding progressing beyond university remained. Some Scholars nearing graduation reported having a clear career direction whilst others were more uncertain. There were Scholars who expressed excitement to join the workforce and described having the necessary skills and knowledge to move on after university. However, others shared a sense of trepidation for the time when the financial and personal support received through the Scholarship would end.

"So, it's very scary because suddenly I feel like, in my head at least, it feels like suddenly you're virtually dropped. So, that support system drops and now you're just like a person in a void where it's like you don't have a - oh, you're not a student anymore, you're not anything anymore; you're just a person that floats in the air. So, I guess that's the feeling that I have. It's very scary, and go out and I don't know what the support will be after this and what it will feel like. I guess the idea of now I have to go and find a career and things like that, and start becoming an adult." (Robertson Scholar)

Care experienced and estranged students in particular highlighted the challenge of finding accommodation and employment, and the need to speak to someone about next steps, after they had graduated. They expressed concerns about what will happen when the options for support from The Robertson Trust are no longer available, and questioned the implications.

"I have saved up for a deposit to actually get my own place and I have a job and a sort of income, so maybe I've been able to do it, but I feel like not having that sort of paternal figure of someone just to be able to sit down with and be like, 'This is what I'm thinking, what should I do?' That kind of thing, without it being financial advice, but just more in the sense of advice overall." (Robertson Scholar)

Scholars also discussed potential improvements to the support offered regarding progression. For Scholars that were uncertain regarding their plans after graduation, it was suggested that an interview or catch up nearing graduation to discuss their plans would be beneficial. Scholars who expressed concern about their Scholarship support coming to an end suggested having an extended year of support after graduation (such as something similar to the undergraduate support but without training sessions). Another proposed improvement was to have a programme with support and opportunities during postgraduate education to allow Scholars to enhance their skills further.

Finally, participants said they would value more support from The Robertson Trust, particularly for those who did not undertake an internship or have a mentor, to explore post-

university destinations. One suggestion was that the Scholarship handbook⁵ could provide some information and guidance.

“I think what would be better is to maybe have a general handbook for different subjects, kind of like a guideline so that different students are able to know what they should do generally. That could help them with their job opportunities in the future.”
(Robertson Scholar)

⁵ A graduate options handbook is made available to Scholars, as is a linktree to support on the Scholar portal. Scholars can request career guidance meetings, mock interview support etc. This information does not appear to have reached Scholars who took part in the research.

5. Communication and relationships with The Robertson Trust

Participants discussed the range of ways The Robertson Trust communicates with their Scholars, university staff and schools.

5.1 Mode of communication

In focus groups, Scholars discussed their views and experiences of communicating with The Robertson Trust, including benefits and challenges regarding how The Robertson Trust shares information about available support and upcoming opportunities. The Robertson Trust's predominant mode of communication with Scholars was said to be email, but social media, video clips giving practical guidance and information on upcoming events and the Scholar portal were also mentioned. Scholars reported being accustomed to communicating via email and said that Robertson Trust staff were generally quick to respond. Emails were therefore seen as an effective way of communicating and sharing relevant information to Scholars. When raising issues with staff, Scholars also spoke positively regarding how all Robertson Trust staff used the same email and were good at communicating with each other to remain up to date regarding how problems have been addressed. However, Scholars also discussed limitations relating to the use of emails to share important information; receiving multiple emails from The Robertson Trust had led to Scholars missing emails.

There was a lack of awareness among Scholars of other modes of communication used by staff to share opportunities, for example, via social media platforms such as Linktree. Scholars also shared that at times they experienced delays in receiving a response via email from Robertson Trust staff but emphasised that overall their communication via this mode was positive.

Overall, Scholars approved of email being the main way of communicating with The Robertson Trust. However, they also expressed a desire for greater clarity and information on what other media The Robertson Trust use to share information.

5.2 Communication and relationships with Robertson Trust Staff

Overall, Scholars' experiences of communicating with members of The Robertson Trust staff were generally positive. Although Scholars expressed a lack of confidence regarding reaching out to Robertson Trust staff in their first year of university, this tended to improve over time as Scholars' confidence increased through taking part in activities and having the opportunity to meet Robertson Trust staff. Scholars said they appreciated that The Robertson Trust staff team was small because it meant they got to know them well which made Scholars feel safe talking to them.

However, participants who became Scholars during the COVID-19 pandemic had a slightly more negative experience of communicating with Robertson Trust staff as a result of online rather than in-person contact. This was said to have acted as a barrier to building relationships with staff.

“It's been really good to meet them and talk to them in person and be able to learn more about them. They've been able to learn and see what I am like in person, so I think in that regard The Robertson Trust I think are missing out in terms of the staff members connecting in person with the scholars themselves. Everything is done online and on email and it's kindae just like you can apply to this, you can apply to that but there's no actual communication between the staff and the scholars.” (Robertson Scholar)

“I think it's because I've had more of an online interaction. I don't really know the staff there personally to go and talk to them if I had a problem, so I'd probably lean more to going to my mentor at [my university].” (Robertson Scholar)

While there were Scholars who viewed their communication with Robertson staff as generally positive, others identified elements of communication which could be improved. For example, Scholars shared that contact and communication was always prompted by themselves rather than Robertson Trust staff. Therefore, the Scholars felt the onus was on them to reach out. This was difficult for Scholars to do when they did not feel they had a relationship with Robertson Trust staff.

“I think the communication is really good, but it's more just when you get in contact with them. Other than that, during my first year I didn't really speak to them. I think in that sense if you don't speak to them, they don't speak to you. It is just they'll email you when it's time to fill out a report each semester, and then they'll email you after they've read your report. Other than that, honestly there is zero communication. It's not that the communication isn't good, it's just kind of non-existent. It's kind of coming back to this secret society kind of feeling.” (Robertson Scholar)

As previously mentioned, another challenge with communication was the lack of knowledge and awareness of support available to Scholars through the Scholarship. For instance, there were Scholars that were not aware of certain forms of support offered through the Robertson Scholarship, such as mental health support.

Finally, when discussing experiences of communicating with The Robertson Trust staff, Scholars were sometimes uncertain which members should be the first point of contact, and whom to contact if they were experiencing issues and needed support. Scholars said that they would like more clarity on which staff members should be contacted for different elements of the Scholarship. This was also raised by University staff who expressed some confusion as to which staff member should be contacted in regard to specific issues or individual Scholars.

“And I think as well, see even kind of like emails, they’re all kind of disjointed so you get them from all different people so you don’t actually know who deals with what specific thing.” (University staff)

5.2.1. Progress reports

Scholars are required to complete bi-annual progress reports as part of the Robertson Scholarship. Scholars are invited to reflect on their university experiences, any opportunities they had accessed and to identify support and development needs.

Overall, the progress reports were perceived positively by Scholars who described them as an opportunity to reflect on their time at university so far, summarise their skill development and determine where they needed support. Scholars also noted that their ability to retain the Scholarship was linked to their continued academic progress. Therefore, some expressed a reluctance to outline any struggles they might be experiencing, for fear of their funding being rescinded. Nonetheless, Scholars appreciated having tailored feedback on their progress reports; they said it made them feel listened to. Scholars also appreciated how staff were very supportive and proactive in offering support relevant to the challenges they faced.

“I really like the fact that they look at your report and not grade it, but they review it and then they email you back. I thought that was really nice because the email back was actually very supportive. A lot of the challenges that I've faced, I haven't actually contacted The Robertson Trust about. That's not at all their fault, I think I just, I don't know, I didn't feel like it was really very relevant, but I guess I wrote quite a bit of that in the report because they ask about how your year has been. It was really nice actually for them to come back and say, 'Please let us know about anything that you're struggling with as you go'. I think they even said, 'Is there anything we can do right now to help?' Like I say, just this ongoing support is really invaluable, yes.” (Robertson Scholar)

One concern Scholars raised about progress reports was the time it sometimes took for The Robertson Trust staff to respond to them. Scholars spoke of how follow-up responses to their progress reports had been delayed and highlighted the importance of timely feedback to ensure they can access adequate support.

When discussing feedback on progress reports, care experienced and estranged Scholars discussed challenges around not having one named point of contact. Although the reports were perceived to be sufficiently addressed by staff, the lack of consistency in terms of staffing was seen as a barrier to building relationships. Having a dedicated member of staff assigned was viewed as important for care experienced and estranged Scholars, particularly when sensitive circumstances were raised in their progress reports.

“It varied a lot, so even for example the progress reports, it's a different person each time that answered mine. That was a little bit tricky, because obviously the progress reports are covering things like, 'What did you find difficult?' The sensitive things, and you've not got one person that's kind of building that relationship with us. [...] everything was addressed sufficiently. It's not about the response as much as it's about

it being inconsistent and a different person coming back every time. Not inconsistent, but there's no dedicated approach or that sort of thing.” (Robertson Scholar)

5.2.2. Relationships between the Trust and external organisations

In the focus group with staff from different universities, participants talked of the nature of their relationship with both Robertson Scholars and Robertson Trust staff.

Informal relationships

University staff's relationships with the Trust varied depending on the nature and length of their relationship with the Trust. Some individuals reported working closely with the Trust while others said they had little contact aside from when Robertson Trust staff notified them of issues with individual Scholars. Some universities had identified a named contact to liaise with the Trust and Scholars but most did not. This impacted on relationships between universities and the Trust. University staff without a named contact highlighted the 'informal', 'unstructured', 'serendipitous' and 'ad hoc' nature of their relationship with the Trust.

“It happens on a kind of ad hoc basis and they're getting in touch with you from the student's point of view and then you always have to say, 'I can't tell you what to go and tell a student. Ask the student to get in touch with me' if it's like a massive issue and then you've got to unpick what the actual issue is and then help them deal with it. [...] Sometimes you're like, right there is no person at the university who is a point of contact for all of The Robertson Trust Scholars that needs to deal with this. It happens on an ad hoc basis.” (University staff)

Some university participants noted that requests they received from the Trust to assist individual Scholars were sometimes outwith the remit of that member of staff. While university staff said they were keen to help where they could, they are limited by their team's capacity and resources.

University staff expressed mixed views with regards to the frequency and nature of contacts they had with The Robertson Trust. Some said that the Trust did not contact them about individual students who were struggling until at such a point that students were in crisis. As discussed previously, this may be because the students themselves did not contact the Trust until they were in crisis, partly due to a lack of awareness among Scholars as to available support.

“If we've had contact [from The Robertson Trust] with regards to students that are struggling, it always seems to be at the critical stage. So there's never...its always right at the end when the person is about to drop out. So see if we had some contact before that, if there were any students, specific students that were struggling, that we could obviously support them in any way that we could. But if The Robertson Trust could liaise with us a bit before it gets to that stage, we could put in place any support, but I

always feels as if [the Trust] has always contacted me when a student is right at the edge of wanting to drop out, wanting to leave.” (University staff)

Other university staff, however, suggested that the Trust can sometimes be too quick to ask universities to support Scholars, highlighting instead the need for students to build capacity and resilience, in line with the aims of the Scholarship. Another university participant noted that their university was rarely asked to step in because The Robertson Trust was providing the support Scholars needed.

“The Robertson Trust themselves do such a good job of supporting the students that its very, very, rare that we’re actually asked to do anything additional to the support that Robertson are already giving them.” (University staff)

Across the different universities represented in the focus group, there was a consensus that closer working between The Robertson Trust and university teams (both pre-entry and post-entry) would be beneficial. They called for ‘more joined up’ working with the Trust, highlighting the positive ways that the support provided by the Trust to Scholars ‘dovetails’ with that provided by their institutions to widening access students.

“It would make sense I think for us to be more joined up about this because [...] [the Trust’s] criteria for who they’re supporting very much ties in with who we would consider to be Widening Participation students. So I feel like, maybe there is more that we could do, more structurally to support but it goes back to resource as well. [...] So yeah, there’s maybe a resource thing to think about there if something like that was going to be set up. (University staff)

Knowing which students are Scholars

A key theme raised in the university focus group was around whether universities were aware of which of their students were Robertson Trust Scholars, and the pros and cons of this information being shared with universities. One of the university participants said their institution was aware which of their students were Scholars and included them within their widening access groups. This was said to enable the university to help identify those students who were facing challenges and in turn to provide Scholars with additional tailored support and to monitor their progress.

More commonly, universities said they were unaware as to who their Scholars were, unless they declared themselves to the university or the Trust contacted them on behalf of individual Scholars. University participants were generally of the view that it would be beneficial to know which of their students were Scholars.

“It probably would be better to have an understanding from the very outset who the scholars are and maybe set up transition stuff that introduces how the uni works and how the Support Services work. The students at each institution can take that away and then they’ve got a guide as to how to navigate things, who the right folk to contact are.” (University staff)

As well as allowing universities to better identify and support students who may be experiencing additional challenges, university staff were also of the view that knowing which of their students were Scholars would also allow universities to recognise the achievements and celebrate the success of their Scholars and to help promote the Scholarship to prospective students. On the other hand, other university staff advised caution on this, noting data protection agreements and suggesting that students may benefit from their university not being aware of their Scholar status.

“It’s giving our students that ability to maybe make the most of that programme without feeling that they have to admit certain characteristics about themselves to the university.” (University staff)

It should be noted that The Robertson Trust already shares a list of new Scholars with universities at the start of each term – whether they match fund or not. However, it would appear that this may not be reaching the correct members of staff, providing further support for the suggestion of identifying a named contact at each institution to liaise with. In the final participatory workshop held with Scholar Research Consultants, the group was supportive of their name being shared with their university, noting it could be useful and important for admissions teams to know so that they can signpost information and support to Scholars. They cautioned, however, that Scholars should be able to opt-in/consent to having their name shared with their university.

5.2.3. Improvements to communication

Suggestions from Scholars

Scholars suggested a range of ways in which communication with The Robertson Trust could be improved. This included greater clarity on what support is available through the Scholarship, alternative modes of communication and greater opportunities to connect and build relationships with Robertson Trust staff.

Increasing awareness of available support

During the focus groups, Scholars expressed a lack of awareness or knowledge regarding the various opportunities and support available through the Robertson Scholarship. There were Scholars that were not aware of organised social events or that The Robertson Trust could refer them to mental health support. A general increase in the frequency of communications was suggested as a way to prevent Scholars from paying for support that is already available through the Robertson Scholarship. Scholars also suggested practical and specific improvements to communication. This included a newsletter for Scholars updating them on information, support and upcoming opportunities available to them. It was suggested this could celebrate Scholars who have accessed opportunities and also include sections on wellbeing, alumni and their progression routes, as well as graduation advice. Scholars could also be involved in creating the newsletter as work experience.

For Scholars who struggle to find relevant progression opportunities, it was also suggested that having tailored emails regarding upcoming, degree-relevant, opportunities would be

beneficial. Other suggestions included a dedicated section within the Scholarship handbook with examples on what can be accessed, wellbeing email check-ins, and links to other relevant progression opportunities and support in emails to Scholars.

Regarding challenges with delayed feedback on progress reports, Scholars suggested that a member of The Robertson Trust could have a 30-minute call with Scholars at the end of the semester to discuss any challenges Scholars were facing. Scholars recognised that this may be challenging in practice, therefore Scholars would also like to see greater consistency in the speed at which progress reports are responded to, particularly those that raise issues or concerns.

Improving relationships with Robertson Trust staff

Scholars that were care experienced and estranged would like to see Scholars assigned a dedicated point of contact from The Robertson Trust, particularly in response to progress reports. This was not limited to Scholars that were care experienced or estranged, though it should be noted these Scholars tended to report experiencing more challenges at university. Alternatively, Scholars requested greater clarity on who to contact within The Robertson Trust team if they require specific types of support.

“I think it's even more important for care experienced and estranged students to have some person, one person who's your go-to contact. From my experience of The Robertson Trust, it seems like everybody knows you well enough that you can go to them, but I don't know who to go to specifically as a first point of contact. I feel like if we just had that, that would really help.” (Robertson Scholar)

Scholars with stronger connections to staff members emphasised the importance of relationships and suggested that there should be more opportunities and events for Scholars to connect with staff in-person.

Suggestions from university and school staff

University staff suggested that closer relationships between universities and The Robertson Trust would be beneficial, particularly in terms of identifying and supporting struggling students. A key element of this would be formalising the relationship between the Trust and universities by identifying specific individuals in each institution to take responsibility for liaising with The Robertson Trust and with Robertson Trust Scholars. It was also suggested that the Trust should consider ways to better communicate to universities (with the permission of Scholars themselves) which of their students are Scholars. This would enable universities to provide additional support where needed to Scholars, and to help universities celebrate the success of their Scholars.

“So I think there are positives to it but I think it would be nice to know more about what is actually happening. And maybe also as well, at the end of the programme could there be some sort of opportunity to celebrate the success of these students? So we're not necessarily getting reports back on how they're doing *etc.*, but there is an

opportunity to celebrate that they've come through this program and have us a little bit more involved in that whole process." (University staff)

As with the Scholars, university staff suggested wider forms of communication could be used to promote the Scholarship to universities, e.g., through webinars, online events, newsletters etc. They also suggested it would be beneficial for the Trust to communicate with universities which member of Robertson Trust staff should be contacted in specific situations.

"There's that many different contacts so even having like specific contacts at The Robertson Trust, you know who to get in touch with if you needed them, who does what job." (University staff)

A key suggestion for improvement raised by the university staff related to the monitoring of Scholars' graduate outcomes. Participants noted that the Scholarship was said to have impacted Scholars in a range of ways. However, they emphasised that evidence of impact is largely anecdotal, having been drawn from discussions with individual Scholars over the years rather than published data. It was suggested it would be beneficial for the Trust to closely monitor and publish Scholars' outcomes to enable the impact of the programme to be measured against students who are not part of the Scholarship.

"How many scholars have actually come through? What have they gone on to do? How many of them survived the 4 years and progressed onto something else? You look at the website and there's a few alumni on there, a few things but I don't know if any of them are ours, I don't know who the [Scholars are] coming through this place, where did [they] go last year? It would really help me with being able to actually, or help us with being able to actually market this and make sure we're getting it to the right people and all of that sort of thing to see the outcomes, see the impact that its having. Absolutely positive, without a doubt the things we hear really, really positive but it would be nice to kind of quantify it a wee bit because we're all being asked to do it all the time anyway." (University staff)

It was also suggested that publication of this information would also help promote match funding arrangements, by giving universities evidence of the programme's impact which may encourage further match funded places.

6. Discussion and implications

As outlined in The Robertson Trust's 10-year strategy (launched in 2020), the Trust aims to reduce the impacts of poverty and trauma for people across Scotland. The support provided through The Robertson Scholarship to young people from backgrounds under-represented in university goes a considerable way to addressing that. Overall, the Robertson Scholarship and the Journey to Success programme were very well received and highly valued, both by current and former Scholars, and by school and university staff.

6.1 Impact of the Scholarship

The evaluation findings show how the Scholarship helps to level the playing field for students who may not be able to access the social and financial support that some of their peers can draw upon. The bursary was key to the perceived success of the Scholarship. For students from low income households, the ability to fund accommodation helped Scholars broaden their choice of university to consider universities further away from home, and enabled financial independence. As the review of the policy literature (Appendix A, Section 8.1) shows, students from underrepresented groups such as those eligible for the Robertson Scholarship are likely to encounter greater levels of challenge in accessing the most prestigious institutions, and this can impact on their later employment chances.

The Scholarship reduced Scholars' financial worries, allowing them to undertake less paid work, engage more with their studies and have time and money to socialise. This helped Scholars' mental health and enabled them to take part in activities offered via the Scholarship to enhance their CVs and participate in student life.

6.2 Range of support on offer

As part of the evaluation, a review of bursary and scholarship schemes funded both independently and through universities in Scotland was also undertaken (see Appendix A, Section 8.2). The review points to a range of other bursaries and scholarships available through independent funders (such as Santander, ICAS, Unite, the Helena Kennedy Foundation or the Cowrie Scholarship Foundation) and universities' access bursaries. While the bursary available through the Robertson Scholarship is lower than some of those offered by other independent funders, what makes The Robertson Trust Scholarship different to the others is the level of non-financial support which is offered as part of the Scholarship.

The importance of this was highlighted both by Scholars themselves and university staff. The Scholarship helped open up Scholars' access to a range of other supports which they might not otherwise have been able to access. Scholars spoke of the pride they felt in being awarded a Scholarship, and former Scholars highlighted the benefits of being part of a 'family' and a community through the Scholarship. The support on offer helped Scholars navigate their experiences as students and prepare for post-graduation destinations. Scholars said that without the Robertson Scholarship they would not have had access to the social and employment links they were able to forge as a result of the self-development and career opportunities on offer through the Scholarship, such as accessing internships, mentoring or volunteering.

6.3 Eligibility criteria

The review of the policy literature (Appendix A, Section 8.1) highlights the inequalities in terms of university access, retention and progression for students who are care experienced, estranged, carers, and those from low income backgrounds, including those who are from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds (particularly those who are from Gypsy Traveller backgrounds, or are of Black African or Black African Caribbean heritage). The links between attainment, HE participation and poverty and trauma are also evident in the review. In incorporating the groups with the greatest levels of need in its eligibility criteria, the Scholarship aligns well with the literature. In some respects, the groups eligible for the Scholarship are broader and more inclusive than those adopted by universities when considering widening participation criteria. Staff attending the university focus group noted how this can help address some of the gaps in support experienced by students. Scholars also welcomed the Scholarship's eligibility criteria, though some suggested the age criteria could be extended to those aged over 25 years in lieu of the length of time it can take students, especially those from care experienced or estranged backgrounds to reach university.

6.4 Areas for improvement

While feedback on the Robertson Scholarship was overall very positive, some more negative aspects were raised. Addressing these would help the Trust further increase the impact of the Scholarship on young people who have experienced poverty and trauma.

While the bursary helped reduce financial stress, it did not remove it. Some Scholars still faced significant financial difficulty at university, and Scholars suggested the bursary, particularly during the summer months, could be increased to better support those from low income households.

Another key issue was in terms of low awareness of the Scholarship, particularly among school teachers, which it was felt may result in some eligible students missing out on the opportunity to apply for the Scholarship. Participants highlighted the need for greater promotion of the programme to help encourage students to apply. Communicating the range of support on offer through the Scholarship (beyond the bursary) also identified as an area for improvement, with Scholars often only becoming aware of what assistance was available once they had reached a point of crisis.

The evaluation also points to varying levels of need identified amongst Scholars, with some groups (e.g., care experienced and estranged students) clearly experiencing higher levels of poverty and trauma than others which could impact on their experiences of university and of the Scholarship.

Finally, the evaluation findings highlight the need for closer, more formalised, relationships between the Trust, Scholars and external partners to ensure proactive, timely and targeted support can be provided to Scholars experiencing difficulties at university.

Overall, the Robertson Scholarship and the Journey to Success programme were very well received and highly valued, both by current and former Scholars, and by school and university

staff. The section below outlines participants' recommendations for the development of the Scholarship, before then considering what the implications might be for The Robertson Trust.

6.5 Participants' recommendations for the development of the Robertson Scholarship

Research participants suggested ways that the different elements of the Scholarship programme could be improved which may help the programme to operate even more successfully. These suggestions are summarised thematically below.

6.5.1. Improving access to the Robertson Scholarship

- Increase promotion of the Scholarship to teachers, university staff and prospective students (from S4 onwards) to ensure young people are able to make informed university choices and that all eligible students are able to apply.
- Build closer relationships with teachers and university staff to raise awareness of the Scholarship and the various forms of support offered by The Robertson Trust.
- Celebrate the success of current and former Scholars and work with them to promote the Scholarship to potential Scholars and support applicants.

6.5.2. Financial support

- Increase the value of the bursary available to Scholars, and consider paying all Scholars the same level of bursary, regardless of their living situation.
- Provide greater flexibility around the timing of bursary instalments and consider providing additional financial support to cover the summer months.
- Increase awareness of and improve the communication related to additional financial support available.

Social and mental health support

- Provide more in-person opportunities for social events for Scholars and explore the potential to increase engagement between Ambassadors, Scholars and the Trust.
- Increase awareness of available mental health support using a range of formats.

Post-graduation support

- Review and amend the content of training sessions to ensure they best reflect the needs of Scholars, including those on the professional pathways.
- Consider ways to raise awareness and inform Scholars nearing graduation of their options for support.
- Expand the range of opportunities available via internships, mentoring and networking to cater for a broader range of degrees and career pathways.

6.5.3. Improving communication and relationships

- Consider the best means of communicating with Scholars, teachers and university staff to inform them of the full range of support available through the programme.
- Expand opportunities for discussing Scholars' progress and ensure timely feedback to Scholars' annual progress reports.
- Explore options for closer relationships with schools and universities; identify a dedicated point of contact for care experienced and estranged Scholars and provide greater clarity on staff members' roles within the Trust.

It should be noted that some of the suggestions identified by participants have already been, or are in the process of being, addressed by the Trust, but may not yet have filtered through to participants. These include:

- Tightening up the Scholar Ambassador recruitment process, making attendance at the SAMH mental health training 'Working with Others' mandatory and introducing trauma training next year.
- The fact that the Trust is in the process of changing the way the internships scheme is promoted and funded, in line with changes to employment.
- Introducing a triage system to Scholars' annual reports in August 2023, whereby Scholars self-refer according to a list of issues that they need immediate support with.
- Exploring ways for nominators to be informed of the outcome of their nominees' applications.

6.6 Reducing the impact of poverty and trauma

The Scholarship offers an array of important support to young people from backgrounds under-represented in university in Scotland. However, at the moment, that support does not appear to be reaching all the Scholars who need it. To completely level the playing field between students from under-represented backgrounds and their more privileged peers, better awareness of signposting and access to support available through the Scholarship (e.g., mental health counselling, mentoring, internships etc.) and via universities and other organisations are needed.

Implementing the suggested improvements identified by participants outlined above would further help the Trust to achieve its aims of reducing the impact of poverty and trauma on young people. This would, however, require resources, and there will have to be some inevitable trade-offs between increasing awareness, expanding the reach of the programme or greater targeting of support to specific groups of students or individuals. Staff capacity and budgets will play a part in how the Trust moves forward from this evaluation, and the Trust will need to explore what changes are in scope within their current resources.

The evaluation findings suggest that the support currently on offer through the Scholarship has the potential to further reduce the impact of poverty and trauma, but that some changes are needed. The following points highlight some of the potential tensions in considering how best to respond to the participants' suggestions:

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- Expanding awareness of the programme may lead to increases in the number of applications from prospective students, meaning greater staff resource and funding are needed to assess these. This may impact on staff resources available to support existing Scholars.
 - Increasing the support available to specific groups of students (e.g., care experienced/estranged students) may reduce the support available for other groups. The Trust will need to consider whether there is funding and staff capacity to offer additional support to more Scholars.
 - The Scholarship's eligibility criteria is broader than those adopted by universities for widening participation. However, the age criteria currently excludes those who may take longer to reach university and may need additional support once there. Any expansion to the criteria may have implications for the resources available to support Scholars.
 - Increasing the bursary support on offer to students, especially to cover the summer months, would go some way to reducing the impact of poverty on Scholars. However, without additional resource this would mean fewer Scholars could be supported overall.
 - University staff highlighted examples in which the support offered by The Robertson Trust addressed gaps in university services (e.g., mental health counselling). The Trust may wish to consider whether this is the best use of their resources or whether there are other ways that they could help improve the mental health support offered by universities.

The Trust has the challenge now of deciding whether to potentially expand support and therefore dilute the levels of support provided to Scholars without the provision of additional funding, or to target its support towards specific groups of students, and reduce the overall levels of support other Scholars receive. Working more closely with schools and especially universities would help the Trust to address some of the gaps in support for Scholars, for example through better signposting to existing support available in universities, or through more frequent and proactive updates to universities to ensure students are aware of support before reaching crisis point. However, it should also be remembered that as this research was qualitative in nature, the suggestions provided by participating Scholars may not apply to all Scholars. Further survey-based research with Scholars, and with the school, college and university staff who nominate them, would be beneficial.

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8. Appendix A: Policy and bursary review

8.1 Policy context

The Robertson Trust Scholarship programme focuses on delivering improved outcomes in relation to university access, retention, attainment and graduate outcomes. The policy context for each of these areas is outlined below.

8.1.1. Accessing university

Patterns of university participation in Scotland

Young people from under-represented backgrounds in Scotland face a range of academic, social and financial barriers to accessing university. In 2021/22, 41.2% of Scotland's school leavers were in Higher Education (HE) ([Scottish Government, 2023](#)). However, access to HE in Scotland is unequal with disadvantaged young people over-represented in colleges and underrepresented in universities.

Access to university in Scotland has tended to be linked to social background, with much higher rates of students from the 20% least deprived postcodes⁶ entering university than those from the 20% most deprived postcodes (known as SIMD20). In 2016, the [Commission on Widening Access](#) set the target that by 2030, students from SIMD20 postcodes should represent 20% of entrants to Scottish universities. By 2026, the target is that 18% of entrants to Scottish universities should be from SIMD20 postcodes. The most recent *Report on Widening Access* ([SFC, 2023](#)) shows that 16.5% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to full-time first-degree courses were from SIMD20 postcodes, compared with 26.3% from the least deprived 20% of postcodes. While the proportion of university students from SIMD20 postcodes is increasing, progress is relatively slow, equating to an increase of 80 students from these postcodes across Scotland between 2020-21 and 2021-22.

Universities attended

The proportions of SIMD20 students varies greatly by institution. As illustrated in Table 8.1, SIMD20 students are disproportionately found in the more modern ('post-92') universities, with lower proportions in some 'ancient' universities⁷. There are also geographic differences, with higher proportions of SIMD20 students attending universities in the West of Scotland compared with those in the North East. For example, 31% of undergraduate degree entrants at the University of the West of Scotland are from SIMD20 postcodes, compared with 6% at

⁶ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a neighbourhood measure of deprivation used as a proxy for social background. It classifies postcode areas in Scotland according to income, health, employment, education, crime, housing, and access indicators.

⁷ Scottish universities are often classified in the following way: **Ancient:** Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews. **Pre-92:** Heriot-Watt University, University of Strathclyde, the University of Stirling, and University of Dundee. **Post-92:** Glasgow Caledonian University, University of the West of Scotland, University of Abertay Dundee, Queen Margaret University Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University and Robert Gordon University. **Other specialist institutions:** Glasgow School of Art, Royal Conservatoire Scotland, University of the Highlands and Islands.

Robert Gordon University of Aberdeen in 2021-22. Table 8.1 below also shows how the proportion of SIMD20 students at institutions varies over time. The Universities of St Andrews and Glasgow have increased their share of SIMD20 students since 2019/20 while others, such as the Universities of Aberdeen and Strathclyde, have seen a decrease during this time.

Table 8.1: Proportion of Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants at Scottish HEIs by institution and 20% most deprived, 2019-20 to 2021-22 (SFC, 2023)

University	2019-20		2020-21		2021-22	
	Proportion MD20	MD20	Proportion MD20	MD20	Proportion MD20	MD20
University of Aberdeen	8.6%	125	7.9%	115	7.9%	150
Abertay University Dundee	16.3%	175	16.8%	195	18.7%	215
University of Dundee	16.2%	335	16.4%	355	16.0%	335
Edinburgh Napier University	15.1%	375	12.5%	365	13.4%	410
University of Edinburgh	10.8%	190	9.1%	185	10.2%	245
Glasgow Caledonian University	22.5%	860	23.0%	950	22.1%	855
Glasgow School of Art	21.1%	50	25.8%	55	23.9%	75
University of Glasgow	13.5%	395	14.8%	505	16.7%	605
Heriot-Watt University	11.0%	165	13.4%	165	11.5%	170
University of the Highlands and Islands	10.5%	70	8.6%	60	12.1%	85
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	13.8%	110	13.1%	120	13.8%	120
Robert Gordon University	5.2%	115	6.1%	160	6.2%	135
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	19.4%	25	21.6%	25	16.7%	25
Scotland's Rural College	10.1%	15	13.5%	30	5.1%	15
University of St Andrews	11.0%	75	10.2%	65	14.9%	90
University of Stirling	13.1%	200	13.4%	220	12.9%	230
University of Strathclyde	19.6%	610	21.6%	690	17.7%	595
University of the West of Scotland	29.6%	1,080	29.9%	1,240	30.7%	1,240
Total Full-time First Degree Entrants	16.4%	4,970	16.7%	5,515	16.5%	5,595

University participation among widening access groups

Progress has been made in terms of widening access to students with care experience, with 2% of all undergraduate entrants in Scotland in 2021-22 being care experienced, compared with 1.5% of children under-18 who were looked after in 2021 (SFC, 2023). The number of students Scottish-domiciled full-time first degree entrants who identify as a carer has also increased in recent years, rising from 675 students in 2019-20 to 1250 in 2021-22, of whom 780 are aged 16-24. The number of students identifying as estranged has similarly risen from 655 in 2020-21 to 770 in 2021-22 (SFC, 2023). Among full-time first degree university entrants, 17.4% had a declared disability.

Prior attainment is a key factor in determining access to HE, and particularly to Scotland's 'ancient' universities. Among school leavers from the most deprived quintile, 34% achieved one or more Highers compared with 43% from the least deprived quintile. At Advanced Higher level (SCQF Level 7), the gap is significantly wider, with 10% of those from most deprived quintile achieving this versus 38% from the least deprived quintile ([Scottish Government, 2023](#)).

A key barrier impacting on attainment, and consequently HE participation, is poverty. An evidence review undertaken for The Robertson Trust found care experienced young people, Gypsy/Travellers and White Scottish/British boys were most affected by the poverty-related attainment gap during school years ([Poverty Alliance, 2021](#)).

Ethnicity is also a factor. More than one in ten (10.3%) of full-time first-degree entrants in 2021-22 were from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background ([SFC, 2023](#)). This is higher than the proportion of people from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background (4.5%) in the Scottish population as a whole ([Audit Scotland, 2022](#)). However, Black, Asian or minority ethnic students are under-represented in some Scottish universities ([Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020](#)), which is partly explained by the close relationship between ethnicity and poverty, with Black, Asian or ethnic minority students (particularly Black African/African Caribbean young people) more likely to come from SIMD20 postcodes than white students.

Barriers to accessing university

The cost of attending university can be a major barrier to access. Scottish-domiciled students have their tuition fees paid by the Scottish Government but they must still fund their living costs – either through contributions from student loans and bursaries, their parents/family, part-time work, or other options such as scholarships. Cost can also influence where students choose to study. Attitudes to student loan debt and the cost of accommodation can lead some students, predominantly those from lower income households, to choose to study locally to reduce their costs. Research by Minty ([2021](#)) and Riddell et al. (2023) also points to the role of parental influence and regional culture, with students from the West of Scotland more likely to live at home regardless of their social background. Recently published research from the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities Study ([COSMO, 2023](#)) of English school leavers shows the continued impact of socioeconomic background on young people's university aspirations – both in terms of whether young people plan to study in university or college, and the type of university they intend to apply to. Those from working class families were less likely to have applied or intend to apply to university compared with those with parents in managerial or professional occupations (55% vs 77%), and were less likely to want to attend one of the UK's 24 research-intensive universities which are part of the Russell Group. They were also more likely to want to live at home while studying.

Care experienced and estranged young people face particularly high barriers in accessing university, including lower rates of school attainment and higher chances of leaving school at 16 ([Scottish Government, 2023](#)), due to factors such as disrupted schooling, multiple placements and childhood trauma. Qualitative research with care experienced and estranged students in the north east of Scotland ([Minty and Vertigans, 2021](#)) found they tended to enter university later, often via articulation routes which allowed them to enter second or third year of a university degree with a Higher National Certificate or Diplomas (HNC/D) from college. In

a survey of care experienced students in Scotland by [CELSIS](#), the majority of respondents reported receiving no help with their applications and having limited wider support networks to assist them.

8.1.2. Staying in, and making the most of, university

Once young people from under-represented backgrounds have accessed university, their rates of retention tend to be lower than their more advantaged peers. The data for 2020-21 into 2021-22 ([SFC, 2023](#)) show a retention rate of 88.6% for students from SIMD20 postcodes compared with 94.2% of students from the 20% least deprived postcode areas. Retention rates are also lower for disabled students and for some ethnic groups (e.g., Black, African and Caribbean students). Research identifies difficulties faced by under-represented students in terms of 'fitting in' at university ([Reay et al., 2013](#)). For young people from lower income household or from families or schools where going to university is not the norm, it can be difficult to develop a sense of belonging. For care experienced or estranged young people, stigma can be an additional barrier ([Costa et al., 2020](#)). Scottish Government data ([SFC, 2023](#)) show care experienced students are more likely to discontinue their studies, while research undertaken as part of the HERACLES project found care leavers were twice as likely to do so ([Harrison, 2017](#)). Research has found carers were four times more likely to discontinue their studies ([Carers Trust Scotland](#)). Among the estranged students in research undertaken with estranged students for the Scottish Government ([Minty et al., 2022](#)), interruptions to study, repeated years and thoughts of 'drop out' were frequent.

Lack of money is a factor in student drop out, and a key barrier to young people's academic attainment and their ability to make the most of university. A recent survey of students by the National Union of Students Scotland ([NUS Scotland, 2023](#)) found that 37% had considered dropping out for financial reasons. Students cited not having enough money in their loan or bursary (34%) and the cost of living (19%) as reasons for dropping out. An earlier survey of students by NUS Scotland ([2022](#)) highlights the inadequacy of Scottish student support, with 68% of survey respondents stating they had to turn to other avenues for support as their loan/bursary did not cover their costs. Finances are especially precarious for care experienced and estranged students. NUS Scotland ([2022](#)) found a third of estranged students had experienced homelessness. The most recent survey by NUS Scotland ([2023](#)) showed that 35% of respondents had been unable to pay their rent at some point (compared with around half of estranged students; care experienced students and those on low incomes). Managing finances over the summer months have been found to be challenging for students, particularly those from widening access groups ([NUS Scotland, 2023](#); [Minty et al., 2022](#)).

Part-time work is commonly undertaken by students, but those from lower income households tend to work longer hours which impacts on students' engagement, attainment and ability to socialise. Students report that loans and SAAS bursaries tend not to cover all of a students' basic needs. Three-fifths of students responding to NUS Scotland's survey ([2023](#)) undertook paid work alongside their studies. Almost half of these (47%) worked between 10 and 20 hours per week, while 16% worked 20 to 30 hours, and 10% did more than 30 hours per week. Undertaking too much paid work can impact negatively on students' academic studies, their ability to socialise and their physical health ([McGregor, 2015](#); [Minty et al., 2022](#); Riddell et al., 2023).

Price rises in energy, food and accommodation costs have not been matched in student support. Asked to state how they had responded to increases in the cost of living since 2022, almost two-thirds (63%) of students said they had cut back their spending on food and essentials, while 43% had used less fuel and 47% had stopped or reduced socialising with friends ([Sutton Trust, 2023](#)). A survey of more than 8000 students at 14 Russell Group universities found that a quarter of students regularly went without food or necessities because they couldn't afford them, while 72% of students felt their mental health had suffered as a result of the cost of living crisis and 54% felt their academic performance had suffered ([Russell Group Students' Union, 2023](#)). Among young people from low income households the impact is likely to be even more severe.

Recent research with students illustrates how the cost of living crisis is encouraging more students to commute ([APPG, 2023](#); [NUS Scotland, 2023](#); [COSMO, 2023](#)). However, those who travel to university have also reported reducing the frequency of their journeys ([Sutton Trust, 2023](#)), missing classes and social events ([NUS, 2023](#)) as a result of the cost of doing so.

Worrying about where to live and how to afford food, as well as feelings of not fitting in, can negatively impact students' mental health. Almost three-quarters (74%) of more than 15,000 Scottish students who responded to the Mental Health Foundation's survey ([2021](#)) reported low well-being, while a third (36%) reported either moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression. Furthermore, two-thirds (66%) of students who responded to the NUS Scotland survey ([2023](#)) said their mental health had been impacted by their money worries. This rose to 83% among estranged students, 79% of those with caring responsibilities; 78% of those with low income; 76% of those who are care experienced; and 75% of disabled students.

Some groups of young people (e.g., carers, care experienced, estranged) experience particularly high rates of poor mental health. Young people may have experienced trauma as a result of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect. Estranged students report significant challenges in accessing appropriate trauma informed counselling through universities or the NHS ([Minty et al., 2022](#); [Blake et al., 2020](#)). More widely, young people have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Research by NUS points to the pandemic's impact on students' poor mental health ([NUS, 2020](#)) and its impact on young people's health, attainment and motivation ([COSMO, 2023](#)).

8.1.3. Moving on from university

Graduate outcomes also differ according to students' backgrounds ([SFC, 2023](#)). Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree graduates from Scotland's universities from SIMD20 postcodes, disabled students, Black, Asian and ethnic minority students and care experienced students are all less likely than their more advantaged peers to be in positive destinations 15 months after graduation. The Commissioner for Fair Access ([2020](#)) reported that SIMD20 students are underrepresented among postgraduate students and that first degree graduates from SIMD20 postcodes are less likely to progress to postgraduate study, with strong links in rates of progression between subject studied and neighbourhood deprivation.

Estranged students have been found to struggle with the transition between graduation and entering either employment or further study ([Stand Alone, 2020](#); [Minty et al., 2022](#)). Without parental support, graduates prioritised financial and accommodation security over finding work or further study which suited their interests and aspirations.

8.1.4. The impact of scholarships and bursaries

Studies have shown the positive benefits mentoring can provide to young people facing multiple challenges. A rapid review by the Poverty Alliance ([2021](#)) supported the use of mentoring as a solution to the poverty-related attainment gap but noted the lack of evaluation evidence on mentoring in Scotland and the poor provision of free tutoring for children and young people. An evaluation of MCR Pathways Social Bridging Finance Initiative ([Biggs et al., 2019](#)) demonstrated how the initiative impacted on care experienced young people's staying on rates, school attainment, aspirations and positive post-school destinations. Students in receipt of financial scholarships interviewed as part of research with estranged students ([Minty et al., 2022](#)) and with disadvantaged students in the North East of Scotland ([Minty and Vertigans, 2021](#)) spoke of how these eased, though did not remove entirely, their worries about money, allowing them to work fewer part-time hours and focus on their studies. A review of contributory factors to poor mental health and wellbeing among college and university students undertaken in Scotland for the NUS, highlights the importance of providing support at pre-entry, induction and during exam times ([Oloyede et al., 2020](#)).

8.2 Bursary and scholarship schemes

As part of the evaluation, a review of bursary schemes in operation in Scotland was undertaken. To ensure the scope of this review was manageable within the time and budget, the review was restricted to programmes, scholarships and bursaries provided via independent organisations and universities to Scottish-domiciled students enrolled in Scottish HE courses. Scholarships funded by individuals have been excluded from this review, as have programmes which provide support to school pupils whilst still in school (such as the EY Foundation Smart Futures programme for S5 pupils and the Social Mobility Foundation Aspiring Professionals programme).

8.2.1. Independently funded bursaries and scholarships

Six different scholarships, bursaries and grants were considered. These included:

- Santander Universities Scholars Programme (£30,000 bursary over the course of 3 years, plus access to activities to support individuals' student experience and help to develop their employability skills);
- ICAS Foundation Programme for finance and accounting students (up to £2,500 per year, plus mentoring, internship and graduate roles);
- Helena Kennedy Foundation bursary (£2,250 bursary plus some scholarships offered in partnership with universities, plus additional support), <https://www.hkf.org.uk/hkf-awards/he-awards/>;

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- Unite Foundation Scholarships (free accommodation for up to three years);
 - Wheatley Foundation Bursaries (£1500 grant for full-time students/ £750 for part-time to assist with costs of study);
 - Carnegie Trust Undergraduate Tuition Fee Grants (fees only).

Of these, the programmes provided by Santander, ICAS and the Helena Kennedy Foundation are most comparable with The Robertson Trust Scholarship, in that they consist not just of a bursary, but are complemented with an additional programme of support for Scholars.

The Santander programme provides a significant bursary to students; a total of £30,000 over three years, equating to £8,500 plus an additional £1,500 personal development grant per annum. The Scholarship's eligibility criteria are similar to that of The Robertson Scholarship, though it is also suitable for mature students and refugees. Like the Robertson Scholarship, students are invited to attend events as part of the scholarship aimed at improving their professional and networking skills, and activities to support individuals' student experience and help to develop their employability skills. Students must commit to complete a series of evaluation surveys throughout the programme, some of which, like the Robertson Scholarship, are mandatory. Each student is assigned a designated Santander Universities Relationship Manager (RM) as their main point of contact with the programme and they are expected to be in touch with them every two months. While 100 students were funded through the Scholarship, its long-term nature is unclear; the website notes it is only for those students graduating in 2025.

The ICAS Foundation Programme for finance and accounting students is aimed at young people from family backgrounds with limited resource. To be eligible, applicants should be studying an accountancy or finance related degree at any Scottish university, should have an annual household income of less than £34,000 and be in receipt of a SAAS bursary. The Programme includes a bursary of up to £2,500 per year for the length of the degree paid in two instalments over the course of each year. Scholars are matched with an experienced Chartered Accountant who provides mentoring throughout their time in university. Penultimate and final year students are also provided with information about opportunities for internship and graduate roles. Of the students who graduated in 2020, 70% were accepted into a paid summer placement in their penultimate year and 74% went straight into employment or further education after graduating.

The Helena Kennedy Foundation is similar to the ICAS Programme above. It offers a bursary of £2,250 per annum for the duration of the degree to students able to demonstrate they face severe hardship who are undertaking Access courses or Scottish Highers in FE colleges who are moving on to HE level courses. As well as the bursary, the award provides some scholarships offered through partnerships with universities. Students are assigned a named contact to advise and signpost. They also have access to free training sessions, work shadowing, work placements and volunteering opportunities. As with the Robertson Scholarship, students are expected to report annually on their progress.

The Unite Foundation Scholarship and the Wheatley Foundation Bursary differ to The Robertson Trust Scholarship in that they only provide financial support. In the case of Unite, this offers students free accommodation and bills for up to three years. This is open to estranged and care experienced students who are aged under 25 and studying their first undergraduate degree at one of five universities in Scotland and living in specific halls of residence identified by the funder. There is also the opportunity to join a community of care experienced and estranged students from across the UK. So far, the charity has awarded 721 scholarships to students from across the UK. The Wheatley Group offers a bursary to both FE and HE students. Since 2016, the Foundation has supported 382 students. The bursaries are available to people living in homes owned by Wheatley Homes Glasgow, Wheatley Homes South, Wheatley Homes East and Loretto Housing, as well as those who live in a home factored by or renting with Lowther.

Finally, the Carnegie Trust provides Undergraduate Tuition Fee Grants of up to £1820 per annum for undergraduate students at Scottish universities. Carnegie fund around 250-300 such awards each year to students educated in Scotland and from a low income household, who are not eligible for public grants or loans, towards the cost of tuition fees. They must not have already graduated with a degree. Most of the students supported by the awards previously attended college or university but withdrew before completing their studies.

8.2.2. Scholarships and Access bursaries available via universities

A range of Scottish universities provide financial support only, or support for accommodation, in the form of Access Bursaries to students from different widening access eligibility criteria. The scholarships available through Robert Gordon University are the only ones which have additional elements other than bursaries and accommodation support. The scholarships reviewed include:

- University of Edinburgh – Access Edinburgh Scholarship provides care experienced and estranged students with an annual bursary of £5,000. Bursaries of between £1,000 and £3,000 are also awarded to students on incomes lower than £34,000. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/student-funding/undergraduate/uk-eu/access-awards/access-edinburgh>
- University of Glasgow – Undergraduate Talent Scholarships (Scottish-domiciled students on their first degree who can provide evidence that their circumstances are such that they may find it difficult to take up a place at the University for financial or other reasons are eligible for a £1,500 bursary which is provided for each year of a degree. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/scholarships/undergraduatetalentscholarships/>
- University of Glasgow – Sanctuary Scholarship for refugees who are unable to access funding through SAAS. Provides tuition fee support, as well as a £5,000 stipend for study costs. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/scholarships/sanctuariescholarships/>

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- University of St Andrews - St Andrew's Access Scholarship for care experienced students and those with a household income of less than £40,000. Total awards of between £4855 and £51.21 per annum are awarded (depending on income) via a combination of maintenance bursaries, contributions to accommodation and sports membership costs. <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/study/fees-and-funding/scholarships/scholarships-catalogue/undergraduate-scholarships/st-andrews-access-scholarship/>
 - University of Aberdeen – SIMD20 One Year Free Accommodation Offer to all Scottish-domiciled students from MD20 postcodes in self-catered halls of residence. <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/simd-accommodation.php>
 - Robert Gordon University – Access RGU Scholarships (four different scholarships with varying levels of support available, ranging in amount from £1,250 to £3,000 per annum). Eligibility is focused on those students from SIMD20/40 postcodes, care experienced students, carers, those with low incomes, and those from backgrounds underrepresented in HE. Depending on which of the four scholarships are awarded, additional support is also provided in the form of mentoring, support for dissertations and projects and opportunities for work placements. <https://www.rgu.ac.uk/study/apply/access-rgu/access-rgu-scholarships>
 - University of Stirling – The Reid Family Scholarship (Widening Participation) has three awards for first generation Scottish domiciled undergraduates who are offered £8,500 for each year of study to support with living costs. To be eligible, students must meet one from a list of additional widening access criteria. <https://www.stir.ac.uk/scholarships/general/the-reid-family-scholarship---widening-participation/>
 - University of Strathclyde – STAR Scholarships of £1,250 per annum are awarded to pupils from Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) schools with lower than average rates of progression to HE, those from SIMD20 postcodes, care experienced or estranged students, and recipients of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) recipients or Free School Meals. <https://www.strath.ac.uk/studywithus/scholarships/starscholarships/>
 - Heriot-Watt University – Heriot-Watt Widening Access Bursary (Scotland) offers Scottish-domiciled students £1,000 per year. Students from MD20/40 postcodes, SHEP schools, articulating students, those from the SWAP programme, care experienced students, those who are carers or are estranged are all eligible. <https://www.hw.ac.uk/uk/scholarships/access-bursaries-scotland.htm#:~:text=The%20Heriot%2DWatt%20Access%20Bursary,to%20help%20to%20wards%20living%20costs.&text=New%20Scottish%20students%2C%20starting%20in,widening%20participation%20backgrounds%20can%20apply.>

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- Glasgow Caledonian University – GCU Foundation Common Good Bursary offers students an annual stipend of £1,500 for a four-year degree to contribute to living costs, with additional support for graduation costs at the end of their degree. Scholarship students are expected to provide an annual report on their experiences, attend scholarship related events and make good academic progress each year.
<https://www.gcu.ac.uk/study/scholarships/undergraduate/gcu-foundation-common-good-bursary2>

An additional three scholarships offered through universities are aimed at increasing the participation of students from ethnic minorities:

- The Cowrie Scholarship Foundation for economically disadvantaged (with an annual household income of less than £25,000) British students (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) provides fees plus £8,000 annual maintenance stipend for duration of course. Bespoke mentoring is also provided.
<https://www.rcs.ac.uk/apply/finance/scholarships/cowrie-scholarship-foundation/>
- The Andrew Levy Scholarship supports students from Black African and Caribbean heritage with a household income of less than £34,000 per annum to study at the University of Edinburgh. The scholarship covers the costs of tuition fees and a stipend of £5,000 per annum for living expenses. [The Andrea Levy Scholarship | The University of Edinburgh](#)
- James McCune Smith Undergraduate Scholarship for students from African/African-Caribbean backgrounds whose circumstances are such that they may find it difficult to take up a place at the University of Glasgow. This provides a bursary of £2,000 for the first year of undergraduate study.
<https://www.gla.ac.uk/scholarships/jamesmccunesmithundergraduatescholarship/>

To conclude, The Robertson Trust Scholarship provides a medium level of financial support compared with other independently funded scholarships and those provided by universities. Whilst the levels of funding provided are lower than scholarships such as that offered by Santander or the Cowrie Scholarship Foundation, what makes The Robertson Trust Scholarship different to the others included in this review is the level of non-financial support which is offered as part of the Scholarship. It thus bears similarities to the ICAS and Helena Kennedy Foundation, which also provide mentoring, training and networking opportunities, although The Robertson Trust bursary is higher than these for some students. Among the universities, the only scholarship/ bursary which is comparable to the all-round support provided by the Trust is the Access RGU Scholarship offered by Robert Gordon University which includes some mentoring and placement opportunities, and the Royal Conservatoire Scotland's Cowrie Scholarship Foundation which provides bespoke mentoring. However, these do not appear to provide the same range and depth of opportunities that are offered through The Robertson Trust Scholarship.

9. Appendix B: Overview of Training sessions

9.1 Mandatory Training Sessions 2023 - 2024

Achieving Success and Accessing Support

TS1 is a mandatory session offered to 1st year Scholars in semester 1. This session will provide Scholars with an overview of all aspects of The Journey to Success Programme that will be available to them throughout their degree in order for Scholars to thrive and achieve success throughout their academic journey. The session will touch on mental health and wellbeing at university as well as discussing how to get the most out of your time of being a scholar. Scholars will have the chance to engage with fellow Scholars and a member of staff from the Scholarship Team and there will be some time for Scholars to ask questions.

TS2 – Professional Communications

TS2 is a mandatory training session offered to 1st year Scholars in semester 2. This session is an interactive workshop to explore the importance of personal statements and refine the art of expressing your 'why.' Scholars will get a chance to enhance their written and verbal communication skills and explore positive language for impactful self-presentation. From boosting interview skills to improving CVs and cover letters, this session offers valuable insights for navigating the professional world. Communicate with purpose and skill as you sharpen your professional toolkit.

TS3 – Recruitment Practices and Company Values

TS3 is a mandatory training session offered to 2nd year Scholars in semester 1. In this session Scholars will begin to think about different recruitment processes. This may be for a part-time job, an internship, or a volunteering opportunity (as well as starting to think about your ideal workplace after graduation). The session will look at how companies 'brand' themselves and why an organisations values are so important - even before you apply to work with them. The session will touch on The Robertson Trust's values and encourage Scholars to start thinking about their own personal values too. Scholars will have the chance to engage with fellow Scholars and a member of the Scholarship Team, as well as ask any questions.

TS4 – Building Personal Resilience

TS4 is a mandatory training session offered to 2nd year Scholars in semester 2. This session will explore the relationship between resilience and success and practical ways Scholars can showcase their ability to tackle challenges. Scholars will learn to navigate tough questions with the STAR technique. This workshop aims to provides practical insights to help Scholars navigate the path to success.

TS5 – Preparing for Internships and Employment

TS5 is a mandatory training session offered to 3rd year Scholars in semester 1. This session explores internships; why they are beneficial and what Scholars can gain from completing an internship at the end of their 3rd year. The session will discuss The Robertson Trust's Internship Scheme and provide details of how and when to apply for an internship. Scholars will get a chance to look at some scenario-based examples that they may face when applying for or completing an internship, and practise competency based questions.

