Interviewer
Yes, OK, great. So tell me a little bit about yourself. Like, where did you grow up and how did you end up at X?

I grew up in D. I. Oh my God, how did I end up X? I did the X Scholars scheme when I was in college, so I was in my first year of college and I did it around October, November, and then COVID hit and then.

Associate will be like residential part of the scheme and then I didn't get to do it because obviously we're all stuck at home. So we did it online instead. But then I kind of looked when I was looking for unis in year 13, I realised like no where does the politics course I want apart from X anyway. And so as I already like the university, it's only university, I've got to visit like apart from London Birmingham that I'd already seen. So I was like, yeah, I like X and that was my first choice.

Nice. OK. So you said you're studying politics, right? Is it politics with anything?

IR, International relations.

Cool. And do you know what you want to do with it? Or are you still figuring out some what?

I mean, I guess because my placement year, I would like to do something a bit diversity based, but that is my personal interest anyway.
But yeah, I think my placement is kind of given me a bit more of a push before I was like happy to do anything. And then like I'm only six months in, I'm like, you know this is kind of where I'd want to go.

Nice. That's good news.

OK. So we're just going to talk a little bit now about when you were like preparing for university when you're at college. So did your parents or carers go to university?

No, it was just yeah, non parents didn't go

OK and any siblings that older siblings?

my half brother did. However he stayed like very local. I think it was a 10 minute drive from where we lived. So OK, no one's gone too uni. Yeah.

Yeah. And how did you experience support from your family whilst you were going through the process?

I guess 'cause it was my mum's not been to university. It was a bit hard 'cause. She didn't know how to support me. And a few of my family members did. But then they were a lot older and like, went before you even had to pay university fees. So it was about a bit like the help isn't there, but they're very supportive and like just kind of like, yeah, do what you want. They're like, positive. But they couldn't give me direct help. Yeah.

So that's of the kind of knowledge. But yeah, they supported you wanting to go.

Yeah.

OK. And how about what kind of support was available at college for university application?
We had a careers advisor. He was really nice.
I did sit with him once because I was really going to do. I did. I did the geography strand of the scholars scheme. So I was originally going to do geology and then one day I was like, no, I don't do geology. I don't do politics and don't go to uni and I think that's like very like teenager. Like anyway just like.

You have to make a decision at the age of like 1718. It's very wild, but it's very nice. You just kind of help me for my grades kind of ask me what I liked and then kind of didn't push me, but kind of said is there anything you'd like to do with each of these subjects or where do your skills lie? I was like, well, I'm not good at science, so I don't know why I want to do geology, geography. I don't enjoy. And politics is one I do enjoy. So I went through that route. I just, but there were options other than going to university. They were very open.

OK, that's good. And did you have like support with writing the personal statement when you got to that point or?

Yeah, I think we did. It was very long time ago. Now when I think about it, it's like 4 years ago, yeah.

But I think we did. I remember having meetings where we discussed it, but I don't think we had help writing it. Mm hmm.

And what about like the process, you know, in terms of UCAS, did they introduce you to what UCAS was and how you put your application on there and things?

I think they kept us in date with the great deadline stuff like that, I think because it was A6 form college, it was a bit more of it was very open. If you wanted to do apprenticeship. Here's the apprenticeships, whereas like the school I went to previously was like, no, you go to university or that's it. So they're very open. They just helps deadlines. And if you were going to university, I think they gave you extra support.

OK. How do you feel generally about the level of support that you offered?

Good. Obviously it was quite a few years back looking back now, but.
I remember feeling quite positive. I wasn't scared at any point or obviously you're a bit scared about the rejections and everything, but I wasn't like fearful of the process itself.

That's good. Sounds like you've felt like quite well supported. Yeah. And do you remember if any university came into your college to talk about university or options?

I don't think so. I think X was our only when we had apprenticeships.

Like people with different apprenticeships come in, but never universities.

OK, OK. And so you said that there was like a variety of options available. Did most people in your college end up going to university or?

From what I remember, it was a huge college. I think it was about 1000 per year, so I wouldn't like a lot, but of the people I know, I think it was pretty 5050. I know people that like doing apprenticeships and they're working in like like they're doing really well in their firms and that right university.
I think out of my close group, all of us went to UNI but I think we all had a different like reasons why.

OK. OK, nice.

Did you take part in any extra correct care activities whilst you were in college?

Obviously, COVID kind of took out that aspect in my in your 13, but in year 12 I was in the formal debate club. If COVID hadn't happened, I would have been the like the President of the club, but we couldn't do it.
Yeah. Did you find that that kind of had any relation to your application for university? Did you talk about it in your application? Did it give you any skills or?

I think I talked about it in my personal statement. I think, again, such a long time ago but.

We it was very nice club. It was very because it was formal debate. It kind of made you think about things a bit more and I think it's a good process. I try and do I use, I use the skills I learned there at uni to where I look at something go what's this side? What's this side but.
It was a nice environment blow to different people, so I think it kind of especially my college itself helps me move into university just because it was a more.

It was more of a college and a sick form, so you could just leave whenever you wanted. You could go grab lunch. She could.

Like it felt a nice transition into university life, being a bit more independent.

Yeah, great. And did you have any financial concerns when you were considering higher education?

Yeah, I'm not from a very like, well off area, which is why I've got onto the scholars scheme but I worked. I started working when I was just about 17 and I worked all way through college, so I was balancing like the Personal Life school and then work all in one. It was very tiring, but I just wanted to one come to university with skills just in case I chose not to do my placement year and I didn't want to leave university about any skills and I was like it will be nice to have extra money when I do go to university and it did help my first year because I didn't have to think every first year kind of like spends all their money.
But I'd already because I've been working for a few years before. I'd already kind of done the mental thing of this is how I budget, so I kind of do that splurge that a lot of people do.

Yeah, that's amazing. So you had more of a like, a handle on earning and spending money.

Yeah. It was a very long, long winded process of, like, thinking for it. But it's what I decided was best just in case very much like, just in case kind of person.

That's. Yeah. That's very forward thinking for a 17 year old. Yeah. And how about things, you know, like the loans and paying for accommodation?

I think the accommodation was like one of the scariest parts and I think especially moving to the South has been a bit scary and I think back then I kind of knew all the South's a bit more expensive and now I could be like, no, it's a lot more expensive, but I guess it was that of, like, not knowing where I'd be going if I'd be going like a bit north, a bit South and then how that would change, like even though I'd get the same student loan, it was always a bit of a worry of what they end up in London. I can't afford anything or whatever. I end up north and it's all fine.

OK. And did you were you able to get support either like actual financial support or the moral support? Or just information about the financial stuff when you were thinking about it?

 I think they kind of told us that we need to choose student loans and go for the applications, but I don't think they gave any information on what's the difference between a tuition loan and a maintenance loan. So going into that screen was kind of like, oh, I'm learning this now.

And so I kind of spent like 10 minutes kind of low my everything and then did the application just because that's big financial decision to make it 18 or 17. Yeah.

But yeah, so you kind of did it yourself mainly. Yeah just have learned it yourself and made sure that you understood it.

Yeah.

Yeah, fair enough. OK. So now if we move on to talk about X scholars, the actual programme when you did it. How did you end up taking part? Did you say somebody came to a school or did you get an e-mail?

Let me click on e-mail and I think it was a psych spread across that at the time I was interested in geography and I saw it and I was like, I fit bowls requirements. Maybe I should apply and I kind of thought about it and like if I deserve the place and I was like, no, I should just do it. If I deserve the place, I get the place. If not like, that's fine. Then I did. And then, yeah, nice.

OK. And how would you describe your experience of X scholars?

I really enjoyed it. I think again, it was very long time ago. But I remember getting on the train and being really excited. And it's been like, oh, like even the fact that they paid for our train tickets was really nice because normally that's about.

Can be like a £40 ticket and so I was like, wow, this is fun. This is interesting. And then it was a bit. It was very interesting. So I've never, like done that on my own where I just travelled to my random that I'd never been and just got picked up by someone in a red jumper. But it was quite fun and I think unfortunately, because of COVID, I think the experience wasn't the full experience because it was all online. And I think that was the only part I didn't enjoy as much because I was just sat in my room for a week like coming in and out of. Like webinars and stuff and that was. What it wants you can change that up, but given the time and given. Like knowledge of what we can do online so but something that I really enjoyed it that was good.

So you had, did you have one or two days where you came to campus before?

I think I only got one day I think I came to X for one day and then we were supposed to have another day but it got cancelled because it was like Oh no COVID we don't know what's happening then the lockdown happened not long after and then everything got moved online.

OK. And what did you hope to get out of X scholars when you start?

I kind of wanted to see one of geography was for me and one what X uni was like because I'd never. Been to. Oh yes, I have been. That's such a lie. I had been to a university. I did. A stem course at B University at one point, because I was very much just, I've moved from what I want to do very much. I think like one point I was like, I want to do maths and join the Army and I've done.

Like a huge change, but I've been to B University and did a course and I was like, this is fun. It was a residential so it was really interesting. We got to see in our own little.

Actually, we were in a hotel, but we got to stay on campus and just kind of do loads of different activities and then coming to, but it was a bit more like younger like I remember how old you were and did that 1415. So it was definitely more like, oh, do you want to do?

Science. At this stage it was a bit more early on in the like academic journey and then.

I think coming to X and doing like getting to in big seminar halls and lecture there. So that was like really weird. And so it was nice to experience. I really it kind of changed my view on university and how comfortable I'd be here I guess.

OK. Interesting. Tell me more about that. Like what was your view before and how did it change?

I think because I'd been to B University and the thing about universities in D, they were all just there. And so it didn't feel like anything different. I just felt felt like, oh, I get to go inside a building I've seen before. But then obviously the whole like student like experiences or the idea of it's student experience is going to a different uni and travelling away from home and being like hours away and just doing your own thing. And so when I actually got the train I was like, Oh my gosh, this is really like a long way away and like it was interesting, just like for a day being in the life of uni student going around to different places, exploring the buildings and stuff like that, you have to still remember going to the Y building and just sitting there and being really scared.
Like some student older students coming in and be like, hi, This Is Us and it was really it was a really nice experience.

Yeah. OK. So do you feel like the your experience of going to Aston for, you know, even though it was not quite the same because it was really familiar to you? Do you feel that that was like an important part of your journey towards thinking, actually? Yeah. I do want to go into higher education kind of like coupled with the X scholars. Or is that not part of it?

I think it did. I went to a school like a secondary school where. It unfortunately it was a culture where we went to university. If you didn't go to university, you'd kind of ruined your life at like, even at the age of 16 it was very much that conversation. And so when I went to Aston, it was more of what do I want to study at university. But when I came to X, it was more of do I want to go to university. And so I kind of like they're both exploratory like experiences. But I think the one coming to writing scholars was a bit older, knew a bit more about myself, knew about, like, where I'd kind of wanted to go. So it was more of Like career, not career wise, but more subject wise and so coming to writing is more like is this university for me and is is the university kind of experience for me and like the academic sense.

OK. Interesting. So by the time you join scholars, you kind of thought that you probably did want to go to university.

Yeah. Yeah. I think before that I kind of felt forced. Into it, and by the time I got to year 12, I was like, maybe that is for me because I didn't see any apprenticeships. I was interested in, like, my college is very good at giving different avenues, but I kind of knew I would kind of prefer the academic side of things rather than the practical, like I wanted to learn more about my subject before I went into the world. Yeah. Yeah.

OK, nice. And which parts of scholars did you enjoy? I know it's bit different because you didn't have the residential, but kind of, I know that there are, you know, academic components. And then there's the kind of social chatting to. Other students and also current X students. Which bits of it did you enjoy?

Again, because I've missed like a lot of the like social aspect, I got more of the academic side of it, which was I really did enjoy it. I think the only unfortunate thing about mine is that we all had to do a presentation. It was on the same topic. And I think on the last day it was, I just had the same thing about the same mountain about 5-7 times. And at that point I'd enjoyed the rest of the week. But that was my core memory of like sitting there for hours going. How many times I hear about them, no interruption.
And just like not having anything else in my mind, but then from what I remember, we did like we did webinars and seminars throughout the week and of like lectures about things. And then we got to do research tasks on our own. And sometimes we had things with current students at X. So it was a very, like, mixed bag, I guess, because I didn't get the social aspect. I Rick can't really speak on that. It was one day and I remember meeting a lot of people. I do remember.

A student saying to me. Oh yeah, I've been studying soils for my dissertation for the last few months and that I think that was what made me go. I don't want to do geography.

I remember it were like, really clearly and go, Oh my God, I can't do that. I'm not. I can't sit in a lab and think about soil, but then the whole experience made me what go. I really like X. And if I was going to study anywhere, I was going to make the journey. I'd rather it be so my life. That's it. Felt so welcoming already, just won the outreach programme.

The students here, they were very honest, but in a nice way, like there wasn't any. Like, obviously with, like retrospect, you can say like things about. Oh, don't apply to this university, but they were all so positive. It was really nice. And I think sometimes I speak to friends from other University. I don't hear that kind of like conversation. And even in the last six months, I've had so many nice things about X. And it's it's kind of nice and refreshing to know that hasn't changed in the time since year 12. And now. Yeah.

Amazing. OK. So you don't have to have anything for this, but is there anything that you think that universities can do to support students when they're in sixth form or college?

Around that age, yeah. I mean, speaking from a personal experience, I came from a very like deprived area where, like, I think out of all the people I grew up with, I'm the only one to go to university, whereas I didn't go to school in my area. I went to a grammar school, so it was like.
It's a mix of everyone around D who've got the greatest to get in. And so I was very much like in a different situation of where I went to school of where I lived. So when I was at home, I knew that like, I was like doing a lot of homework compared to my friends because other schools didn't support them in their university applications and they didn't push university because they thought they had that mindset of are you from an area? This is how many people from the area go to university. You're not going to be the one.
And so I grew up with friends who were told they can't get to university and they didn't try because they'd always grown up with it. And it was very, like, unfair, I think, even from an age because then, like, I can't say at 11, I was ready to go to university. And yet that day was the same age when the decision was made for them. And that's like something, I guess that's a bit too.
Like philosophical, if I'm going that too far. But umm. I think support needs to be extended to all forms of like society and I know, two weeks ago me and Co worker went to a conference about outreach and transitions and it was so nice because I know they've worked with X previously. I think Bright network and. there were two really good.

Groups and they work with students in different ways and like one of them. Matched PhD students with students from like underrepresented areas, and it was a really nice idea of like giving someone going. Hi. I'm like at the end of like towards the end of my like academic. Like learning experience, I guess because you're always learning, but I'm like pure education and someone that's still like working their way into it. And it was really nice scheme. And I think we need to build more skills in young people.

Actually, because getting careers is very hard and like even with a degree you can't guarantee you're getting a job. And so I think even if we can support people with going towards degrees, we should still offer it wherever we can.

It being kind of like other skills.

Yeah, even like public speaking, essay writing reports that all comes into university very, like, very tightly. But then it benefits students like elsewhere, like I.

I was really nervous about doing presentation when I did the writing scholars and it kind of helped, especially on sat in a webinar.

And that doesn't mean I'm good at public speaking. But it did give me an opportunity to work out how that would be different to doing one of my friends in school. And so it was very like, I think more opportunities on that. But I know X does sign in some ways.

Yeah. OK. So just to recap, just so that I've understood kind of like what you're suggesting is more like
Provide opportunities to people in schools in all sorts of areas. To kind of gain skills that will be useful for life, whether it's in university or not, but also to kind of plant that seed that they could go to university if they want to. And give them that the confidence and skills. Yeah, if that is something they end up wanting to do rather than, you know, them being ruled out from from the get go.

Yeah. Because I know. Sorry to continue.

No, please.

I do know a lot of the schools like schools that had a higher, like, greater attainment in my area did university talks and they had universities come in, whereas the schools that weren't in those areas did career talks. So they were named differently despite like Both like I know my my previous school had a career one, but they heavily pushed on the University one but the other ones focus on career and even that's a small difference. But yeah, making sure they're being when people do do outreach, it's goes everywhere, not just specific schools.

Yeah, absolutely fantastic. OK, so going to move on just to briefly talk about your experience of university. So how are you finding university? You feel like you were ready when you came here?

Yeah, I think so. I think I think we're university is a bit of a wild experience anyway because it's a lot of people. It's been the first time away from your parents like finding a new city or town. It's already weird, but I remember feeling quite I'm very much just like, deal with it. I know that's not the best way, but I go into a situation I just like scope out as I go and I try not to think about it like dwell on it too much before because then I will get nervous. So I just kind of went into it and just went into halls. I was like, hi. Or I'll introduce myself constantly and I've had a really good experience at X. I think obviously there's times where you think, oh. Like is this right and whatever, but I don't think it was X that caused. It was more my personal circumstances. And so and even then, getting a lot of support from X's been lovely. I think the welfare team, like academics, DAS, like, there's always a bit of help wherever you need it. So it's quite nice. It's very well signposted of which looking for what we look like. Sometimes it was hard, especially when applying to find things, and I think X was very straightforward.

OK. And do you feel like X scholars made you? I know you said it impacted sort of you kind of seeing yourself at university, but do you think it made you more ready for university in any way?

I guess it did in terms of the academic sense because I can't I didn't get the experience of coming to halls and like living and going to the latches and everything which is just like I can't blame that on anyone apart from like just circumstances but.
I felt a bit more. I understood what I was going to get into. Like the independent learning side where because I think my I don't know if it's the same for every strand. But I was definitely given a project a little bit of like seminar lecture work and then kind of do the research on your own and then come back. And so at the time, I was like oh, wow, that's quite a lot. But then I got to university. I was like, oh, no, this is what it's going to be. But then there's also studysmart, which I I did like, I remember finding that really helpful when I started.

OK. So I guess it was a mix of like the outreach kind of getting you a bit, giving you a bit of a like small glimpse into what the live site can. Then a good like transition programme to getting you in. Yeah, fantastic, amazing.
Are there any particular challenges or barriers that you face at university now?

Speak like now. I feel like it's a bit hard. 'cause. I'm doing a placement. Yeah. So I'm not like as a student. I think previously I've had some personal circumstances that I think weren’t dealt with the best way by my department, where they were kind of just. I don't think they followed the proper policy. Unfortunately, from what I know of staff. So when I went for help I was told, OK, you can come back or you can defer again.
And there wasn't any like outreach. And I know now that there's like SAFES is like way to reach out to students and help them through and kind of give them plans. But I get that situation. So when I found about it, I was like, oh, I was supposed to get support somewhere along the line. And I just never did. But then there was also other circumstances where like welfare and like, the disability service were really helpful. And so they kind of balance what I'd miss from my department, but then
I guess in my first year I did have a really bad experience. I lived with some not very nice people in halls and no times when it did feel. Sometimes it is just like throwing a bunch of people into a group regardless of them being 18 is like it can be hard, but then sometimes it felt a bit like discriminatory where it was myself and another non white woman in the halls and then plus someone who like.
Is like on the autism spectrum. And so we felt very much like othered. And so the three of those were kind of like that we had to see in our rooms because we'd be like, have rude things and I didn't know at the time I could go to my Hall warden and ask for help. I didn't know I could get moved from my room. And so a lot of the time, first you felt a bit scary. And I felt, apart from my friends, like, I felt very alone because I couldn't. My course was.

You can meet controversial people on the politics course, and so I didn't feel safe on my course like I had previously in education, but I didn't feel safe in halls either, so it was just very hard until I moved to 2nd year and then me and my friends created our site safe space at home and kind of fell a bit more supported by like other services by the university. But that was more just circumstance and.
Sometimes you don't know what's going through other's mind, so you can't place a blame on it.

But yeah, that sounds really tough. A really tough experience in your first year. Like in halls.

Yeah, it was very interesting. It was very instant too. So that's what made it a bit more difficult to deal with whether we were being too whether we were blaming on things. It wasn't, if that makes sense. Like if we were overthinking the race difference. But it's what it is.

Do you think there's anything that you know, like you say, it's complicated sort of situation and you've just you've just moved to university. Is there anything you think the university could have done differently? Like you said, you weren't sure about how to get in touch with your Hall ward and, for example, would that have been better?

Yeah, I think there's a huge handbook you're supposed to read when you come to university, and I think it it's a lot of information all at once. And I think that could have been because I didn't have pictures of my whole wardens, but I kind of thought, why do I have that in my kitchen? And at no point, I don't think it was really.

Explained to us who they were and what they were for, and I know it's been worked, kind of. I know the living black at X has kind of like pushed that change in how Hall wardens are.

Like signposted students, but at the time I didn't know and I just kinda put up with the like scenario 'cause, I thought it was kinda like put up and shut up, like that's kind of this is the universe. So you're gonna have people that leave mould in your flat like it's student experience and then we're bit of retrospective like no, that was a bad experience and I knew which I'd known where to get support, but ultimately I still had a good time at university Despite that.

Yeah. Sounds like you've done like a good job to overcome some challenging circumstances.

Is there anything more broadly that you think the university could be doing to support students, and that is not already existing?

I think there's not heavy enough like. Weight in community in X and I think that's just a general thing. There's. I think it's very hard for a university to be like to force a community to go on. But I think that could be worked on with schools and departments. And I think there are a few schools and departments like doing that, which I've learned from my placement year, but I think.

If we kind of embedded that in the like school structure and the teaching and learning structure, I think it'd be nice way. OK. So kind of like, so obviously there's like the supports your services and the students union, which is kind of community, but you mean more within a school so that you feel part of your academic school, I think a lot of people see the student union as the social side of, like, meeting up, going for drinks, going for dinner, stuff like that or your personal interest.

And so I think we still need that community within the department. I've been very lucky and it's only since doing my placement here that I've been this lucky to like, meet with people like staff from my department, most students from my department and then.

It's a nicer community. I was very lucky last week to go to be the talk with the MP, and it was such a nice I've met people that are in my course. I've sat next to him. We didn't know each other because in my department there's no, you don't meet anyone unless you're elected together. You kind of don't talk and that's it.

Well, they know some have like coffee hours of staff and stuff like that, and I think I've seen on a lot more people from other departments. They're like, yes, I love this member of staff because this and this and this. And so I think all the departments kind of integrated that be nicer especially because when going to university is hard. It's if you can get those opportunities to meet students from your degree, it kind of helps you work out what you're doing wrong and where you're going. Right. Because I now speak to a few students from my department a few times a week.

And by being able to tell them that that is hard, definitely spend more time than you are doing. That is so helpful and I wish I'd had someone. Yeah, they do that, but it's heavily dependent on where do you need people at university. Yeah.

You need, like, a more slightly more formalised space and opportunity to build those connections, perhaps even just initially. And then things can grow off it.

I think it helps with like both the transition period of like what, what am I doing? Where do I go but also specifically creating that support throughout university.

So it's not just at the beginning and the end, you've got that support throughout from your department.

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. OK, thank you. So if we just wrap up with those final reflections on everything that we've talked about, what do you think are the most important or influential things that have led you to be at university now?

I think the X scholars scheme that very much did help me. I remember being very nervous and not sure at the time and then getting to go just before COVID as well was very much.
A good experience like, even though it was very short and sweet, actually seeing the campus itself, I think even that kind of helps solidify universities. What I want to do, and I think I had a lot of good support from my family despite not being able to like tell me about university and what seminar is. They definitely were very supportive and they were just like, yeah, you've got this and I think having a mix of my family and also the support from X was very nice.

Nice, excellent. And are there any other significant barriers to coming to university that you faced that we haven't already talked about?

I don't know. I think I I didn't know about foundation year. I didn't know that was possible. And so maybe if I had known about that years ago, I would have.

Gone about university a different way and maybe I would have done a completely different topic, but I think maybe that's a schools issue rather than a university issue. But like actually showing the different opportunities you can do once you've finished schooling and education, or at least like further education. Yeah. But yeah, I think that's more on just general education.

Yeah. Education about education, yeah.

OK. And any final recommendations for X scholars as a programme?

Or any other activities.

I think keep going. I think even if it's a small group, you're supporting people, even if they don't end up at X, it's better than them never considering it and it's best to just give some people that most likely won't go just for a little boost to go. Yeah, you can do this. And this is for you if you want it. Yeah.

Yeah. Fantastic. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

No.

Fantastic. Thank you so much.