Social Identification, Widening Participation and Higher Education: Experiencing Similarity and Difference in an English Red Brick University

Affiliation

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Abstract

In 2012, the UK government introduced the National Scholarship Programme - a scheme that aimed to ensure that young people from families with low household incomes would not be discouraged from entry into higher education by increases in tuition fees. Drawing on longitudinal evidence in the form of eighty semi-structured interviews conducted in an English Red Brick University over a three-year period, this paper uses Jenkins' work on social identification to examine the processes by which these post-2012 undergraduates used and experienced the financial support made available to them as part of the Programme. The paper explores how the initially categorical label associated with being a student in receipt of financial assistance was variously understood and experienced as they moved through their degree. Not only did the additional finance allow students to avoid excessive part-time work, recipients also felt increasingly valued by the institution when they began to recognise how their financial circumstances differed from their peers, and that the university had made this provision for them. It remains to be seen whether these, more intangible, benefits of non-repayable financial support will transfer to the system of 'enhanced' loans that have subsequently replaced maintenance grants and the National Scholarship Programme.

Key words

financial support; student experience; student loans; widening participation; social identity; identification and categorisation

Introduction

Drawing on a three-year longitudinal study of eighty undergraduates at an English Red Brick University, this paper explores how low-income students understood and used the financial support they received as part of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP). It uses Jenkins work on social identity (2000, 2008, 2014), we

examine how the processes of being identified and classified as 'low income' were experienced by students, and chart how an initially unfamiliar categorical label was negotiated in the context of the institution.

Taking an innovative 'whole student lifecycle' approach that followed students through the three years of their university studies, the research demonstrates how non-repayable financial support enhanced the experiences of lower income students in a 'Red Brick' university. This augments the various insights offered by, amongst others, Callender and Mason (2017), McCaig (2016), and Reay et al. (2009). While there is no doubt that the overarching emphasis of the National Support Programme exacerbated inequity across the sector - particularly between the levels of financial support offered by pre-1992 and post-1992 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) - it was vital to the success of low-income students who found themselves in higher-tariff, more selective universities, for several reasons. First, being in receipt of support helped them to make sense of their experiences of difference that emerged in their interactions with their more affluent counterparts. Second, and perhaps more important, the money they received also allowed them to shape their university experience around their own interests and needs. While we are not suggesting that this subsidy fundamentally transformed their basic identities associated with socio-economic status, we examine how this financial support was understood, and how it facilitated the identifications they made during their passage through the institution. Whether such benefits will transfer to the system of enhanced loans that have replaced these mechanisms of support remains to be seen.

Widening Participation, Non-repayable Grants, and Social Identification

In 2011, the UK government set out new arrangements for the system of student finance in England. It permitted HEIs to charge up to £9000 per year of study - trebling previous fee levels - whilst also re-developing the loans and grants accessible to undergraduate students (BIS, 2011). One central concern about these changes was the impact they would have on students from lower socio-economic and 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Sutton Trust, 2012; Harrison, 2018; Dearden et al., 2011). As a result, during the first years of the new fee regime the UK government and HEIs sought to document and justify their attempts to support social mobility by widening participation in higher education (Clark et al., 2015).

A major vehicle through which this was done was the National Scholarship Programme (NSP). Match-funded by government and individual HEIs, and starting in 2012, the scheme was designed to provide front-loaded financial assistance to those in most need, whilst alleviating some of the direct costs of tuition. To award non-repayable scholarships, the coalition government specified that eligible students needed an 'assessed household income' below £25,000, with HEIs able to set their own eligibility criteria beyond this base-line. However, whilst headline figures suggested that the sector invested a total of £416.6 million in financial support packages during the first year of the scheme (OFFA, 2014), the capacity of individual HEIs to support low-income students was constrained by the number of low-income students they typically attracted. As a result, there was a high level of variation across the sector, with the more diverse lower-tariff HEIs[1] having to spread the support more thinly because they had more eligible students (Callender, 2012, Chowdry et al., 2012, McCaig, 2016).

There is evidence of the positive effects of financial support, and its importance for 'academic and social integration' (Tinto, 1975, 2007). Such literature has continued to demonstrate that the likelihood of a student staying in higher education is related to the extent to which s/he feels they belong within the institution. In addition to a lack of economic capacity, deficits in academic preparedness, dedication to educational goals, and commitment toward the institution have also been recognised for their deleterious impact on performance and continuation (see Davidson and Wilson, 2013).

Issues of retention and engagement have also received more detailed, and critical, examination within the Bourdieusian literature exploring the experience of

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[1] Tariff points generated by the UCAS application process have been used as an indication of an HE applicants' measure of educational capital and the degree of competition to get into a particular institution.

inequalities in higher education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Passeron and Bourdieu, 1979, Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2010, Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). Here the emphasis is on examining how 'social capital' is implicit within the language and practices of HEIs. The capacity to act is greater for those students who are best able to use their biographies and experiences to correspond with the 'habitus' of the institution. Exploring how student social capital and habitus vary with the type of university and a range of different student identities, this literature has examined how HEIs continue to reinforce the social reproduction of inequalities associated with class, gender, ethnicity, and age (Reay *et al.*, 2009, Waller et al, 2018).

Insightful as this work is, there has been little exploration of the *processes* of social identification underpinning the experience of financial support, and the label of 'widening participation' (WP) associated with schemes like the NSP. This matters because there is a crucial conceptual difference between *categories* such as 'widening participation' and *group identifications* such as class, gender and age.

Social identification is the dynamic process by which we come to understand and experience ourselves and others (Jenkins, 2014). Questions of *social* identity concern who we think we are, how we see others, how they see us, how we think others see us, and how others think we see them - and so on. To this end, the literature on social identity has long demonstrated that there are two ways of looking at identification: individual or collective *self*-identification and the categorisation of individual or collective *others*. This recognition provides the foundation for a further conceptual distinction between groups and categories: internalised association with the collectivity shaping the former, external categorisation defining the latter (Tajfel, 1981, Jenkins, 2014).

Eligibility for the NSP, and the label of 'widening participation' more generally, are external categorical impositions of circumstance, and not necessarily a self-affirming internal identification. The WP category that is measured by proxy through eligibility for free school meals, parental income, or postcode (see HEFCE, 2013), is often at least one step removed from individual experience. It is unlikely to be incorporated, at least in the first place, into a student's sense of social identity (Jenkins, 2014). Whilst membership of any given kinship network and socio-economic status *is* likely to be central to an individual's understanding of who they are, this lived experience is - in terms of social identification - some distance from the classifying principle of 'assessed household contribution' underpinning eligibility for the NSP.

However, external categorisations can become internal identifications, and *vice versa*. Equally, the processes through which similarity and difference are experienced by and between individuals, and between individuals and institutions, are multi-faceted and dynamic. Clearly, there *are* long-standing differences in

opportunity, attainment, and outcomes associated with higher education - but the collective patterns do not always overwhelm individual lives. Not only do WP students succeed *and* fail in HEIs, they do so in different and nuanced ways, and to differing degrees (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; McKay and Devlin, 2015; Waller *et al*, 2018). Whilst Bourdieusian approaches make some room for the transformation of identity, in terms of the subjective experience of objective probabilities, there remains a need to supplement the focus on collective difference with a more nuanced appreciation of how the *sense* of similarity and difference underpins the experience of financial support[2]. Given the apparent policy push to encourage high tariff, more selective HEIs to widen participation and enhance social mobility (McCaig, 2016, OFFA, 2015), we need to examine where and how small economic enhancements shape the way that lower income students see themselves within 'Red Brick' institutions (Harrison *et al*., 2018; Jack, 2016; Thiele *et al*., 2017; Boliver, 2018).

Examining longitudinal qualitative evidence within an understanding of social identification deriving from Jenkins (2000; 2008; 2014), this paper charts how the financial support that lower income students received as part of the NSP helped them navigate some of the social and economic differences they experienced during their degree. In the process, it demonstrates how being in receipt of financial support also tended to encourage a stronger identification with the University. Enhancing Béland's (2017) general contention that experiences of identity should be at the heart of policy analysis, it argues that greater understanding of the distinctly social processes of identification that underpinned the NSP, could support better outcomes for those lower income students likely to be classified 'WP'.

The Research Study

An emergent and innovative trend within the literature about higher education is beginning to use longitudinal designs to explore the whole student lifecycle (Bathmaker *et al*., 2016, Purcell *et al*., 2010). Encompassing all aspects of university life - and across the full term of their degree programme - these studies aim to examine interdependencies within, and across, key arenas of student experience. Taking such a 'whole lifecycle approach', this paper is based on a three-year longitudinal study that documented the experiences of forty 2013 home undergraduate entrants, as they moved into, through, and beyond their degree programme in an English Red Brick University (ERBU). In focussing on the

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[2] Of course, the notion of *sens* features heavily in Bourdieu's collected work and was, at least in part, a vehicle through which he attempted to articulate the generative strategies of actors, and the delicate balance that exists between perception and practice. The relationship between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' also serves as a key point of reference in his discussions on 'epistemic reflexivity'.

experiences of the second cohort of students studying under the post-2012 tuition fee regime, the project explored aspects of finance, learning and teaching, lifestyle, health and wellbeing, and careers and employment. This paper is, however, concerned with the 27 of those students who were eligible for non-repayable maintenance grants or bursaries when they entered the institution. It draws on a total of 80 semi-structured interviews that took place annually across the three-year period (n_1=27, n_2=27, n_3=26[3]). The demographic characteristics of this group are detailed in Table 1.

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[3] One interviewee declined to be interviewed in the third year of study.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants who received Financial Support (N = 27)

	Respondent
Gender	
Female	16
Male	11
Faculty	
Arts and Humanities	3
Engineering	5
Medicine, Dentistry, and Health	6
Science	6
Social Science	7
Age on entry	
18 years	13
19-20 years	9
21+ years	5
Ethnicity	
White	15
Black	3
Asian	5
Mixed/Other	4
Home postcode	
Local Postcode	9
Other or missing	18
First year financial support (fee waiver[4], City Scholarship[5], or bursary[6])	
Two or three types of financial support	20
One type of financial support	7

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[4] Students whose household income was below £25,000 a year were eligible for a National Scholarship Programme provided as a fee-waiver at ERBU. Those with a household income less than £18,000 were eligible for the full waiver of £9000, others received £6000. Some of this money could be taken as an optional cash-waiver.

[5] Students from deprived post-codes in the City Region gained a one-off cash payment as a scholarship.

[6] Corresponding to the maintenance grant eligibility, students gained additional yearly support provision from the university in the form of cash bursaries. This ranged between £500 - £1400 per year, and students below a yearly household income of £42,000 were eligible.

To ensure that a broad range of students were included in the study, the project employed a two-step sampling strategy that utilised the technique of maximum variation at both case and unit levels (Patton, 2002). At the case level, two or three departments were initially selected from each of the five faculties of ERBU with the following inclusion criteria: the nature of department (traditional, vocational); relative size (small, medium, large); and ratio of WP students (low, medium, high). A total of twelve departments were sampled.

At unit level, seven students were awarded either a bursary or the 'City Scholarship'; fifteen received the combination of the NSP fee waiver and the bursary; and, two received a combination of the 'City Scholarship' and the bursary. Three students were awarded all three sources of financial support (see below for further description). Inclusion criteria at the unit level also involved balancing the sample against more general characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity. Participants were initially drawn from a randomised list of students within each target department and approached to participate in the study; non-response was 69.7%. This design enabled the sampling frame to cover a diverse range of students, chart the complexity of their experiences, and identify central themes and interests (c.f. Patton, 2002: 234).

Conducted in accordance with the host University's regulations on research quality and ethical practice, each student was interviewed on three separate occasions during their programme - usually between the middle and end of the second semester of study. These semi-structured 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 aspects of their financial life they considered to be significant.

All interviews were transcribed; using QSR Nvivo, the texts were subjected to thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Theoretically and methodologically transparent, this systematic approach to analysis is responsive to the emergent themes of interviewees *and* those that are actively chosen by the researcher as being of interest. Analysis involved a six-stage process: familiarisation; initial coding; identifying themes; reviewing themes; defining themes; evidencing those themes using data. As part of the analytical process, issues of financial eligibility, of similarity and difference, and of identification emerged as key themes. This suggested that Richard Jenkins' work on social identification would be an appropriate lens through which these processes might be better understood. More specifically, our attention was drawn toward the emergent dialectics of nominal-virtual, similarity-difference, and internal-external as discussed by Jenkins (2000, 2008, 2014). The results have been divided into three discrete sections based on the emergent properties of the analysis. Interview excerpts have been anonymised.

Findings

The experience of financial categorisation

Symbolic interactionist approaches to social identification have long demonstrated that there is a conceptual difference between being nominally labelled as something, and the experience of that label. Instead, what is required for a nominal identity to have meaning for an individual is a cumulative *process* over time, whereby the label is seen to have consequences for the individual or collectivity in question. It is this sense of experience that helps to shape identification with any given label (Jenkins, 2014: 101).

Eligibility for financial assistance under the post-2012 funding regime was, and still is, based on an external classification based on household income and/or postcode. Three main types of financial support were provided at ERBU in 2013. The first was an annual bursary ranging from £500 to £1,400, depending on assessment of family income. The second was a one-off 'tuition fee waiver', with the option of taking some as cash support, worth £6,000 as partial, or £9,000 as full waiver. Eligibility was determined by both family income and the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) ranking of their home postcode. Finally, there was also a one-off 'City Scholarship' worth £1,500 for students who lived in deprived areas of the ERBU City Region.

From the outset - and perhaps not unsurprisingly - low-income students struggled to experience the complex calculations associated with the 'assessed household contribution' as a meaningful identification of *them*. As an external categorisation, *relative* poverty is not necessarily an aspect of lived experience, especially where the previous lived social context has been characterised by similarity with others. For instance, Gemma suggested:

> Yes, I've been quite lucky. I've been given a £1400 bursary. I'm not really sure why, but they also waived my first year. I think they do it for 10% of the people a year from the lower income background and depending on where you live... I mean I didn't know that I'd be offered it before I came, and I was just really surprised that this happened. So, I've been really lucky in that sense, yes. (Gemma, first interview)

Prior to this notification it did not occur to Gemma to search for information on financial support, as she was not expecting to be considered 'poor'. Her categorisation as someone entitled to financial assistance - and the related WP

status - was set by a distant administrative structure that had little resonance with her self-image (see Batty and Flint, 2013 for further discussion).

Whilst lower-income students recognised the consequence of the calculation, they attributed the monies they received to characteristics that were largely external to themselves. Samuel, for example, made distinctions between the types of support he received, comparing financial support eligibility based on place and on family income[7]:

> Yes, I got some of that [money] but not the rough area one, just the low income one. So I would have got another two grand if my parents had moved like half an hour walk away from where I live, but they moved at a really lucky time so they live in a really nice area. (Samuel, first interview)

Likewise, Aina connected the payment to her parent's income:

> [The university gives a tuition fee waiver] to people whose parents earn under £25,000 for the first year. I got that so then I'm just applying for student finance [tuition fee loan] for the next two years. (Aina, first interview)

Dylan, however, pointed to a combination of housing and income:

> So [where I'm from] is considered a deprived area of the UK and because of that I get bursaries from the university. But it's like really nice over there, so I don't actually see how that works. (Dylan, second interview)

Whilst Samuel, Aina, and Dylan all understood *what* they received, *why* they got it bore only limited relation to their understanding of *who* they thought they were. The imposition of the WP category was actually quite distant to their lived experience of place, family, and home. That is to say that relative poverty was not necessarily obvious to themselves or significant others – as was highlighted by Gemma:

> I wasn't expecting it... but then, if I'm in the top 10% that's eligible for a fee waiver, then I just thought, 'Well, I must be'. (Gemma, first interview)

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[7] Samuel's reference here is a distinction between the two levels of fee waivers, which were distributed based on *both* familial income and their home postcode within the Index of Multiple Deprivation. A higher level of fee waiver corresponded to a lower familial income as well as a higher IMD.

This is, perhaps, why the National Support Programme has largely been seen not to have informed student choices in terms of destination (Bowes et al., 2016). If their respective schools or colleges did not make them aware of the potential opportunities for financial support, and they did not pay particular attention during the loan application process, there would be little practical self-identification of themselves as eligible.

Recognising and understanding difference

However, once these students became acclimatised to the landscape of ERBU, and particularly as they progressed through their programme, they began to notice how they differed from their peers. Gemma, for instance, described how her point of departure was quite different from her point of arrival at university:

> I've always been in a comprehensive school and never really known anyone that was rich. And then you come here and just everyone's from both-parent families, a lot of money; everyone can drive *and* has a car! I'm just like 'What?!' So it makes sense when I think about it that I am eligible [for a fee waiver], but yes, I just thought there would be a lot more people that were from my sort of background. (Gemma, first interview)

Gemma's background - a comprehensive school student and a member of a single parent family - did not resemble that of her peers, and she felt different from them. Indeed, low-income students highlighted a number of identifications during their university experience that made them feel different to their peers. This variously included differences in disposable income, familial support, lifestyle, and politics.

For instance, James described his shock at the types of people he found himself amongst when he began his degree:

> [B]efore I came to [ERBU] - I couldn't imagine - I thought that 'Made in Chelsea' was a joke. I didn't realise there are actually people out there like that!… It's crazy; it's like a sketch show. I just thought [the TV programme] was just very good satire but... (James, first interview)

Like Gemma, his background provided a yardstick which under-estimated how different he would feel from his peers. By his third year, he was increasingly reflexive about the issue:

It's a 'money and where you live' thing. I didn't realise that rugby was a thing that people did at school... I knew posh people did it but I didn't know that just people did it... I didn't realise that people actually played hockey. I thought it was just a punishment for people in P.E. Do you know what I mean? I didn't know people actually went skiing, because none of my friends [from home] ever did it. (James, third interview)

Elsewhere, experiences of difference were understood through other identifications that low-income students felt they did not share with the majority of their peers. Khaled, for example, recognised the limits he could go to in an attempt to 'fit in' with the social activities of his peers:

We have so much free time, you don't know what to do with it. So I think a lot of people just sort of go crazy and in the first semester, everyone goes crazy with all that free time... I was sort of taking it all in. I was sort of watching everyone go a bit crazy. It's because I don't drink or [go to] clubs. I was just trying to fit in with everybody and that sort of culture, but it was crazy and so I took a step back. (Khaled, first interview)

Whilst his identification as practising Muslim provided some room for manoeuvre in terms of his social life, it also served as a finite boundary in terms of the activities he chose to engage in. Kai also detailed the financial constraints he was operating within with respect to his family. Unlike many of his peers (see Hordósy and Clark, 2018), he recognised that he could not rely on his family to provide any augmentations to his budget, insisting that he could 'cope' alone:

I'd never ask for money from my mum because I think at home it's hard enough... I think she makes enough for home, but I don't know if she makes enough to support me. And I'd rather her save it for if anything happens in the future. But it's just little stuff like that, unexpected. I'd rather her have money rather than struggle with extra things. Because I can cope - make it cope - with what I'd get from the University. (Kai, third interview)

Mo similarly explained how he, as the first person from his family to go to university, was unable to draw on their past experiences to help him navigate his way through his degree programme. Again, he recognised how his circumstances differed from the majority:

> I feel like it's just generally if you come from a working-class family, it's slightly harder, purely because your parents really don't know what's going on. So you have to figure it out on your own. (Mo, third interview)

In experiential terms, what the students in our sample had in common with each other was not their similarity as measured by financial assistance, but the recognition that they were, in one way or another, different from the majority of their peers. However, given the range and relatively individual nature of these experiences - not to mention the general shortage of lower-income students they could identify with - this difference was not enough, in itself, to form the basis of a more collective identification with each other. There was no visible group membership to which lower-income students could feel they belonged - even though they had incorporated the experience of difference into their self-image.

Social identification: Negotiating similarity and difference in the landscape(s) of HE

Having experienced their difference from their peers, and in the absence of a visible shared group membership with which to identify, the question for the low-income students was then how to make sense of that difference. And for many, the process of receiving financial support became a vehicle through which they could better negotiate the experience of difference. This was because the non-repayable financial support allowed them to find ways to integrate with other students and the institution that better suited their own circumstances. All of this helped to enhance their identification with the University. Broadly speaking, this process of social (re)identification was facilitated by two inter-related factors associated with the financial support they received. On one hand it alleviated the economic pressures associated with university life and gave them increased capacity for manoeuvre. On the other, it made it possible to construct more positive self-identifications associated with the university.

In the first instance, financial support simply alleviated the constraints associated with the day-to-day realities of university expenditure. For example, Taylor suggested:

> I also got a scholarship when I came to uni, which gave me some money, which I put immediately into funding for second year so I didn't need to work. (Taylor, second interview)

Financial support has the potential to negate the need for excessive part-time work, meaning students have more time to spend on academic duties and extracurricular activities (see also Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Burke *et al*, 2017; Harrison *et al.*, 2018; Hordósy, Clark and Vickers, 2018). Mo, for instance, highlighted how the support enabled him to better explore and develop career aspirations:

> Yeah, I've got a university bursary. I think [it's enough to live on] because if it wasn't, I would be dying to get a job right now, whereas, now, I just want a job for, like, more experience. But, obviously I would be happy to get more money, just to save up for the future and stuff. (Mo, second interview)

Free from the requirement to 'work to survive', Mo could shape the employment he *chose* to engage with so it better reflected his further career plans. Indeed, the support enabled a shift in how he saw himself, from someone with a job now, to someone with relevant experience who has the means to develop in the future.

Kim also highlighted the role that financial support had played throughout her degree, especially in enabling her to fulfil her basic economic needs:

> But yeah, with all the changes to the grants and stuff I don't think it's particularly fair because that's what helps people get through in a lot of cases. If I didn't have the extra money that I got from it then I definitely wouldn't have enough money to pay my rent… I think it's really good that the university also do bursaries as well, which I don't necessarily know if other universities do. It's really good because you don't have to pay that back either. (Kim, third interview)

The process of being recognised by ERBU as someone who was eligible for financial support also helped foster wider, and more positive, identifications with the university (see Harrison *et al.*, 2018 for further discussion). Kai, for example, noted how the enhanced income he received eventually helped to give him the confidence to shape his self-image and position it positively in relation to the institution. In the process, he re-imagined his past from the perspective of the present:

> I think the money from university and the grant has helped quite a lot, to be fair, and down the line as well when you think about the loan... I feel like I've become a lot more of my own person at university and I feel like I've learnt quite a lot these past years. But I do have moments where I'm like, 'You know what, I kind of wish I played ice-hockey in first year!'… I wish that I'd just tried

out something completely different, because university's the best time to do it, and there were loads of people doing it. So I, kind of, wish I tried that. It's quite expensive but I feel like I could have budgeted for it. (Kai, third interview)

Similarly, Amina reflected on her relationship with the university with respect to the support she felt she had received because of her background:

I think I've built this bond with the university itself and with the department…they've just been so understanding, they've been supporting me throughout…they've been there for me since day one and I think that's what's been quite inspirational… I feel like I'm part of a family, I'm part of this community, I'm not just a number, I'm not just a student, I'm part of the family. I'm part of the school and that's exactly what it feels like (Amina, third interview)

Although Amina was classified as a mature student, like many others we interviewed, she was uncertain about the reasons she was eligible for support. However, as she progressed through the course, she became increasingly appreciative of the help she had received 'since day one'. Having attended a different institution for a year prior to coming to ERBU, she often contrasted the two experiences with respect to her sense of belonging:

I think the university is lovely. I am so glad I came to [ERBU] instead of any other university. Over here, you are not just a number and they do appreciate you as a student compared to other universities, but I guess you cannot have a good experience everywhere. (Amina, second interview)

Toward the end of his degree, James also highlighted the positive process of negotiating difference in terms of his self-image, and the role of the bursary in enabling him to do that more successfully:

It's a constant process isn't it? Meeting new people, identifying, and learning to identify with them, past those boundaries that you find... It's having the experiences I've had and just, again, the fact that I've grown here so much within the past three years. I just can never imagine going anywhere else… [And] one of the best things about coming to [ERBU], besides all of the stuff that I've already said, is financially they are fantastically good at supporting you. In first year, I had so much support. I still do. From bursaries and the fee waiver

> thing that they do. Just fantastic. That's the thing where you just qualify for it and you get it. (James, third interview)

Not only did this support help him to feel part of the University, as he would later highlight, it also enabled him 'come to terms' with the difference he experienced early on in his degree. This was something that he had taken for granted prior to his arrival:

> I think that on a deeper level, recognising that I grew up with something very different has been very hard because it's coming to terms with the circumstances that make you, but that you've never had to confront because it was just the norm. You know, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing - I think it's a great thing! - but I think it's one of the major things I've learnt from coming to university. Like, the person who I live with now and I lived next-door to in first year is fantastically well-off. Just, you know, he goes skiing all the time. (James, third interview)

Of course, many of the students in our sample also recognised that there could be wider limitations on their capacity to advance into employment - particularly in respect to their access to professional networks:

> It's the connections people have. For example, [name]'s got connections. He got to go to some private clinic, and the guy was like, 'Yes, I want you to graduate, and when you graduate, you can come and work for me and then when I retire, I'll give you the clinic'. (Mo, third interview)

This is perhaps why many also spoke positively of further funding opportunities that enabled them to develop both their experience and employment contacts. Having received the initial bursary - and experienced engagement with the university's bureaucratic processes as positive and rewarding - many lower income students went on to seek further opportunities. In addition to the statutory bursaries, ERBU offered low-income students opportunities to apply for further, more specialised, funding. Based on a notification e-mail about her eligibility, Claudia applied for a travel grant to attend a summer-school, which she could not have afforded without the university support:

> So you get an email saying you're eligible to apply and then it gives you sort of options of where you can go and then, you know, links to their website and then you just look through what they offer… as I was applying, I was thinking why am I doing this?! I can't even afford to do it with the scholarship, and then I got the scholarship [and other extra financial support]... Yes! I can pay my rent, I can go to summer school; this is amazing! So I was very happy. (Claudia, second interview)

The summer school enabled Claudia to start building a career profile and a professional network to match her aspirations. James attempted to summarise the value of his WP status and explain how the financial support that he received positively changed both his self- and public image in the context of applying for a Masters scholarship for under-represented groups:

> [I]t's just really hard to know how to phrase that in 500 words, to just say, 'If it wasn't for charities giving me money, I wouldn't be here,' sort of, thing. Not to get sentimental about it or anything, it's the opportunity that those sorts of schemes allow you - and it's very hard to verbalise that and be, like, 'Yes. I would be a fundamentally different person who would just be working at Tesco,' or something, and wouldn't have all this knowledge, but would have the potential to... and that's just a really weird thing. I've been coming to terms with it over the past two weeks. (James, third interview)

Contrasting his self-image then with his public image now, James identified himself as someone who had changed for the better as a result of his, initially external, label as a 'WP' student. No longer nominally identified as 'someone with potential', his identification with 'these sorts of schemes' had changed him into someone 'with all this knowledge' and, with it, a changed perception of his life-course. James experienced a cumulative labelling process over time, in which he had experienced the WP label as having positive consequence for his 'university experience' and what might lie beyond. Given institutional legitimacy by being categorised as someone who was eligible for non-repayable financial support, his experience of difference *and* similarity in his interactions with his peers, and the wider university, enabled him to make sense of the external identity he had been ascribed to the extent that he incorporated it positively within his fields of identification.

Discussion: the 'Added Value' of Non-repayable Financial Support

It is, perhaps, not surprising that students in receipt of additional financial support view that assistance as positive. As one student commented, 'it's free money, so it's all good'. Nor should it be surprising that students in receipt of assistance would want to portray themselves in a positive light in terms of what they used it for. However, whilst the effectiveness of any scheme is both contingent and relative (Harrison and McCaig, 2017), it is clear that the students in receipt of financial support that we interviewed valued the assistance offered to them and used it in ways that helped to support their engagement with the university. Our evidence, presented above, illustrates how lower-income students experienced the 'added value' of non-repayable financial support, and the processes through which it allowed them gradually to adjust their self-identifications during their three-year experience of ERBU.

There are, of course, some limits to our conclusions. Firstly, the case-study nature of the research design necessarily constrains the portability of the findings. Reay *et al.* (2009), for example, have demonstrated how the individual *habitus* of particular institutions can enable and/or constrain the capacity of particular types of students to 'fit in' and/or 'stand out'. McCaig (2016) has also argued persuasively that the experience of the NSP varied across the sector. As a result, whilst it is possible to make what Malcolm Williams (2000) has termed 'moderatum generalisations' to other English 'Red Brick' universities where levels of support were similar, further research into the processes of identification that underpin the WP label in other types of HEI are still necessary.

That said, our results matter, for three key reasons. Firstly, in terms of HE policy the present study resonates with earlier, pre-2012, findings from Callender and Wilkinson (2013), Harrison and Hatt (2012), and Chowdry *et al.* (2012), and continues to show that the complexity of financial support limits the ability of such schemes to influence student choice of HE destination. However, this does not, in itself, negate the value of the non-repayable financial support that lower-income students received under the NSP, in this case, those studying within higher tariff, more selective institutions. We do not disagree with those such as McCaig (2016) who have demonstrated that the NSP exacerbated inequality *between* HEIs, but we want to emphasise that non-repayable grants and bursaries made vital contributions to the lives of the very lowest income students *within* 'Red Brick' institutions.

Secondly, echoing the key points of Tinto's theory of student retention (1975, 2007), our findings show how forms of non-repayable financial aid can help to mediate the relationship between individual, interaction, and institution - and in doing so, promote retention. However, it further demonstrates that being identified as someone who is eligible for financial support can, at least in part, mitigate feelings of being different and offer a sense of being valued. Beyond the economic 'boost' that

it can provide, the experience of being awarded financial support, and having the autonomy to shape that support around individual needs and interests, can all help to enhance confidence and wider engagement with the university. So, whilst the new system of loans proposed by the Conservative Government in 2015 *might* allow those 'most in need' to balance their immediate budgets, it is unlikely to provide the 'added value' that can be experienced by receiving targeted non-repayable funding, especially where it is perceived to come in part from the university. It should also be noted that it remains to be seen whether those students most in need will actually take up the opportunity for a larger loan. Given the wariness of debt in lower-income groups, we might reasonably expect many to instead attempt to manage their finances through extra part-time working (Callender and Mason, 2017, Clark, Hordósy and Vickers, 2017).

Finally, following Béland's (2017) argument that analysis of public policy needs to be understood in relation to the processes of identification through which it is experienced, our findings show how institutionally-legitimated categories originating in policy-making can become positive individual identifications. This perspective offers a better appreciation of the dynamic relationship between self, others, and environment, as experienced by individuals. This is not to say that the institutional *habitus* of the HEI in question is unimportant in helping to structure the experience of WP students. Nor is it to suggest that the National Support Programme and associated schemes of non-repayable financial assistance are the only, or best, means of ensuring fairer access, participation, and outcome. Increased economic capacity cannot conjure what Bourdieu called 'symbolic capital', 'habitus' or 'the subjective expectation of objective probabilities' out of individual or collective existence (Bourdieu and Passeson, 1977, Passeron and Bourdieu, 1979). However, our account, rooted in an interactional model of social identification, demonstrates that individuals are not necessarily overwhelmed by either their previous circumstances *or* their current environments. Routine classificatory categories need to be understood with reference to the specific histories and social relations that construct them, *and* the relationships through which they are experienced (Jenkins, 2014). A greater emphasis on the social processes of identification in context - and experiences of similarity and difference, in particular - might support better outcomes for those lower income students likely to be classified as 'Widening Participation'.

Acknowledgement

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