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Beyond the Compulsory: a Critical Exploration of the Experiences of Extracurricular Activity and Employability in a Northern Red Brick University

Abstract

There has been an increasing emphasis placed on the skills and attributes that university students develop whilst studying for their degree. These ‘narratives of employability’ often construct extracurricular activity (ECA) as an essential part of gaining post-graduation employment. However, these future-oriented drivers of engagement often neglect the role ECAs have within contemporary student life-worlds, particularly with respect to lower income students. Drawing on a three-year longitudinal study that tracked a cohort of 40 undergraduates throughout their student lifecycle, this paper examines how students in a Northern English Red Brick University understood the purposes of ECA, and how they chose to engage with it. The results suggest ECA appears to be somewhat stratified in terms of timeliness of engagement and motivation to participate. By extension, the paper argues that those recent attempts to measure and use ECA to narrate future ‘global’ employability, are likely to reproduce well-established inequalities. As such, any further pressure to engage with ECAs solely in terms of employability could result in the further marginalisation of lower income students.

Key words: Extracurricular activities, Higher education, Employability, Student experiences, Student engagement, Social mobility

Introduction

Drawing on a longitudinal study that followed a cohort of 40 undergraduates throughout the three years of their degree lifecycle, this paper examines how students at a Northern English Red Brick University¹ (NRBU) understand the purposes of extracurricular activity (ECA), and the variety of reasons why they engaged with it. Comparing the experiences of lower income students with their peers, it provides a three-fold typification of ECA in terms of timeliness of participation - continuation, experimentation and deferment - before highlighting four primary roles for ECAs within student landscapes: belonging; making a contribution; health and well-being; and, employability. In doing so, the paper problematizes the narrow and instrumental view of ECA that would position it as a neutral vehicle that can be used simply to assess future employability and economic competitiveness.

Building on previous work in the area of ECA (Tomlinson 2008; Purcell et al. 2013; Milner et al. 2016; Tomlinson & Holmes 2016), the paper draws on the critiques variously provided by Brown (2003), Brown and Hesketh (2004), and Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) to examine how ‘narratives of employability’ associated with ECAs are variously experienced by low income students and their peers. Whilst there can be little doubt that students do indeed use ECA to prepare for future employment, it also plays a crucial role in the here and now of student lifeworlds. Tinto’s theory of integration has long demonstrated the importance of community participation in both retention and outcome (Tinto 1975, 2007). These results similarly point to the importance of viewing ECAs as supporting participation,

¹ ‘Red Brick Universities’ are UK Higher Education Institutions that were established in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. They tend to be research-intensive in focus and selective in their student intake.

not solely as a means of demonstrating future employability. However, the paper also highlights that those policy and practice innovations designed to ‘capture’ extracurricular activity for the purposes of employment could actually serve to reproduce existing structural inequalities that are currently shaping the extracurricular experiences of lower income graduates studying in higher education institutions.

Extracurricular Activity, Employability, and Socio-Economic Status

In the context of Higher Education, extracurricular activity (ECA) refers to the broad range of activities that students engage with beyond the requirements of their degree. However, specific operationalisation of the term is usually dependent on a narrower or broader list of activities deemed suitable for analysis (Bartkus et al. 2012). For instance, Lehmann (2012) defines ECA as those pursuits that were directed toward extra-credential involvement. This included: career-related employment, internships, volunteer work, and study abroad/travel. Broader definitions of ECA, such as that used by Stuart et al (2009, 2011), regard all activities that occur beyond the classroom as extracurricular. This could include: involvement in university clubs and societies; paid and voluntary employment; family commitments; religious engagement; and, internet activities. Greenbank (2015, 187) similarly argues that all optional and additional activities ‘outside the formal university curriculum... that make a contribution to ‘a student’s personal capital’ can be considered to be on top of the programme, rather than part of it (see also Tchibozo 2007; Holdsworth & Quinn 2010; Stevenson & Clegg 2011; Roulin & Bangerter 2013).

Regardless of exact definition, as an ‘important vehicle for learning and personal development’, ECA is increasingly seen as an integral microsystem of student life (Jones

2017, 6). Indeed, following the recommendations of the Burgess Report (UUK 2007), in 2012 Universities UK (UUK) launched the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). Partly devised to help employers differentiate between degree-level job applicants, the scheme aimed to provide graduates with a relatively standardised record of intra and extracurricular activities. The HEAR replaced traditional academic transcripts with a digital document that would provide 'more fully than now the strengths and weaknesses of the students' performance' (UUK 2007, 35). Whilst not a statutory requirement, uptake has been comprehensive and the policy continues to be supported by the UK Government (Crossouard 2010; Johnson 2015; Tomlinson & Holmes 2016).

In the form of learning portfolios, Personal Development Planning, and student profiling, the desire to record extracurricular achievement within HEIs has a long history, both within the UK and elsewhere (Assiter & Shaw 1993; Wright, Knight & Pomerleau 1999; Clegg & Bradley 2006). Indeed, initiatives that are designed to more broadly assess the relationship between present participation and future capacity are a continuing part of the pervasive rhetoric of 'employability' across the sector (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011). Emphasising both capacity and flexibility in the individual, these narratives are used in policy and practice as a device to promote the idea of social mobility, competitiveness, and human capital (Brown 2003). In the context of 'cost-sharing' approaches to funding - and resultant increases in tuition fees - this continuing discourse has sought to position the skills and capabilities associated with degree-level study, and extracurricular activity, in a direct relationship with economic gain (Brown & Hesketh 2004). No longer an end in itself, increased levels of education and experience are perceived to result in a more equipped, flexible and productive workforce, with the 'graduate premium' apparently rewarding those most prepared to take responsibility for enhancing their employment capacity. To this end, the presentation of one's accomplishments that are embodied by initiatives such as HEAR are

designed to conform to the competency profiles scrutinized by employers. Rather than promoting engagement with ECA in and of itself, they are perceived to enable those deemed most capable to access higher levels of employment (Brown & Hesketh 2004).

Unfortunately, there is also a wealth of evidence that this push toward ECA under the heading of employability merely reinforces existing inequalities (Tomlinson 2008; Stuart et al. 2009 & 2011; Stevenson & Clegg 2011; Lehmann 2012; Roulin & Bangerter 2013; Greenbank 2015; Clark et al. 2015; Bathmaker et al. 2013). For example, Purcell et al (2013) provide evidence to suggest that non-traditional students - such as those from lower socioeconomic classes and first generation entrants - tend to engage less in ECA, with Bathmaker et al (2016) similarly suggesting that this is due to a lack of time, financial resources, and networks. To these ends, Clegg et al (2010, p 616) have persuasively argued that ECA is 'based on an image of the student as full-time, funded, without caring responsibilities, and discursively positioned as white, able-bodied, normatively male and single'.

However, even within this more critical literature few studies have examined the role of ECAs from the perspective of students, and fewer still that have done so across the student lifecycle (although see Purcell et al. 2013 and Bathmaker et al. 2016). In the context of both the substantial increases in UK tuition fees in 2012 and the introduction of the HEAR initiative, there remains a paucity of evidence that has sought to explore the motivations and reasons that underpin engagement with ECAs across time, and how these understandings and experiences might vary by socioeconomic category.

Operationalising an understanding of ECA as those ongoing organised activities that are on top of, not a part of, the degree programme, this paper aims to examine how students understand the purposes of extracurricular activity as they progressed through their degree,

and the variety of reasons why they chose to engage with it. More specifically, it aims to highlight the various roles that ECAs have for low income students and how their engagement was both similar to, and different from, their peers.

Method

The results presented in this paper are part of an innovative project that sought to follow a cohort of 40 home undergraduate students throughout their student lifecycle. The project was based in a Northern Red Brick University that, according to Brennan and Osborne (2008, 184) is a 'Type B' institution. That is to say that NRBU has relatively low levels of diversity and high levels of shared experience, with students typically living away from home for the first time with few commitments outside the university. Beginning in 2013, and including a total of 118 semi-structured interviews across the three years of the student lifecycle ($n_1=40$, $n_2=40$, $n_3=38^2$), the study examined a number of aspects of university life, including: finance; learning and teaching; social life; health and well-being; and, careers and future trajectories.

The project employed a two-step sampling strategy that utilised the technique of maximum variation at both case and unit levels (see Patton 2002; and Yin 1994 respectively). This strategy enabled the sampling frame to cover a diverse range of departments across NRBU. Maximum variation provides an approach to qualitative sampling that enables the capture of high quality descriptions of cases, whilst also allowing for the identification of central themes and interests (c.f. Patton 2002, 234). At the case level, two or three

² Two interviewees declined to be interviewed in their third year of study.

departments were selected from each of the five faculties of the university, with an inclusion criteria that included: the nature of department (traditional to vocational); relative size (small to large); and, ratio of students from lower socio-economic background (low to high).

At unit level, the study oversampled low income students. During the first year of study, eighteen students within our total sample received a fee waiver due to their household income being below £25,000 a year - effectively the lowest income decile of the NRBU student population. Students receiving this fee waiver in their first year are signified by 'FW', those not in receipt are marked by 'NFW' throughout the paper. Inclusion criteria at the unit level also involved balancing the sample against characteristics that included: gender, age and ethnicity. Participants were initially drawn from a randomised list of students within each target department and selected to participate in the study according to the sampling frame.

Each student participated in a semi-structured interview on three separate occasions during their student lifecycle. This took place towards the second semester each academic year. These interviews were designed to allow students to discuss any aspect of their HE experience. However, as part of the interview, students were asked to reflect on their participation in extracurricular activities.

Emergent data were analysed in accordance with the process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the analysis being facilitated by QSR NVivo. Thematic analysis offers an approach that is both responsive to the emergent themes of interviewees and those that are identified and pursued by the researcher. The results are divided into three sections based on the properties of this analysis: the timeliness of participation; the motivations for engaging in ECA; and the difference between lower income students and their peers in their experience of ECA. All interview excerpts have been made

anonymous and the research was conducted in accordance the host University's regulations on research quality and ethical practice.

There are, of course, some limitations to the study, particularly in respect to the overarching case-study design. NRBU has a high entry tariff and successive cohorts are made up of white, middle class students of traditional age. As such, the portability of the findings cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, the use of the maximum variation sampling strategy means that statistical generalisations from sample to population cannot be inferred. However, this is not the purpose of the approach. Instead, maximum variation offers both a richness of detail, and the ability to compare and contrast lived experience across different groups in order to identify patterns and trends (Patton 2002). So, whilst the results presented here might not be exhaustive of all HEIs and all students, there is little reason to suggest that the findings presented below are not instructive of general experience elsewhere (see Williams 2000, for further discussion).

Results

Extracurricular Activity: An imperative of doing

All students within our sample, in one way or another, experienced an imperative of doing with respect to their engagement with ECAs. That is to say they felt that they should be engaging with extracurricular activities beyond the confines of their course. Indeed, even those who were not engaging with ECAs, or those who did so only sporadically, experienced a sense that they ought to be doing more - as was articulated by Sandra in her first year:

I think I had in my head that I was going to get involved with everything, and be really proactive and do everything all the time - which I'm not doing. (Sandra, 1st year, FW)

Whilst Sandra located these expectations within her sense of self, other students used their peers to make judgements about their engagement, and their self-image:

My [housemate is] always doing stuff like society things and is just so active, like a real person. And there was me, just going home (...); always in the same place, still not washed, just doing nothing. So he put me to shame quite badly throughout this year. (...) I'm not part of any societies. I'm not in any clubs. I don't have any hobbies. I'm just very dull. (...) I don't know what I do with my time at all. (Holly, First year, FW)

This feeling that they needed to engage with ECA remained throughout their studies, with many students promising themselves that they would do more 'next year'. However, within this general imperative, there were three overarching narratives of engagement that emerged over the course of the three years. These can be broadly defined as: continuation, experimentation, and deferment. Each is dealt with in turn.

Continuation

In the first instance, there were those ECAs that students continued doing upon arrival. Rachel for instance continued her involvement in volunteering activities and fundraising events throughout her time at NRBU.

I did quite a bit [before university], I've done quite a bit of volunteering at home, like I help out with [a children's charity] and I do things like that. So yes, I've done volunteering for quite a long time... (Rachel, 1st year, NFW)

In many cases, the continuation of an ECA became intertwined with their view of themselves as an active student. Not only did these students attempt to take immediate advantage of the opportunities offered by the university, they often took their participation within this space for granted. As Daniel suggested, he was behaving the 'truly studenty way', doing a lot of sports, and spending most of his money on alcohol (see also, Cheeseman, 2018):

(...) it is more fun to play rugby and go out drinking. That is just the way it works, I suppose. (Daniel, First interview, NFW).

In contrast, other students - particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and especially commuter and mature students - continued their previous employment-related activities into university. These types of engagement were more likely to be linked to off-campus paid job roles in either catering or retail. Several of the fee waiver students of traditional age in our sample transferred their job roles in large chains to stores in the NRBU region:

I work at [a retail chain] and what they do is: they've said I can work seasonal; as long as you do eight weeks a year I can keep my contract. Or I can maybe get a transfer and I can work here over the summer. (Gemma, FW, 1st year)

These students certainly did not regard themselves as being a part of the mainstream ‘student experience’ and instead highlighted the importance of having to work in order to balance their student budgets ([retracted for review]). They had little spare time to spend within what they saw as more conventional university ECAs.

Experimentation

In the second instance, some interviewees defined their engagement with ECA in the context of starting a new period in their life where they could try new activities. Many students initially constructed their time at university as a temporary space for experimentation, as Kai suggested: ‘uni’s about trying new things, broadening your horizons’ (Kai, First year, FW).

Charlotte also imagined joining a new sports team on arrival to the university:

I’m not a very sporty person, but when I came to uni I did think, oh “shall I get involved in something like athletics”, you know, but I was quite shocked, because I thought it’d all be a bit more like “everybody come along and try”, but it’s quite serious. (Charlotte, NFW, First interview)

Many joined events organised by departmental societies or signed up for several sports groups and societies via the ‘Freshers Fair’. However, this involvement was often initially experienced as fairly passive, with many expecting activities to be organised for them:

I am part of the [departmental] society but there is nothing really going on with that, you don’t really get anything with it (...). (Sophie, NFW, First interview)

For these students, the first year was understood to be the time when university communities were formed and cemented, as Taylor summarised the development of her networks:

I have a friendship group which have mixed degrees and things. We're all part of [society] so we all went on a first walk. We stuck together and we just became friends by that. (Taylor, First interview, NFW)

Engagement with ECA was perceived to be important stage in gaining a secure 'social' foothold into the University ([retracted for review]).

Deferment

A final type of engagement relates to those who chose to start their participation with ECAs at a later stage of their degree, and some, despite the best of intentions, remained relatively disengaged throughout their university career. Whilst these students still felt the imperative to engage, they stalled engagement due to their academic duties, socialising, external obligations, or what they perceived to be a lack of fit with mainstream student culture. For instance, Lucy suggested that her early decision not to engage was related to her anticipation of the academic demands of her programme:

I am [a part of a society], but I'm not going to lie, I don't go to their events, I just get the emails. (...) I was going to join some sports but then for the first year, decided I didn't know how much work I'd have to do, so I was just going to take this year off from sports.

(...) I'll start in sports, once I've found my feet and know where everything is, and things like that. (Lucy, NFW, 1st year)

For students like Lucy, the fundamental priority was their studies and even though they stated a desire to engage more fully, they ultimately perceived extracurricular activities as a distraction from their course duties.

Conversely, there were also those students who put an emphasis on socialising. They tended to have an intention to participate in extracurricular activities throughout their degree, but it never really materialised. For instance, in her third year Mary talked about her regret over not participating more fully:

Mary: If you ask me what my advice would be to anyone, it would be: "don't be cynical about societies, and just join one".

[retracted for review]: Is that why you didn't join?

Mary: I think, I've never been a fan of group, like society, ... organised fun is my least favourite thing. (Mary, Third year, NFW)

However, for several of the low income students this game of 'waiting' was particularly prescient for other reasons. They cited the increasing pressures from their course, and a perceived lack of integration as a reason to 'put off' ECA. Some, such as Sandra, internalised the blame for not being an active student:

I've been saying that I was going to [join societies] the entire three years that I've been here, but still not... I did start doing [departmental team sports] for a few weeks, but it was just... I don't know, I just I felt... I just didn't go again and it wasn't something that I was hugely into, so I was just, "Eeh." (Sandra, FW, Third year)

Another non-traditional student, Khaled, explained how he found it particularly hard to be outside of his usual friendship group, whom he had known since nursery: 'for fourteen years with them [friends] and I've never really had to make any friends'. As a local Muslim student who did not move into halls, he found it hard to fit into the frenzy of Fresher's Week:

All anyone talked about was going out, or what happened in accommodation, and obviously I can't relate to any of that because I've never experienced any of it. I tried to gear it towards other sort of normal things like 'what did you do over the weekend?', but it was always sort of geared in a particular direction, so I could never get a foot in. (Khaled, NFW, 1st year interview)

Many of the non-traditional students highlighted that the most visible activities associated with ECAs centred on alcohol, and this often alienated them in some way. Age, gender, class, socio-economic characteristics, and cultural/religious background were all quoted as reasons for not participating in this drinking culture. Claudia, for example, has a disability and this made her more mindful of her participation:

I signed up to the society for my course and then I never go to anything, because all they want to do is get drunk. I get all these emails, "do you want to compete against the economics society getting really drunk...?" (Claudia, FW, First interview)

However, some of these students who initially felt alienated, did find meaningful ways to engage at later stages of their university career. Indeed, this participation tended to be much more directed to their individual interests, with a tendency to engage with ECAs that had much less emphasis on alcohol. This included: niche non-competitive sports, international student organisations and volunteering, and (paid) mentoring roles. For instance, Khaled went on to join a non-competitive sport group, began to play football with a friendship group from his department, and joined an international student organisation during his second year. He also gained a paid research role, initiating an interest in pursuing a doctorate after his degree. Similarly, Claudia found a well-paid role within the university which gave her a high level of job satisfaction, whereas in her final year she received extra financial support from the university to attend a summer school in her desired career area.

Motivations for Engagement with Extracurricular Activity

To this end, there were a number of interlinked motivating factors that underpinned both the imperative of doing, and the timing of its realisation. These were: belonging and friendships; making a contribution; health and well-being; and employability.

Belonging and friendships

As suggested earlier, for many of the interviewees in our sample the initial role of extracurricular activity was to find communities in the university and enhance their chances

of meeting like-minded others. Departmental societies, for example, helped them to get to know others on the course, whereas special interest societies such as those for rock music, baking, or photography provided spaces to meet others with particular interests.

Therefore, the desire to continue activities or engage with new ECAs was, at least in part, motivated by a desire to form friendships. Students often reflected on the high level of flux in the social groups in their later years:

(...) the people that you make friends with in first year, although you might make friends with them all the way through, it's (...) more like, just about convenience, whereas later on you meet people with similar interests. (Charlotte, Second interview, NFW)

Participation in ECA was used as a means of increasing both the chances and depth of integration within the university. One unanticipated, but valuable, outcome of socialising within these groups was the contact that it provided with students in higher years:

So that's quite a good way to meet other people, which is helpful actually because it means they can... we talk about (...) work experience and [vacation] schemes and that sort of thing, so it is really helpful having that sort of input from someone older than you. (Sadie, First year, NFW)

These connections often provided a substantial amount of tacit knowledge about how to perform well as a university student. They allowed valuable insight into the next steps for a

career in terms of help with job applications, CVs, and interview advice, as well as suggestions on MA and PhD pathways from more senior peers (see also Greenbank 2011).

Making a contribution

Whereas some students used ECAs for the purposes of enhanced community membership, subsequent years saw them and other students take the opportunity to contribute more actively to wider communities. This took several forms, such as fundraising or volunteering, or joining a political or a liberation campaigns. Some became student representatives, whilst others joined academic programmes to support university wide programmes on learning and teaching - as explained by Dylan:

[I'll be a member in this group] for the next academic year, and that involves being able to contribute, well, work on projects and contribute ideas to make teaching and learning better for prospective students next year. (Dylan, FW, Third interview³)

Similarly, Amina volunteered with a children's charity as it 'keeps a smile on my face, I think that's the only thing that I've actually enjoyed from all the jobs that I've had' (Amina, NFW, Third year). In bridging the gap between university and the wider community, several fee-waiver students specifically attempted to make contributions to departmental or university level outreach programmes with local children. As Kai explained in his third year, his

³ Dylan was on a four year degree programme.

involvement was driven by his own experiences of coming to university from a lower socio-economic background:

When I was younger I didn't really have anyone that was helping me. In my primary school I think I'm the only one that's actually gone to university... When I see the children in the primary school that I speak to on the trips, it pretty much reminds me of my school, when I was younger. And a lot of them could be heading where a lot of my friends go and what they do, prison or whatever. So maybe pushing them in another way or if they can try to find what they're interested in, try to channel their energy in another way, which would be good. (Kai, Third interview, FW)

Whilst these interviewees recognised the merits of outreach positions as flexible, well-paid work that contributed to their skillsets and CVs, they primarily valued the opportunity to make a contribution to things they cared about (see also Fleming & Grace 2016 and Raven 2015).

Health and well-being

Beyond engagement and contribution, students also participated in ECAs for reasons of health and well-being - either physical or mental. To this end, several students commented on the advantageous nature of participating in regular sporting activities on their mental wellbeing, physical health, and interestingly, time management:

I feel like if I don't go to the gym I would also be compromising uni work... 'cause I was only going to the gym like three times a week during the revision season... and the days I

did get to the gym, I found I was way more productive than I was on the days I didn't.
(Dylan, Second year, FW)

Similarly, Adam also suggested that being in a music band helped him to structure his academic work better:

I could say, "Okay, this day is rehearsal. I have two hours in the evening where I have to, say, I can work around that," and it, sort of, motivates me to get work done at the same time so it's not too much time. (Adam, Third year, NFW)

Participation in some ECAs were also sometimes seen as a welcome space for creativity.

Selena, for instance, suggested that her arts society allowed her to express herself in different forms:

I'm part of [creative arts society]. I love going to that. It's a good society and I wish they'd do more stuff like that in the [departmental society]. (Selena, NFW, 1st year)

Whilst much ECA was within the institution, some students - particularly local commuter students - had links to activities and organisations that were external to the university.

Samuel, for example, was involved in an external sports group all the way through his university years and provided some welcome relief from campus life:

[Doing sports outside the university throughout the year] has been really nice, for not just knowing students. I think that [it] has just made it feel a bit less, you know factory..., and a bit less claustrophobic as well. (Samuel, First year, FW)

For some, a crucial part of extracurricular life involved being an active member of a religious organisation. The church that Ade, a mature student, attended with her children was a basis for her social life and community engagement. Aina, also suggested that her involvement with her local mosque allowed her to remain connected with her community, which meant she had little need for the university's Islamic Circle:

The stuff that they [the Islamic Circle] do, I can do that in my own community, I guess, because we used to have little classes on our religion and stuff, and we have a lot of community stuff and I think that's why I don't have to [engage elsewhere]... (Aina, Second year, FW)

Employability

Much of the motivation for participation with ECAs related to the 'here and now' of campus life and the networks of communities associated with the University and the local area. However, extracurricular activities were also explained as giving 'added value' to the student's future employment potential. Indeed, as they moved through their course, interviewees became gradually more vocal about, and active in, shaping their imagined futures. Particularly toward the end of their degrees, strategic career planning underpinned some ECA choices, whereas other activities contributed to an emergent narrative about their skills and capacities. However, some remained sceptical about the meaningfulness of such

narratives. Adam, for instance, highlighted how some people appeared to try and take on roles purely for the performative value:

I felt the committee's been pretty apathetic at times. It sometimes felt that some people were doing it for the titles and stuff like that. I think with the fact that it's such a small society there's... It sounds really bad; there's less effort put into it, because it's... you don't have to organise these massive events and you're not challenged as much. (Adam, Third interview, NFW)

Others, however, approached career development in more meaningfully engaged ways. Indeed, there were two intertwined themes of participation that were orientated towards the future. First, engagement was narrated as a sequence of career experiments that the student wanted to explore; second, they thought it would act as evidence of employment-related activity. Reflecting on her participation throughout her university years, Rachel suggested that many of the extracurricular activities she got involved with fitted into a narrative of 'trial and error':

What haven't I crossed off the list [of possible future careers]?! I, kind of, crossed museums off last year. [I] did the odd piece of volunteering [at a local museum] a few times, and I just found it dull. (Rachel, Second interview, NFW)

Later, a few more of her ideas for a career were 'crossed off', leaving her planning to apply for postgraduate programmes:

I went to a careers evening and they brought in five people who had done [Arts and Humanities Degree] and what they'd gone on to do. The journalist put me right off, she was, "You need to be really pushy, and you need to be prepared to lie," and all of this lot. I thought, "Right, gone, that's another thing ruled out, journalism". (...) There was a teacher and that was the one that most appealed to me at the time. But since actually teaching some kids - "no!". So it was helpful in the fact that I just crossed off a load of more things on my list. (Rachel, Second interview, NFW)

There were also those who settled on a fairly well-defined career plan before, or early within, their university programme. These students often attempted to gain more specialised experience via their extracurricular activities. Students aiming for specific postgraduate courses - such as teaching or nursing - had a relative advantage in finding such opportunities, given the availability to engage with these sorts of roles.

In more specialised career pathways, however, opportunities depended on a mixture of personal connections, tenacity to seek such opportunities when not readily available, and serendipity. Taylor initially gained insider information on the career pathway she was aiming for prior to university entry through personal connections whilst living with her family in the South of England. She then took matters into her own hands. Note the ease with which she explains her approach in finding suitable opportunities:

I've got work experience purely through asking, and that's how you do it. So yes, basically from going to [professionals] and then them going "Oh, if you ever want work experience let me know"; that's basically what I did. (Taylor, Third interview, NFW)

On the other hand, Aina - a fee waiver student - had to make repeated contact with organisations in the local area until one company agreed to provide her with some experience:

I Googled [type of companies] and I found their website. I literally just rang them, I didn't really know how big it is or how small but, I thought that I might as well take this chance, so I rang and said, I want to do some work experience... I actually emailed a lot of other places but they didn't get back to me, but [this company] said, "Okay!" So I sent my CV and a covering letter; they really liked my CV and I met up with them so we just took it from there. (Aina, Second interview, FW)

Unlike Taylor, Aina's options were somewhat limited due to being a commuter student with her family links centring around the North of England. It was only her tenacity, and a certain amount of serendipity, that enabled her to find a placement.

Differences between fee waiver and non-fee waiver students in their narratives of engagement

Whilst all students felt the imperative to engage with ECAs, with most engaging at different points for different purposes, there were two overarching trends with respect to non-fee waiver students and fee waiver students. The default starting position for non-fee waiver students was to engage with ECAs immediately, either as a continuation of previous activities or to experiment with new ones. They mainly used this as a platform to meet people, make friends, and generally get involved with university life. Whilst some never went on to

actually attend anything they had signed up for - mainly because they drew on flatmates or course mates for their sense of belonging - others would later re-focus away from these initial points of contact to pursue more specific ECAs. With their initial involvement having served its purpose in helping establish themselves at NRBU, these students would then direct themselves toward activities that either better resonated with their emergent self-image or contributed toward future employment goals. Other NFW students did, however, remain loyal to those initial choices and many would go on to play some sort of role in the organisation of these groups.

For example, Ben and Sadie were two non-fee waiver students who had in-depth prior guidance on extracurricular activities by family and friends. Ben got a university role as a casual worker - a job that provided substantial flexibility and good pay - and would later find a paid research internship leading onto a PhD. Sadie was also keen to participate in student groups that were directly relevant to her future career path taking the option of accrediting one of these within her degree. Both were involved in sports for the whole duration of their degrees, and their respective departmental societies for shorter periods of time.

On the other hand, fee waiver students tended to be much more reticent with respect to ECAs at the beginning of their university experience - particularly in respect to those activities that were more socially-orientated. Instead, many had to continue to focus on either part-time employment and/or maintaining relationships that were external to the university. Whilst some tried to experiment with departmental and other societies, they often found it difficult to integrate with the early stages of campus life that tended to emphasise excessive alcohol consumption over and above the stated activities. Amy, for instance, was a local mature student with caring responsibilities. All of her engagement with extracurricular activities were external to the institution, either continuing community involvement pre-

dating her time at university, or taking up new volunteering and part-time work opportunities.

As she suggested, she soon began to feel estranged from her peers:

A lot of people don't know what they want to do, that's why they're on my course, but I know what I want to do so it makes it a bit frustrating, and they're all 19 and it's just like oh, I feel old. (Amy, First interview, FW)

However, as their university careers progressed, some fee waiver students did begin to engage with university-based ECAs, but they remained very careful in terms of both what they did and why they were doing it. In some cases this selectivity was attributed to paid employment demands elsewhere, whereas in others it was narrated as desire to avoid feelings of exclusion from what they perceived to be the 'mainstream' student culture. Aina and Sara - both local Asian working-class students - began their engagements in their second year after they spent their first year being involved with non-university groups, or not participating at all. This initial restraint was partly due to their perceived lack of fit with the mainstream activities, whereas the subsequent participation with a personal drive to be involved in an alternative activity that they cared about, such as international student groups, research projects, or volunteering via the university community. These later engagements tended to be given purpose in terms of either making a wider contribution to society or a specific contribution to their employability. For example, Claudia's academic engagement was greatly enhanced due to her eligibility for a participation grant for summer schools from NRBU. She understood this chance to link with international academic communities:

‘I think it’s more the emphasis of going abroad and, you know, just getting experience of being somewhere else’ (Claudia, Second interview, FW).

However, much of this engagement was dependent on finance. Lauren and Selena, for example, had demanding part-time roles in retail and catering respectively, with long shifts and little flexibility. This pressure on time coupled with the alienation she felt from her course meant that Selena dropped out, to later start another course at a different institution. In Lauren’s case, the time spent at work had an impact on her assessments and her ability to engage with ECAs. It was only summer volunteering, when Lauren had space and time to work away from the everyday demands of balancing her budget, to pursue more purposeful activity enhancing her employability.

Discussion: Extracurricular activity, integration, and exclusion

The concept of employability has gained considerable traction within HEIs who are variously tasked with demonstrating the value of their degree programmes and their wider contribution to society (Brown 2003; Williams et al. 2015). Whilst many commentators remain critical of both the ideology and the metrics that underpin such discourse, these narratives are frequently deployed to deliver marketable features of courses, enhance ranking positions, and, help universities demonstrate teaching quality (Frankham 2017; Christie 2017; [retracted for review]). Indeed, within the representations of employability that are contained within schemes like the UK's Higher Education Achievement Report, ECAs are used as a cornerstone of the ‘student experience’ for the purposes of future employment. No longer by-products of campus living, student societies, sports groups, varsity matches, and Student

Union initiatives, are all co-opted, packaged and branded to help market a very particular version of university life designed to encourage 'success' in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market.

However, a number of commentators have been critical of the instrumentality of these approaches to employability, and the neoliberal assumptions that underpin them (Brown 2000, 2003; Tomlinson 2008; Stevenson & Clegg 2011; Greenbank 2015). Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011, 138), for example, argue that the continuing neoliberalisation of employment opportunities on a worldwide scale has resulted in a middle-class that is 'running just to stand still'. That is to say that global qualification inflation is challenging the traditional assumption that higher education equals higher income. Instead, 'more people with more degrees' means that middle-class graduates now have to respond to an evolving recruitment criteria that increasingly requires them to demonstrate enhanced employment capacity through those activities they engage with throughout their student lifecycle (Tomlinson 2008). To this end, those policy and practice innovations associated with developing employability - like HEAR - are designed to help to encourage, record, and evidence this activity.

Brown et al argue that a low cost, highly educated knowledge class that is global in scope is likely to mean that the need for such enhancements are to spiral ever upward. However, the evidence presented within this paper suggests another two key problems in the emerging relationship between these 'narratives of employability' and student experiences of ECA. The first is concerned with those mechanisms of recording ECA engagement that threaten to override the needs of the 'here-and-now' with the recruitment needs of HEIs and the future employability of their (middle-class) graduates. The second relates to the different

types of engagement with ECA that are actually experienced by lower income groups and their peers.

In the first instance, the emphasis on recording activity for the future could risk marginalising the reality of student needs in the present. Indeed, ECAs play a particularly important role in the ‘here and now’ of student life-worlds. Vincent Tinto’s theory of integration has long demonstrated the importance of community membership in both retention and outcome (Tinto 1975, 2007). This study provides further evidence that ECAs are a primary vehicle through which such integration can be achieved. Not only can ECAs allow students to acclimatise to university life and promote well-being, they also allow students to explore and develop ideas of social justice and quality of life alongside whatever individual gains may also be made.

That said, a number of studies have also steadfastly emphasised that the resonance between social capital and habitus is vital in shaping experiences of integration within the lived realities of university landscapes (Bourdieu 1977; Crozier et al. 2008; Bathmaker et al. 2013 & 2016; Reay, 2017). In this respect, the evidence presented above suggests that ECAs can exclude as much as they include, particularly where they are based around excessive consumption. Indeed, given the benefits of early engagement, HEIs could be well advised to explore how they can better facilitate ECAs that are not primarily based around activities that could inadvertently exclude non-traditional students.

Similarly, if engagement with ECAs is stratified - and there is some evidence here and elsewhere to suggest that it might be (see Cullinane & Montacute 2017; Purcell et al. 2013) - then it cannot be assumed that those vehicles that are being used to record engagement with ECAs are neutral recording devices. Instead, they could tacitly reproduce those existing structural inequalities that are already shaping engagement with ECAs.

To this end, further changes to the system of UK HE funding that have seen non-repayable grants replaced with an increased loan entitlement could result in lower income students attempting to manage precarious budgets through increased part-time working ([retracted for review]). Not only is such a strategy likely to influence degree performance (Hovdhaugen 2015), it could also likely to further impact on their capacity to engage with ECA. From there, it is not too difficult to imagine that this reduced capacity will make lower income students more vulnerable to feelings of isolation, whilst constraining their attempts to both experiment with potential career choices and develop those ‘narratives of employability’ that are, rightly or wrongly, being constructed as vital to their onward trajectories out of HE.

Indeed, continued drives toward employability overlook the considerable financial constraints on lower income groups and other non-traditional students who find themselves engaged with external part-time employment and/or other responsibilities - all types of ECA that are not routinely recorded by schemes such as HEAR ([retracted for review]). On top of those trends toward global qualification inflation, any perceived lack of engagement could actually serve to marginalise onward career trajectories and further undermine the idea of social mobility for those students unfortunate enough to come from a lower income household.

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