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Student budgets and widening participation: Comparative experiences of finance in low and higher income undergraduates at a Northern Red Brick University

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a thematic analysis of longitudinal qualitative data (n_{total}=118), this paper takes a 'whole student lifecycle' approach to examine how lower and higher income students at an English Northern Red Brick University variously attempted to manage their individual budgets. It explores how students reconcile their income - in the form of loans, grants and bursaries - with the cost of living. Four arenas of interest are described: planning, budgeting, and managing 'the student loan'; disruptions to financial planning; the role of familial support; and, strategies of augmenting the budget. In detailing the micro-level constraints on the individual budgets of lower and higher income undergraduates, the paper highlights the importance of non-repayable grants and bursaries in helping to sustain meaningful participation in higher tariff, more selective, HEIs. It also supports an emerging body of literature that suggests that the continuing amendments to the system of funding Higher Education in England are unlikely to address inequality of access, participation, and outcome.

Keywords: higher education; student loans; student debt; private credit; part-time employment; widening participation

INTRODUCTION

Using longitudinal qualitative data, this paper takes an innovative 'whole student lifecycle' approach to compare the experiences of financial capacity in low income and higher income undergraduates as they made their way into, through, and out of an English Northern Red Brick University (NRBU). In the context of fundamental changes to the system of funding Higher Education which saw the trebling of tuition fees for undergraduate courses (Callender 2012; and, Belfield et al. 2017), it explores how students entering HE under the new funding regime variously reconciled the income and expenditure associated with their individual budgets. Drawing on a total of 118 semi-structured interviews conducted over a three-year period, it highlights the rather acute problems that low income students faced whilst at university and the impact it had on their participation. Positioning the paper within the context of wider international trends that have progressively sought to introduce mass education on one hand, and the 'privatization of social risk' on the other (Palfreyman and Tapper 2014; and, Taylor-Gooby 2014), discussion is focused upon how the lived experiences of the policy do not appear to support the rhetoric around social mobility that accompanied the changes and the subsequent policy amendments.

In outlining the impact that the post-2012 system of funding has had on those students from low income households - typically labelled as 'widening participation' in England - the paper makes three important contributions to the literature. Firstly, the findings appear to add further weight to Antonucci's contention that 'the investor model' of funding Higher Education in England is not likely to enhance social mobility or reduce intra-generational inequality (Antonucci 2016; West *et al*. 2015). Secondly, whilst we would not seek to refute Barr's assessment of the importance of resources in early child development, this study provides an insight into the lived experiences of those from low income backgrounds 'who make the starting gate' (Barr 2012, 502). In doing so, it explicates the micro-level constraints on the individual budgets of low income undergraduates and continues to highlight the importance of non-repayable grants and bursaries in helping to sustain meaningful participation in higher tariff, more selective, Higher Education Institutions (Esson and Ertl 2015; Bowes *et al*. 2016; Hordósy & Clark, Forthcoming). Finally, the 'whole student lifecycle' approach taken by the study demonstrates how widening participation is not limited to access or outcome. Instead, it is a dynamic and emergent process within which a variety of compounding factors associated with financial capacity can negatively impact on the experience of HE itself (Purcell & Elias 2010; Bathmaker *et al*. 2013 & 2016).

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEOLIBERALISM, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND STUDENT BUDGETS

Whilst there is no single definition of what neoliberalism might encompass, David Harvey (2005) argues that it is broadly underpinned by the idea that human well-being is best advanced through an institutional framework that emphasizes strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. To this end, the 2011 White Paper '*Students at the heart of the system'* continued a neoliberal trend within British and international HE policy that can be traced back to at least the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979, and probably before (Radice 2013; Callender 2012; Marginson, 2016). The paper built on the emphasis of both *'the Teaching and Higher Education Act'* (1998) and *'the Higher Education Act'* (2004) that had already seen non-repayable maintenance grants for all phased out, and replaced by a scheme of subsidized fees and mortgage-style loans (Furlong & Cartmel 2009). However, it went further by allowing HEIs to charge up to £9,000 in fees, covered by the tuition fee loan, whilst providing a maintenance loan allowance for up to £5,500 per year in 2012/2013. For students with a household income below £40,000 a year the government also provided a non-repayable maintenance grant (BIS 2011).

In practice, this meant the total level of indebtedness needed to graduate would likely be in excess of £44,000 for 2012/2013 entrants (Crawford & Jin 2014), with the interest rate equivalent to RPI inflation, or RPI inflation plus 3% depending on how much they would go on to earn after their degree. According to recent projections by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), this debt is likely to remain a long-term obligation for the majority of graduates (Belfield *et al*. 2017). However, whilst levels of indebtedness will be high, there is a stipulation that the student loan will be written off after 30 years, if it has not been paid back already. Therefore, the actual *cost* of the degree to any one individual will depend entirely on their future earnings - with graduates expected to contribute 9 per cent of their earnings beyond £21,000[1].

Given the size of the debt, and the speed at which policy changed direction, there has been much concern about the impact that the tuition fee and corresponding increased borrowing would have on inequality and social mobility (the Sutton Trust 2012). The participation gap between students from more and less advantaged backgrounds is consistently wide, and much academic interest has sought to explore how the changes in tuition fees might impact on both entry rates and outcomes (Dearden *et al*. 2011; Wilkins *et al*. 2013; Jones 2016). This work was a continuation of a body of literature that, in the face of previous changes in the system of funding HE, had already attempted to identify likely impacts on low income groups (Callender and Jackson 2005; Callender and Jackson 2008; Mangan *et al*. 2010; Boliver 2010).

Partly to offset these concerns, at the time of the funding changes the Coalition Government established the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) to provide additional assistance to those most in need. This gave HEIs the ability to offer both cash bursaries and tuition fee waivers to those students who came from the lowest income backgrounds (see Callender 2012; Chowdry *et al*. 2012; McCaig 2016; Bowes *et al*. 2016). However, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS 2012) estimated that whilst 100,000 students would receive support under the previous regime, just 16,600 benefited from the NSP in 2012. The scheme was scrapped in 2015 in favor of an increase in entitlement of the maintenance loan (McCaig 2016; Clark et al., 2017).

Whilst it is not possible to determine how many lower income students were put off by the post-2012 changes, the relationship between debt aversion and university entry may have been overstated and graduate numbers have not demonstrated a decline (c.f. Usher *et al*. 2010; Harrison *et al*. 2015; Antonucci 2016; Jones 2016; Callender & Mason 2017; Clark et al., 2017). However, the debt associated with the cost of tuition is compounded by the cost of living whilst at university – and there is a growing evidence base, both in the UK and elsewhere, to suggest that these costs can have a detrimental impact on performance and retention (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Richardson et al. 2017; Dougherty & Callender 2017). Indeed, whilst the tuition loan made available following the changes was guaranteed to cover the cost of study, there was no such requirement with respect to living expenses. Whilst some support was offered in the form of a maintenance loan, the available funding made an explicit link between entitlement and parental income, with 35 per cent of the amount available calculated against an 'assessed household contribution' (SLC 2013). This was, and still is, an assessment of how much parents are expected to subsidize the student budget - regardless of whether they actually do in practice. A number of authors have now highlighted how parental ability or willingness to contribute can be variously compromised by low parental income, their own retirement costs, number and age of siblings, commuter status, and family estrangement (Christie *et al*. 2001; Kettley et al. 2008; West *et al*. 2015; Harding 2011; Harrison 2018; Hordósy & Clark, Forthcoming).

It is this requirement to supplement the student budget that Antonucci (2016) argues serves to help reproduce inequalities of both opportunity and outcome according to class and location. She highlights how those students who cannot rely on familial financial support have to take part-time employment to contribute toward their studies. This work is usually both low-skilled and precarious in nature. In taking such employment, however, they are often unable to secure the other employability-enhancing opportunities deemed necessary to secure graduate-level positions (Hordósy et al., Forthcoming). Similarly, many will also have to make use of private credit in the form of overdrafts to reconcile their budgets - in spite of a general distaste for such forms of finance (Szmigin & O'Loughlin 2010; Harrison *et al*. 2015).

The need to augment student income is not surprising as the gap between maintenance loan entitlement and expenditure is likely to be significant, regardless of economic background. So, whilst the most recent official data estimated a shortfall of £3,792 for 2011/12 (Pollard *et al*. 2013), the National Union of Students estimated living expenses to be as high as £12,160 per year outside London in 2013/14 (NUS 2013). The maximum maintenance loan amounted to just £5,322.

As of early 2018, there had been no further publication of any official estimates of living expenses associated with university study. There has also been limited empirical attention directed toward how post-2012 students experience and negotiate the everyday financial landscapes associated with the costs of their degree. More specifically, there has been a paucity of research that examines how the financial background of a particular student might impact upon their experience of, and participation with, university life. Given the discourse on social mobility within current HE policy (BIS 2016), and the apparent policy push to enable high tariff, more selective HEIs to widen participation (McCaig 2016), there is a specific need to explore how low income students are able to engage with such 'Red Brick' institutions. Moreover, there is a need to contextualize these experiences of finance within what has been termed a 'whole lifecycle approach' (Bathmaker *et al*. 2013 & 2016; Purcell & Elias 2010). That is to say that the exploration of one facet often termed 'the student experience', needs to be set within the inter-dependencies that exist within, and across, all of the key arenas of university participation over time. This includes, but is not limited to, arenas of finance, teaching and learning, social life, health and well-being, and employability. Using such a qualitative longitudinal approach, this paper examines how low income and higher income students variously attempted to reconcile the income and expenditure associated with their individual student budgets, and how this financial capacity impacted on their experience of an English Northern Red Brick University.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Drawing on a total of 118 semi-structured interviews, the results presented in this paper are based on data from a qualitative, three year longitudinal project. The study aimed to examine the experiences of 40 Home undergraduate full-time students studying at NRBU as they transitioned into, through, and out of university. Beginning their degree in 2013, they were the second cohort of students to move through HE following the implementation of the funding changes.

Beyond the broad case-study design, the project deployed a two-step sampling process of maximum variation at both case and unit levels (Patton 2002; Yin 1994). At case level, a total of twelve departments were selected within the institution for inclusion on the basis of the following criteria: the nature of department (academic, vocational, quasi-vocational)[2]; relative size (small, medium, large); and, ratio of WP students (low, medium, high). This ensured that a variety of types of departments would be represented amongst the sample. At the unit level, the sample was balanced against general characteristics that included: gender, faculty, age and ethnicity. However, the study purposively over-represented those students in lower income brackets (n=27), as shown in Table 1. This enabled the study to explore how students from the poorest backgrounds experience university with respect to their wealthier counterparts. Indeed, the point of the strategy of maximum variation is to capture and describe central themes and interests that cut across a great deal of individual variation (c.f. Quinn-Patton 2002).

'Lower income student' was defined by eligibility for, and receipt of, some sort of financial support from the university and associated schemes. Three main types of financial support were available. Firstly, an annual bursary ranging from £500 to £1,400 depending on assessment of family income. Second, a one-off 'tuition fee waiver', taken as a partial waiver plus a cash sum or a full fee waiver worth £9,000 or £6,000, with eligibility determined by both family income and the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) ranking of students' home postcode. Third, a one-off 'City Scholarship' worth £1,500 for students who lived in deprived areas of the NRBU City Region. Students in receipt of support are signified below as financial support (FS) and no financial support (NFS).

[Insert Table 1.]

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants on an annual basis - usually toward the end of the second semester of each year. A total of 118 interviews were conducted with students across this time (n^1=40, n^2=40, n^3=38). Interviews were directed to five overarching arenas of the student experience: finance; learning and teaching; social life; health and well-being; and, careers and future trajectories. All of the interviews were conducted in accordance the host University's regulations on research quality and ethical practice, and all data has been anonymized.

Facilitated by QSR Nvivo, the resulting data were analyzed in accordance with the process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved a six-stage process of: familiarisation; initial coding; identifying themes; reviewing themes; defining themes; evidencing those themes using data. Data were analyzed in full after each tranche of interviews were completed. This process of analysis revealed four thematic categories of interest: planning, budgeting, and managing 'the student loan'; disruptions to financial planning; the role of familial support; and, how those budgets are variously augmented. These are presented below.

PLANNING, BUDGETING, AND MANAGING 'THE STUDENT LOAN'

In 2013, 89.2 per cent of English domiciled students took up a maintenance loan, with a maximum loan of £5,500 being available for those living away from the parental home outside of London (SLC 2013; SLC 2015). A further means-tested and non-repayable maintenance grant worth up to £3,354 was also available for those households earning under £42,611 (BIS 2012). However, receipt of the non-repayable maintenance grant reduced the amount of maintenance loan entitlement by 50p in every £1 of grant received. Therefore, the total amount of maintenance grant and loan available to a home, full-time undergraduate student living away from home and outside of London was £7,177. To put this into context using the minimum wage for 2013, this total equates roughly to 9 months of full-time work for those in the 18-20 age range (before national insurance deductions).

As previously suggested, the most recent government figures showed a shortfall between income and expenditure of £3,792 for students entering in 2011/12 (Pollard *et al*. 2013). The limited nature of the maintenance support was well recognized by students, as Chris highlighted:

> *"I think I get enough off the Uni, I mean the point of maintenance loan is to basically survive isn't it, really?"* (Chris, NFS, First interview)

The question, then, is how do students attempt to negotiate the constraints of such a budget? A common tactic was simply to spend less, as Dylan explained:

> *"Me, as a person, I don't really spend money that much because I know money is hard to come by, so I kind of know the value of money. So, I don't really spend much."* (Dylan, FS, First interview)

To cut down on accommodation costs, four students opted for cheaper private halls or housing for their first university year, with a further five traditional age students deciding to commute to university and remain in the parental home. There was, however, variation with respect to how these students then contributed to their family household budget. Whilst some students were grateful that their parents did not ask them to contribute, Khaled helped a lot with rent and bills:

> *"[My mother] works in [workplace], and she doesn't earn much. So whatever we [I and my sibling] get, we have to pay rent, utilities."* (Khaled, NFS, First interview)

Whether in the family home or not, the restrictions on their budgets meant that many students resorted to a method of financial planning that saw them apportion income by the number of weeks at university - as explained by Katy:

> *"[When] I got my bursary and my finance through, I counted how many weeks it was until my next bursary. I took my phone bill for those months out of it, and then the remaining amount I divided into the weeks. I think at the moment I have £30 per week to live on until the 20th of September."* (Katy, First interview, FS)

Some parents actually took more direct ownership over the money by appropriating the maintenance loan and rationing it on a monthly basis for their offspring (see West et al. 2015 for further discussion). Megan suggested that this enabled her to know *"how much I'm spending in a way more than other people"* (Megan, NFS, Second interview).

Of course, given the ebbs and flows of costs, bills, and other financial contingencies, actually living on these very tight margins proved difficult. A zero-sum game of balancing income and expenditure often ensued:

> *"I think I do it the truly student way, and if I'm to cut back, I have to cut back on food. I don't cut back on going out, so if I want to go out twice a*

week, I have beans on toast for two weeks as well." (Daniel, First interview, NFS)

Unfortunately, these pressures often meant that problems of cash-flow could build toward the end of the semester, as Daniel explained in a later interview:

"Basically, at the end of the last three or four weeks before Easter, I had maybe a meal a day of [spaghetti bolognese]. And then, I was eating 50p bread for the rest of the time. And that was basically all what I had for a long time." (Daniel, NFS, Third interview)

Many students found themselves living something of a hand to mouth existence toward the end of the maintenance loan period.

DISRUPTIONS TO THE STUDENT BUDGET

Whilst the everyday demands to balanced finances were difficult enough - Katy was attempting to live on just £4.29 per day - there were also rather more pressing, and often unanticipated, disruptions to students' budgets. There were three very particular concerns associated with more medium-term financial planning: changes in familial circumstances, the timing of payments, and the uncertainty of summer income.

In the first instance, the maintenance support that a student receives is not necessarily stable across the three years. Instead, the 'assessed household contribution' is made on an annual basis. If there are any positive or negative changes in household income, then the system assumes that this is reflected in parental contribution. However, as the re-calculation is based on the tax-year, students will be notified of any changes only a short period before the new academic year. If there are cuts to loan and grant eligibility, this leaves little room to seek alternative income streams outside term-time.

The following two stories show the most extreme changes in maintenance funds that occurred in the interview sample - although there were multiple other instances where students had to make up deficits from year to year.

Lizzie benefitted from being in receipt of substantial maintenance loan and grant throughout the first academic year and knew that she could not rely on her parents for financial assistance. She had already worked part-time throughout her secondary school years, and continued to supplement her university budget by these means. Unfortunately, changes in Lizzie's household family structure meant that her eligibility was greatly reduced as she moved into her second year. This was because her mother moved in with her partner and who was thus included in the assessment, despite the fact that Lizzie did not receive any further support:

> *"I'm not supported by my mum or [mother's new partner] in any way, and they [Student Loans Company] took two grand off me. And I went to the finance office and they said that they can't do owt [anything] about it'."* (Lizzie, FS, Second interview)

Elsewhere, whilst Daniel enjoyed a relatively stress-free first and second year, when his siblings also entered HE his parents were unable to support him in the manner they had previously. Without the extra help, he struggled to stay afloat:

> *"Last year was fun, because I could actually do things, but this year, it's been more held back… If I was absolutely desperate, I could get a food shop from my Mum. But I couldn't do it every weekend. At the end of the year maybe, if I was lucky, I could get one off her… they can't afford to give me money really, which is fair enough."* (Daniel, NFS, Third interview)

The second challenge that students experienced was the necessity to find and pay for housing costs that were often some way out of alignment with the maintenance loan payments. The payments from SLC are received in three instalments. In the academic year 2013/14, the following dates were used: 17 September 2013; 7 January 2014 and 15 April 2014. As Kai suggested, large housing deposits and summer rent pre-payments removed significant amounts of money from an already stretched budget:

> *"[W]e've signed a contract for a house next year and it's there or thereabouts the same price [as our current accommodation], but we have to pay £1,600 in June so there's going to be money-flow issues, I think."* (Kai, FS, First interview)

Two difficulties emerge from this. First, students often pay for services they do not use, such as summer accommodation, at a time when they are not nominally supported by the maintenance loan and/or grant. Second, in the form of a deposit and initial rent, there is usually a bigger payment due when students are not in receipt of any additional income. In the first year, for example, many students found themselves having to pay these deposits in March/April for post-July accommodation. Often, this was the time when their budgets were most stretched.

As an extension to this, the final difficulty associated with their financial planning relates to the summer months. Not only do students have to pay for accommodation, the maintenance loan does not fund the student during July and August - regardless of potential family support or alternative income. Given that students are not eligible for any other type of welfare support during this time, students are required to fund these periods by other means. Two methods dominated: students either took on a full-time job to sustain themselves, or relied on their family to provide housing and maintenance for them over this period. The problem with this, however, is that those in the lower income brackets who needed to use the break in university study to build up some savings for the next year, had to find generic employment in either a saturated student labor market or a local one where low-skilled employment was not always available. Lauren, for instance, talked about the distance she travelled in the NRBU's region term-time for her workplace, and her previous job at home:

> *"[The nearby store] didn't have any [places] because it's like student transfer from my store at home, so I work [further away] during term time and then I transferred back home for the holidays because I have to work every weekend unless I have booked it off."* (Lauren, FS, First interview)

Not only did this mean they missed out on extracurricular activities such as placements, internships and summer schools, it left their financial planning subject to the vagaries of local economies.

RECONCILING DEFICITS: THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Corresponding with other research in the area, there was also a high level of variation in the level of financial support offered by families - with those in the lower income group receiving considerably less than their higher income counterparts (West et al. 2015; Harding 2011; Hordósy & Clark, Forthcoming). Table 2 is directly derived from interview data with students being selected to specifically demonstrate the differences in the type and level of financial support they received across the three years of study.

[Insert Table 2]

Those from higher income backgrounds received most support from their families. Taylor, for example, had three years of tuition fees and her first year accommodation costs were paid for, but she was expected to largely sustain herself through the maintenance loan and additional part-time work. Adam had substantial and ongoing support in the form of accommodation costs, a regular allowance, and occasional further assistance. Rachel had her accommodation paid for by her family, as well as receiving some additional funds where needed. In this case it was to help her participate in multiple extracurricular activities.

One key difference between these students and the lower income students, however, is the confidence the former had in being able to fall back on the support of the family – be that money for housing deposits or extra support for smaller items such as sporting kit. This was profoundly different for students in the low income group, who were well aware that they were highly unlikely to receive further financial support. Lower income students could, at best, only rely on support that was in kind. So, whilst Aina was allowed to live at home 'rent free', Dylan's family occasionally gave him food to help him balance his budget. However, Aina also contributed to household costs, and as Claudia highlighted, she often felt that she also needed to support her mother:

> *"For me, if my mum comes to visit me and doesn't need me to pay half of the petrol money, that's like a treat"* (Claudia, FS, Second interview)

Whilst higher income students could often rely on additional monies from their families to enhance their budgets and associated opportunities, lower income students could not rely on any additional income, and some actually used their loan to supplement small gaps in their parents' household budgets (see Antonucci 2016).

AUGMENTING THE BUDGET: SAVINGS, PART-TIME WORK, AND PRIVATE CREDIT

For those unable to rely on financial assistance to cover imbalances in everyday budgets and/or those unforeseen costs, students had to resort to a number of means to reconcile their budgets. This included the use of savings, the necessity of part-time work, and the gradual shift to private credit. Again, these methods of 'balancing the books' were particularly associated with students from lower income groups

Upon arrival, a number of students talked about drawing on their savings that they had previously accumulated. As they expected university to be coupled with an expensive start, these savings were used to support budgeting - especially during the first year and sometimes to avoid taking the full maintenance loan amount. As Dylan explained, he aimed to try and be as debt-free as possible during his degree:

> *"Half of my gap year I was looking for work, the other half I was working and I literally had no summer because I was working… All the money I earned, I saved up to pay off my whole first year accommodation, and I think I got a good fee waiver as well."* (Dylan, FS, First interview)

There were, however, different understandings of savings across the cohort, as defined by their purpose of intended use. Whilst those in the low income group tended to see savings created *by* themselves for short-term utilization - paying for living expenses in the here and now - higher income students saw savings created *for* them as ring-fenced for larger investments after graduation, such as further study or a deposit for a property. These latter amounts were not to be drawn upon throughout the university years, as Megan points out: *"it would just be a really horrible feeling to do that"* (Megan, NFS, Third interview).

Further, there were different degrees of agency over the funds. Smaller pockets of savings, especially where the student had created them, tended to have no parental oversight. Access to larger amounts, however, needed to be discussed and decided together with the family. Unsurprisingly, such a recourse was only available for those higher income students. Rachel for instance, suggested that she would need the money for a potential Masters program, but needed to convince her parents to use it for her studies: *"mummy wants me to spend it on a house deposit or something, so that would probably be a better investment"* (Rachel, NFS, Second interview).

As savings dwindled, many students found themselves having to take up part-time work opportunities (Hordósy et al., Forthcoming). This provided them with much needed additional income. However, whilst part-time work enabled them to earn money, students 'paid' with their time. Inevitably, some were able to negotiate the trade better than others. Those students operating under more pressing financial circumstances often found themselves working longer than the recommended maximum number of 16 hours per week. Following the changes in her maintenance loan, for example, Lizzie started working long shifts at her part-time job, meaning that her hours were often double the recommended maximum. The requirements of supplementing her budget soon began to change her approach to studying:

> *"[I] do like a weekend on, weekend off thing. I'm in Uni [three days a week], from 10 while 4. So then on my four days off, [my employers] just picked two; apart from Sunday. I have my Sundays off, so I can get organized for the week, and any last minute homework for that week."*

(Lizzie, FS, Second interview)

Elsewhere, Selena - another low income student - took up a job in catering for her first academic year as her maintenance loan and familial contribution was not enough to cover her already pressed expenses. However, the time spent working late-shift disrupted her sleeping patterns, and soon began to impact on both her studies and her ability to fully engage with her peers. She struggled to catch up and fell further behind. Looking back at her experience, Selena identified how she became less engaged with her university work and attending her lectures and seminars:

> *"Well, I liked the course, [but] I was not very involved in it, I kind of lost interest and I got more excited about my social life [at work] and just not doing the [university] work. I just did not engage with it very well and then as soon as summer came around and I had to re-do my exam I just panicked, I just wanted to find a way out of it. Then, obviously I was working over the summer as well, so I did not spend a lot of time revising you know, I thought I tried harder than I did back in May but [still not achieved the results]."* (Selena, FS, Second interview)

She left the University and subsequently started a course at a different institution that she thought would be closer to her interests and future plans.

Another way of augmenting income was to sign up for an overdraft - or as Holly put it, *"borrowing for money that I'm going to get"* (Holly, FS, First interview). Interest free overdrafts that offer increasing level of private credit can provide as much as £3,000 by the third academic year, and, as other research has suggested, using such facilities were often seen to be a useful and acceptable way of reconciling gaps in the student budget (Harding 2011; Harrison et al, 2015). Ben, for example, used two bank accounts, holding his maintenance loan on one, and using his student overdraft for day to day expenses. When the latter finished, he transferred money between the two:

> *"Well, yeah, so I use my overdraft up to the point where I can't get any more out, then I go and take the money from my loan to pay my overdraft off, and so it's just more like convenience I guess, more than anything."* (Ben, Third interview, NFS)

There is evidence elsewhere to suggest that financial support might lessen overdraft usage (West et al. 2006). However, for many students in the lower income brackets in our study, the reliance on private credit was an absolute necessity as part of the available budget. Amy, a mature student with children, balanced the family budget by taking on part-time work on the one hand, and credit cards, and overdrafts on the other:

> *"I'm down to my last £150… until next month when we get the next lot. So I've got three weeks to wait. It'll just have to last. I'm broke, but I'm okay, I'm not going to starve or anything, and I have a credit card."* (Amy, FS, Third interview)

Elsewhere, overdrafts were used to cover big payments or emergencies. Lauren used it to enable her to provide a deposit for housing in the second semester of the first academic year. This severely disrupted a carefully maintained balance and created a cycle she found very hard to get out of:

> *"I'd work, pay my bills and then go straight back in [the overdraft]... it was just like a cycle. I was trying to work more to get more out. But when I'd come out of the minus, I would so quickly go back in. And that stressed me out because I know it's like interest free as a student, but that still stressed me out. It was hard… [and] it did stress me out because I needed to cover my next bit of rent."* (Lauren, Second interview, FS)

Many students were also aware of the benefits of paying off their outstanding balance before end of the interest-free period, or even before graduation. Claudia imposed a very strict budget for her third year that resulted in eliminating the overdraft altogether:

> *"I've paid off my overdraft which is very, it's a massive relief and I'm very impressed with myself. I don't really know how I managed it."* (Claudia, FS, Third interview)

Adam further clarified the reasons why he wanted to avoid having an overdraft throughout his university years:

> *"The overdraft is a bit more immediate, and I know if I'm consciously spending someone else's money without good cause, then I feel that that's the point where the debt's not legitimate - in any way. The student loan, I'm using it to, number one, live. I enjoy doing other stuff as well, but it's putting me through university and obviously university is something that is a necessity for me."* (Adam, NFS, Third interview)

Whilst taking the maintenance loan was unavoidable, he, and many others like him, saw the overdraft as 'real' debt (Clark et al., 2017). However, for those from wealthier backgrounds, the continuation of the overdraft into working life was less of a worry:

> *"I don't think my parents would ever, ever, let me have an actual [overdraft with interest paid on it]... Because now if I tell them I'm in my overdraft they're, like, 'Oh no,' but I'm like, 'It's fine,' but then if I ever had an overdraft after university I think they'd be, 'No'."* (Megan, NFS, Third interview)

As a higher income student who had been well supported by her parents throughout her degree – and unlike those who had budget deficits – Megan imagined that the financial support she had received throughout university would continue to be available as she made the transition into graduate life. At the opposite end of the spectrum, however, Samuel resigned himself to being in debt for a lengthy period after University – and he had clearly internalized the constraints on his budget into his self-image:

> *"I will be in my overdraft for a long time… I'm rubbish with money. I'm better than I was. Obviously Uni's a learning experience for that, but I'm still stupid with money."* (Samuel, FS, Third interview)

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are four key points to be made about the themes presented in the results. First, student budgets are precarious in that the maintenance loan available is not likely, in itself, to be enough to sustain the living costs associated with full participation in university life. Second, disruptions associated with the financial life-course of students can have a significant impact on the viability of those budgets. Third, whilst some of the more fortunate can rely on family to reconcile any deficits - and even use this extra finance to buy an enhanced university experience - those from lower income families are severely constrained by such disruptions. Fourthly, whilst those most well prepared will use savings built up before entry, others will have little option to resort to increased levels of part-time work or subject themselves to private credit. Unfortunately, excessive part-time work can have negative impact on degree outcome, not to mention constraining their ability to enhance their 'employability' through extracurricular activity (Richardson *et al*. 2014; Hordósy & Clark, Forthcoming). Collectively, these four points demonstrate factors associated with financial capacity - including debt, the fear of debt, and the activities taken to alleviate or avoid it - can clearly negatively impact on 'the student experience' and any associated attempts to raise employability (Clark et al., 2017). To be clear, the qualitative evidence presented within this paper suggests that financial pressures can disrupt academic engagement, and this is more likely to happen for those in lower income groups, even when the non-repayable maintenance grant and any associated bursaries are taken into account.

Of course, the study is not without limitation. Firstly, the single institution case study design limits the portability of the findings. Whilst great attempt was made to sample across the student population at NRBU, the relatively high entry tariff as well as the nature of the student demographic - which is essentially less diverse than newer HEIs - mean that simplistic generalizations to other contexts are likely to be problematic. Similarly, this study deals specifically with those students who entered HE in 2013. As we have detailed elsewhere (Clark et al., 2017), the changes in policy happened comparatively quickly and left limited time for those students who were planning to enter to change career direction. It remains to be seen how those students who have had more time to plan for the changes will adapt to the financial pressures of income and expenditure.

That said, the experiences outlined in this paper appear to support the contention that the current neoliberal systems of funding prevalent in Europe, North America and elsewhere are unlikely to promote equality of participation or experience (Marginson 2016). According to Antonucci (2016), the direct relationship between the maintenance support system and household income serves to keep young adults in states of both 'semi-dependency' and 'semi-independency'. However, because those from better-off backgrounds are more reliant on their parents than their poorer peers, they are, on one hand, less likely to move toward independence, but on the other, are more likely to be able to 'buy' enhancements toward their university experience. Students from low income backgrounds, and those whose parents cannot provide the amount assumed by the assessed household contribution, 'pay' for their financial self-reliance by being tacitly excluded from the more expensive aspects of the student experience, taking on substantial amounts of part-time work, or accessing further debt from private sources. In these terms, the paper contributes to an emerging body of evidence that suggests changes in the funding of HE in England are, at a micro-level, contributing to *intra*-generational inequalities in the form of both the costs and benefits of degree level study (Lewis and West 2016; Antonucci 2018).

There is little here to indicate that the recent changes in funding, and the subsequent legislation (BIS 2016), will help to address current concerns about the levels of entry and outcome of those in the lowest income brackets. Instead, the findings suggest four immediate policy concerns. Firstly, whilst non-repayable grants for lower income students have already been replaced by greater maintenance loan entitlement, the evidence here suggests that a non-repayable maintenance grant for all but the wealthiest students helps to restore some parity in the balance of risk and responsibility between individual and state. Second, even greater assistance to those in the lowest income brackets in the form of an increased maintenance grant would help to negate the need to augment budgets with part-time work or private credit, and enable access to the enhancement activities needed to raise employability. This is a key point.

Following the cessation of the National Scholarship Programme in 2015 and the ending of maintenance grants in 2016, the government has given those from the lowest incomes greater access to funds in the form of increased maintenance loan eligibility (BIS 2015; Bowes *et al*. 2016). However, this will mean that those in most need will be responsible for the highest levels of indebtedness, whilst still likely to be constrained in terms of participation (Belfield *et al.* 2017; Clark et al., 2017). A non-repayable maintenance grant rather than a loan would ensure that those most debt-averse are not unduly excluded from engagement (Callender & Mason 2017).

Third, annual estimations of the living costs associated with HE study need to be made and published on a regular basis, with corresponding adjustments to the level of assistance available. This would ensure that the assistance available would better reflect the actual costs of university study. Fourth, a more sensitive method of assessing assumed contribution that takes into account contextual factors associated with individual households needs to be devised so students are not left with large budget deficits during their studies. This might include taking into account the number of siblings entering/leaving university, and changes in household configurations that have little direct impact on their finances. Whilst these recommendations are unlikely to greatly alleviate concerns about the costs associated with studying for a degree, they might help to ensure that HE level study does not exacerbate intra-generational inequalities yet further.

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Tables

Table 1. General Characteristics of Participants (total N = 40)

	Respondent
Gender	
Female	26
Male	14
Faculty	
Arts and Humanities	7
Engineering	5
Medicine, Dentistry, and Health	7
Science	11
Social Science	10
Age	
18 years	23
19-20 years	11
21+ years	6
Ethnicity	
White	27
Black	3
Asian	5
Mixed/Other	5
Postcode	
Local Postcode	9
Other or missing	31
First year - scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers	
Fee waiver (out of which partial)[3]	18 (5)
City Scholarship[4]	6
Bursary[5] (out of which below £1,000)	26 (5)
No financial support	13

Table 2: Estimated familial contribution to the student budget across all three academic years of study

	Taylor, NFS (resident)	Adam, NFS (resident)	Rachel, NFS (resident)	Aina, FS[6] (commuter)	Dylan, FS (resident)	Claudia, FS (resident)
Tuition Fee	£27,000					
Total for monthly allowance for three years		£4,500	£3,000 +			
Accommodation	£5,095	£12,775	£12,775	£3,000		
Food and sustenance		£750		£900	£300[7]	
'One-off' cash support	£1,000	£1,000	£600		£500	
Potential availability of further funds	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
TOTAL support for three years	**£24,095**	**£19,025**	**£16,275**	**£3,900**	**£800**	**£0**
Maintenance loan entitlement	Minimum loan	Minimum loan	Minimum loan	Maximum loan and grant	Maximum loan and grant	Maximum loan and grant

Notes

[1] The initial £21,000 threshold that was expected to rise in line with average earnings. However, in 2016, the Conservative government changed the conditions of the repayment by freezing the £21,000 threshold for five years, whilst 2017 saw a rise to £25,000.
[2] Vocational programmes were those that directly led to a professionally-accredited qualification; quasi-professional refers to those programmes that were professionally accredited but required further qualification to practise; and traditional were those programmes that were of an entirely academic nature.
[3] Students whose household income was below £25,000 a year were eligible for a National Scholarship Programme provided as a fee-waiver at the University of Sheffield. Those with a household income less than £18,000 were eligible for the full waiver of £9000, others received £6000. Some of this money could be taken as an optional cash-waiver.
[4] Students from deprived post-codes in the Sheffield City Region gained a one-off cash payment as a scholarship.
[5] Corresponding to the maintenance grant eligibility, students gained additional yearly support provision from the university in the form of cash bursaries. This ranged between £500 - £1400 per year, and students below a yearly household income of £42,000 were eligible.
[6] All financial support provided as in-kind help.
[7] Such support provided as in-kind help.