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

ABSTRACT

There is currently much concern about the relationship between higher education and widening participation, with particular policy attention directed toward to how recent changes to the system of funding HE in the UK has impacted on those from the lowest income brackets. Drawing on a thematic analysis of longitudinal qualitative data (n_{total}=118), and taking a 'whole student lifecycle' approach, this paper examines how low and higher income students at an English Northern Red Brick University variously attempted to manage their individual budgets and, in the process, reconcile the demands of the student finance system 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. Findings are discussed in relation to the experience of widening participation in the context of the continuing neoliberalisation of the HE *sector. In detailing the constraints on the individual budgets of low income undergraduates, not only does the paper continue to highlight the importance of non-repayable grants and bursaries in helping to sustain meaningful participation in higher tariff, more selective, HEIs, it also finds further evidence to support Antonucci's contention that the continuing amendments to the system of funding Higher Education in England are unlikely to support social mobility.*

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 the fundamental changes to the system of funding Higher Education - first detailed in the white paper '*Students at the heart of th*e system' (BIS 2011) - it explores how students entering HE under the post-2012 funding regime variously reconciled the income and expenditure associated with their individual student 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 - and distinctly neoliberal - international trends that have progressively sought to introduce mass education on one hand, and the 'privatisation 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 widening participation that accompanied the changes and the subsequent policy amendments.

Indeed, in outlining the impact that the post-2012 system of funding has had on those students typically labelled as 'widening participation', the paper makes three important contributions to the literature. Firstly, the findings appear to add further weight to Antonucci's contention that the current neoliberal systems of funding Higher Education that are prevalent across Europe and elsewhere are not likely to enhance social mobility (West *et al*. 2015, Antonucci 2016). Secondly, in explicating the constraints on the individual budgets of low income undergraduates, the paper 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, Paper 2). Not refuting Barr's assessment of the importance of resources in early child development, this study provides an insight into the lived experiences of those from widening participation backgrounds 'who make the starting gate' (2012: 502). Finally, the 'whole student lifecycle' approach taken by the study demonstrates how widening participation is not limited to access or performance, but is instead a dynamic and emergent process within which a variety of compounding factors associated with financial capacity can negatively impact on all aspects of 'the student experience' (Bathmaker *et al*. 2013 & 2016, Purcell 2010).

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

Whilst there is no single definition of what neoliberalism might encompass, David Harvey (2005: 2) 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. In terms of Higher Education (HE) specifically, Olssen and Peters (2005: 313) suggest that it is the movement from a professional culture of open inquiry and debate toward performativity and measurable outputs. There is an emphasis on: strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures, and academic audits. Moreover, it positions the HE sector as a key driver in a marketized knowledge economy, with responsibility to connect education with industry and business, promoting entrepreneurial skill on a global stage (see Room 2000, Hordósy 2016).

To this end, the 2011 white paper '*Students at the heart of the system*' continued a 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). More specifically, 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 phased out and replaced by a scheme of subsidized fees and mortgage-style loans. However, it went further by allowing HEIs to charge up to £9,000 in fees, whilst providing a maintenance allowance for up to £5,500 per year (BIS 2011).

In practice, this meant the total level of indebtedness needed to graduate would likely be in excess of £40,000. 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 (Crawford & Jin 2014). However, whilst levels of indebtedness will be high, there is a stipulation that the 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 - a threshold that was expected to rise in line with average earnings[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 changes would have on social mobility (the Sutton Trust, 2012). Indeed, 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 funding might impact on both entry rates and outcomes (Dearden *et al*. 2011, Wilkins *et al*. 2013; and, 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. To receive an award, the Government specified that students needed to have a household income below £25,000, with HEIs able to set their own eligibility criteria beyond this base-line stipulation. To the benefit of those higher tariff, more selective HEIs, this produced a high level of diversity across the sector as those institutions with more diverse intakes were able to offer less generous support packages because they had more qualifying students (Callender 2012, Chowdry *et al*. 2012, McCaig 2016). Even then, 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 favour of an increase in entitlement of the maintenance loan (McCaig 2016, PAPER 2).

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. Harrison *et al*. 2015; Jones 2016). Indeed, for some time, undergraduates have seen 'the student loan' as an inevitable feature of contemporary university life, and it remains the only option for the majority of entrants into HE (Usher *et al*. 2010, Antonucci 2016, PAPER 1).

Unfortunately, whilst the amounts made available were guaranteed to cover the cost of study, there was no such requirement with respect to living expenses. Indeed, there is an explicit link between loan entitlement and household income, with 35 per cent of the amount available to students being 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, with an explicit assumption that families will help to reconcile any deficits in the student budget - regardless of whether they actually do in practice (Christie *et al*. 2001, West *et al*. 2015, PAPER 3). It is this explicit requirement 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 subsidize their studies. This is usually both low-skilled and precarious in nature. In taking such employment, however, they are unable develop the experiences necessary to secure graduate-level positions. 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 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 Spring 2017, 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. Indeed, 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 2010). That is to say that the exploration of one facet of what is 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 (Crockford et al. 2015). 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 moved 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 (traditional, vocational, quasi-vocational); 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 in those students in lower income brackets (n=27). This enabled the study to explore how students from 'widening participation' backgrounds experience university with respect to their more traditional counterparts, but also because it necessarily enabled the sampling frame to capture the diversity of this particular student population. 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: 234). 'Lower income student' was defined by eligibility for, and receipt of, some sort of financial support from the university and associated schemes. This is signified below as financial support (FS) and no financial support (NFS).

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 40 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 analysed in accordance with the process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method of analysis offers a robust and flexible approach to data that is both sympathetic to the emergent themes of both the data and the theory being developed. 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, full-time new entrants to HEIs were able to apply for financial assistance to help cover their living costs. A total of 89.2 per cent of English domiciled students took up this 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). No household contribution was assumed until the total household income surpassed £45,000 (before tax), with further reductions in amount available the higher the total. 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 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 (after NI deductions).

The most recent government data available on the living costs associated with HE suggests that (median) living costs for English-domiciled full time students was £5,502 in 2011/12, with (median) housing costs estimated to be £3,240. Making the unlikely assumption that there was no change in living costs between 2012 and 2013, this would represent a deficit of £1,617 for those who received the maximum grant and loan, and for those in receipt of the maximum loan only, a shortfall of £3,242 (Pollard *et al*., 2013, p 96, p 181).

Indeed, the limited nature of the loan 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)

Indeed, 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 Sara was grateful that her parents did not ask her to contribute, Khaled and Aina 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 resorting 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 loan and rationing it on a monthly basis for their offspring. 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 then ensued:

> *"I think I do it the truly student way, and if I'm to cutback, I have to cut back on food. I don't cutback 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 spag bol [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)

Indeed, many students found themselves living something of a hand to mouth existence toward the end of the loan period.

DISRUPTIONS TO THE STUDENT BUDGET

Whilst the everyday demands to balance the budget 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 the realisation of those budgets. Indeed, there were three very particular concerns associated with more medium-term financial planning: changes in 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 changes in household income, then the system assumes that this largely 'trickles down' to the student. As the re-calculation is based on the tax-year, students will be notified about any changes only a short period before the new academic year. 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 loans and grants 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 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 my [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 about it'." (Lizzie, FS, Second interview)

As a result, Lizzie started working long shifts at her part-time job, meaning that her hours often totalled double the recommended maximum of 16 hours per week. Inevitably, the requirements of supplementing her budget began to erode the time spent 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, they 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, 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. Unsurprisingly, he struggled to stay afloat:

"Last year was fun, 'cause I could actually do things, but this

> *year, it's been very 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 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, but we have to pay £1,600 in June so there's going to be money-flow issues I think. But if I save enough money, I've put enough money aside."* (Kai, FS, First interview)

Two difficulties emerge from this. First, students often pay for services they do not use 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 Spring for post July accommodation.

As an extension to this, the final difficulty associated 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[2]. Given that students are not eligible for any other type of welfare support during this time, the system of funding requires students 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 labour market or a local one where low-skilled labour was not always available. Lauren, for instance, talked about the distance she travels in the Sheffield 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 here 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

Predictably, there was a high level of variation in the level of financial support offered by families. Table 1 is directly derived from interview data with students being selected to specifically demonstrate the differences in the type and level of financial support students received across the three years of study.

[Insert Table 1]

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 paid for her, but was expected to largely sustain herself through the 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 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 like 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. Indeed, 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 as well:

> *"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)

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 those 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 often to avoid taking the full 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 utilisation - paying for living expenses in the here and now - higher income students saw savings created *for* them as ring-fenced for larger investments, such as postgraduate studies 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 programme, 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 (PAPER 3). This provided them with much needed additional income. However, whilst part-time work enabled them to earn money, students 'pay' with their time. Inevitably, some managed the trade better than others. Indeed, those students operating under more pressing financial circumstances - such as Lizzie mentioned above - often found themselves working longer than the recommended maximum number of 16 hours per week. Serena, for example, took up a job in catering for her first academic year as her 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 pathway she 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]."* (Serena, FS, Second

interview)

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

Alternatively, 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). Indeed, interest free overdrafts that offer increasing level of credit can provide as much as £3,000 by the third academic year. However, whereas an initial amount of £500 constitutes roughly 7 per cent of the maximum amount of student loans for 2013/14, the maximum amount of £3,000 would mean a ratio just above 40 per cent. This constitutes a very high individual debt to income ratio (ONS 2016).

That said, using student overdrafts was often seen to be a useful and acceptable way of reconciling gaps in the student budget. Ben, for example, used two bank accounts, holding his loan on one, and using his student overdraft for day to day expenses. When the latter finished, he transfers 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)

For other students, again for many in the lower income brackets, 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 as a make-weight for 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)

Indeed, many students were 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)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, however, the habit of relying on credit sometimes became normalized. Samuel resigned himself to being in such debt for a lengthy period due to his own lack of budgeting and high levels of social spending:

> *"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)

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 loan was unavoidable, he, and many others like him, saw the overdraft as 'real' debt (PAPER 1). However, for those from more wealthy 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 uni I think they'd be, 'No'." (Megan, NFS, Third interview)

Clearly, Megan imagined that the familial financial assistance that had supported her through university would continue as she made the transition out of university.

CONCLUSION

There are four key points to be made about the themes presented in the results. First, student budgets are precarious in that the 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, PAPER 3). Whilst the stress associated with private credit is relatively well drawn, it also remains to be determined how such experiences of private credit, not to mention the requirement to pay it back with interest, are taken forward into the post HE life-course (Harding, 2010, Harrison *et al*. 2015). Collectively, these four points demonstrate that the experience of widening participation in HE is an emergent and dynamic process that is not limited to just the measurement of access, retention or performance (Harrison & McCaig 2017). Indeed, compounding 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 (Crockford et al. 2015).

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 (PAPER 1), the changes in policy happened comparatively quickly and left limited time for those students who were planning to enter to change career direction. How those students who have had more time plan for the tuition fee rises, and their students budget, remains to be seen.

That said, the experiences outlined in this paper appear to support Antonucci's contention that the current neoliberal systems of funding prevalent across Europe, North America and elsewhere are likely to constrain social mobility rather than increase it. 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 avoiding more expensive aspects of the student experience, taking on substantial amounts of part-time work, or accessing further debt from private sources. So whilst such low income students might develop the greater independence needed in order to live 'hand to mouth' whilst at university, this is likely to come at some cost as they move forward into the life-course (PAPER 2 and PAPER 3).

Indeed, there is no evidence here to suggest that the 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, and in lieu of further state investment in HE and the removal of the policy of 'full tuition fees' altogether, the findings in this study suggest four immediate policy concerns. Firstly, whilst non-repayable grants have already been replaced by greater 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 both avoid 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 maintenance grants in 2016, the government has given those from the lowest incomes greater access to funds in the form of increased 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, as Belfield and colleagues have recently shown (2017). It also remains to be seen how these increased amounts will impact on participation (PAPER 1). Indeed, a non-repayable grant rather than a loan would ensure that those most debt-averse are not unduly discouraged from participation (Callender & Mason 2017). Third, annual estimations of the living costs associated with HE study need to be made, 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 individual students are not left with large budget deficits during their studies. Whilst such recommendations are unlikely to greatly alleviate concerns about social mobility in both theory and practice, they might help to ensure that HE level study does not exacerbate such inequalities further.

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Paper 2 (under review) The role of the National Scholarship Programme, maintenance grants, and bursaries in Widening Participation: Undergraduate experiences of financial support

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Table 1: Estimated financial contribution to the student budget across three years of study

	Taylor, NFS (resident)	Adam, NFS (resident)	Rachel, NFS (resident)	Aina, FS (commuter	Dylan, FS (resident)	Claudia, FS (resident)
Tuition Fee	£27,000					
Monthly Allowance		£4,500	£3,000 +			
Accommodation	£5,095	£12,775 +	£12,775 +	£3,000 (in kind)		
Food and sustenance		£750		£900 (in kind)	£300 (in kind)	
'One-off' cash sums	£1,000 +	£1,000 +	£600 +		£500 (in kind)	
Potential availability of further funds	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
TOTAL	£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] In 2016, the Conservative government changed the conditions of the repayment by freezing the £21,000 threshold for five years.

[2] The loan for the final year is actually discounted - in some cases by as much as a quarter - in the assumption that students are available to work during the summer. However, this reduction is made to the first payment of the final year. Students are also not entitled to welfare payments during the summer months after graduating.