"I've changed in every possible way someone could change" – Transformative university transitions

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Abstract: Drawing on a longitudinal research project that followed the undergraduate entrants of 2013 into, and through their university time, this paper provides a novel conceptualisation of transformative transitions via looking at the four dimensions of non-linearity, multiplicity, diversity and structure. To do so, it builds on Archer's (2000, 2003, 2012) relational realist approach and work on reflexivity to show how students select and merge a diverse set of personal concerns to arrive at a modus vivendi. This capstone paper closes a series of publications from a four-year tracking study that collected interview data from a diverse group of 40 students on a yearly basis ($n_1=40$, $n_2=40$, $n_3=38$, $n_4=33$) at an English northern red brick university. The paper explores the changing focus of student experiences, from the social aspects of acclimatisation, to learning to be academic, and finally, becoming a graduate. The results presented here also point to the structural enablements and constraints that higher education institutions and policy makers should mitigate in responding to the inequalities of access and experience. In the context of a large-scale societal crisis, such as the ongoing pandemic, it is key that we understand how university can remain a transformative experience for all students.

Introduction

The emergence of high participation higher education systems has been coupled with changes to how universities are financed (Callender 2012, Marginson 2016). In several national contexts, such as in England, we have seen the individualisation of financial risk through the introduction of tuition fees (Antonucci 2016,). After withdrawing most funding from teaching undergraduate courses in 2012, retaining only the government subsidies for sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics at a lower level, the cap on tuition fees was raised from £3,290 per annum to £9,000 for new entrants from 2012/2013 (Callender 2012, Clark et al. 2019). The onus is then on the student to make an informed choice over higher education participation, whilst universities compete for their 'custom' (Tight 2013). The university experience becomes something to be packaged and sold, with the social elements and extracurricular activities all being included in the price tag (Hordósy & Clark 2018), homogenising students to market 'a' particular version of being a university citizen (Sabri 2011). However, university choice and participation is experienced differently in a system that remains stratified and socially segregated (Raffe and Croxford 2015, Crawford et al. 2017, Crozier et al. 2008), with large variety in student budgets creating differential contexts for learning (Hordósy et al. 2018).

Beyond university and upon graduation, there are again clear structural factors impacting on university students' future career options. The outcomes are nonetheless assessed as the individual's employability, without much account for the fluctuation of the wider youth labour market. Beyond the changing employment prospects, graduate outcomes are of course not equitable, with marked differences based on gender, ethnicity and race, as well as social class (DfE 2017, Zwysen & Longhi 2017, Britton et al. 2019, Duta et al. 2020). In the broader UK context, graduates from higher status universities, overwhelmingly white middle-class students, have better job prospects and outcomes (Britton et al., 2019), through being able to mobilise valued capitals (Bathmaker et al. 2013, 2016, Bathmaker 2021).

The current Covid-19 pandemic resulted in national lockdowns and closure of universities to face-to-face teaching for the majority of students across the whole of the UK. This 'swift and acute' change in student lives (Settersten et al. 2020, 6) also brought disruption to

student support through the 'dissolution of the physical and social environment' (Raaper & Brown 2020, 2). It remains to be seen what impact this large-scale disruption will have on a generation of students and graduates. Comparisons with the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent economic downturn suggests that the youth labour market is likely to be the hardest hit (Henehan 2020, Dietrich 2013). Graduates in the years after the 'Great Recession' retained a slight advantage over non-graduates, with somewhat lower unemployment rates and better wage outcomes (Belfied et al. 2018, Choudhry et al. 2012). However, a sustained impact on graduates' employment conditions remains, as those who entered the labour market under the economic crisis saw a 'scarring effect' to their propensity to be employed and obtain lower wages even 8-10 years on, when compared to those who started their careers before or after the crisis (Coulter 2016, European Commission 2015).

This capstone paper closes a series of publications from a longitudinal research project that followed the entrants of 2013 into, through and beyond their studies. Importantly, through a novel definition of higher education transitions, and illustrating the four proposed dimensions through a case study of an English northern red brick university[1] (NRBU), this paper captures how the diverse undergraduate student experiences change over time. In the context of a large-scale societal crisis, such as the ongoing pandemic, that is 'simultaneously destructive and productive' (Raaper and Brown 2020, 2), and the potentially large-scale changes in higher education, it is key that we understand how university can remain a transformative experience for students.

Conceptualising higher education transitions

Transitions in education encompass how individuals (students) move through the system of (compulsory) education and into a stable position in the workplace, through in-between positions (Müller and Gangl 2003). These different phases are often seen through van Gennep's (1960) work on rituals, understanding the in-between

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[1] 'Red brick universities' are UK higher education institutions established in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, that tend to be research-intensive in focus and selective in their student intake.

positions as liminal rites of passages. Beyond focusing on the individuals moving through the educational system, research has attempted to conceptualise the 'relatively enduring features of a country's institutional and structural arrangements which shaped transition processes and outcomes' (Smyth et al. 2001). These 'transition systems' or 'transitions regimes' are suggested to be changing over time within any societal setting (Walther 2006). Raffe (2008, 278) points to the numerous theoretical lenses used to explore them, suggesting that 'as a result of this diversity of perspectives, transition system research often appears theoretically eclectic and fragmented'.

The field of student transitions in higher education is similarly 'underconceptualised' and 'under-theorised' (Briggs et al. 2012, 2, Gale and Parker 2014, 734). As Gale & Parker point out, 'in many studies 'transition' as a concept is rarely explicitly considered, and seldom is the term interrogated (…), relying instead on taken-for-granted notions' (2014, 736-737). Looking at the literature on youth transitions, Plugor (2015) shows that some of the research refers to a golden age of educational transitions in the 1960s, picturing them as linear, clear-cut and smooth. However, mirroring the economic and social changes, other concepts, such as 'bridges, routes and pathways' in the 1970, and 'trajectories' in the 1980s are used.

In a review of higher education transitions and providing their own conceptualisation, Gale and Parker (2014) identify three main strands of the literature. The first views transitions as induction into higher education, hence focusing on access and the first year at university identifying it as a crucial time period with important turning points. Although such research seeks to highlight that both student characteristics and institutional contexts shape the experiences that concurrently exist, there is no systematic attempt to theorise the first year experience (Yorke 2000, Yorke and Longden 2008, Briggs et al. 2012, Harvey et al. 2006). Tinto's (2007) work suggests the importance of student engagement on retention and success, with his model (1975) combining several academic and social systems, again showing the complexity of drop-out decisions. Scanlon and colleagues (2007, 224) point out that transitions into the first year are accompanied by 'losses' in other arenas of life.

The second strand of literature views transitions as development or transformation of the self into a new life stage, with

university understood as the time to become somebody upon graduation (Ecclestone et al. 2010). This development is still a linear process built up of different phases (separation, transition and integration/incorporation), but allows for some level of discontinuity (Gale and Parker 2014). For instance, Milsom and colleagues (2015) examined what they termed the 'second-year blues', an often noted 'dip' in performance and interest. They find that 'students move from affectively oriented goals in the first year to a second year's cognitive and strategic stage which is driven by performance', arguing that a more positive and integrated curriculum design could better support successful transitions (Milsom et al. 2015, 37). Taking the 'whole student lifecycle' into account, Temple and colleagues (2016) proposed the key aspects and stages of application experience; academic experience; campus experience; and graduate experience, whilst Jones (2017) refers to several microsystems that are integral to experiences of transition – however, it is unclear how these microsystems are related.

Finally, the third direction of the literature understands transitions as becoming. Proposing to follow this third conceptualisation, Gale and Parker (2014, 737) build on Sen's (1985) capability-approach and navigation of change-conditions to define individual agency within transitions structures as 'the capability to navigate change' through a 'perpetual series of fragmented movements'. For instance, using the concept of transitions as becoming, Gravett (2019, 5 & 7) discusses the idea of troublesome knowledge through Meyer and Land's work on thresholds to 'a transformed state of understanding' to 'illuminate the possibilities that risk, uncertainty and change can create'. Importantly, Gravett (2019, 7) also points to the 'diversity and multiplicity of not just experiences but of the self'. Similarly, Tett et al. (2017) also focus on becoming, and explore the critical moments of transitions deriving from their longitudinal account. These are 'the loss of a sense of belonging on coming to university, learning to fit in by the end of the first year, changing approaches to learning and belonging in the final years of study and changing selves in the years following graduation' (Tett 2017, 389).

Elsewhere, to explore further to higher education transitions Katartzi and Hayward (2019, 2) draw on the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein to 'conceptualise [transitions] as dynamic processes taking place whilst social agents move between epistemically differentiated

fields, thereby acquiring differentially structured and valorised knowledge'. They focus on students' 'understanding and sense of themselves as hierarchically positioned knowers'. Conceptualising transformative university experiences and knowledge development, Ashwin et al. (2014, 2016) discuss how students' personal projects in regards to the value of what they are studying are indeed diverse and potentially changeable; further dimensions of interest are social integration and intellectual engagement with the broader disciplinary knowledge.

Although the social dimensions of the university experience invariably appear as changing connections to family, friends and the broader university community, these can be more meaningfully centred through Archer's (2012) relational realist approach. Indeed, using the work of Archer (2007, 2012) and Holmes (2010) on reflexivity and relations, Finn (2017, 421) discussed how emotions and personal relationships are 'central to decision-making and selfhood' in graduate employment. Archer (2012, 109), too, pointed to the difficulty of deliberating careers whilst being 'busy falling in love and are also considering their 'relationship' as a future part of their modus vivendi'.

Of further importance here is Archer's (2003, 298) work on *reflexivity*, 'as the process that mediates the effects of structure upon agency'. In her later book on *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity* she added that 'our internal conversations define what courses of action we take in given situations and subjects who are similarly placed do not respond uniformly' (Archer 2012, 6). This, as Baker (2018, 10) points out, allows for a mapping of 'different constellations of constraints and enablements' through young people's decisions on higher education. Archer (2000, 2012) contends that a modus vivendi is forged through reflexive internal conversations that select and merge a diverse set of personal concerns, via the phases of 'Discernment', 'Deliberation' and 'Dedication'.

To arrive at a comprehensive and holistic understanding of university transitions, this paper reports on a longitudinal research project that followed a diverse cohort of undergraduate students as they made their way into, through and beyond the case-study institution. It understands transformative university transitions as *a dynamic, perpetual and uncertain series of changes and movements*

through time and space to become a university student, and subsequently a graduate (Ashwin et al. 2014, Gale and Parker 2014, Gravett 2019, Katartzi and Hayward 2019, Clegg 2010). Drawing mainly on Archer (2012), this paper also sets out the following horizontal, vertical, agentical and structural dimensions of university transitions:

- Transitions are more than a process of change over time, and their non-linearity means tumultuous moments, quieter periods, dead ends, and re-starts throughout the university time and beyond (horizontal dimension);
- Transitions are multidimensional, with changing foci and weight given to the different aspects of (university) life; becoming someone with the capacity to produce knowledge being key (vertical dimension);
- Transitions are a diverse range of experiences, based on self-reflective internal conversations relating to the past, present and imagined futures; resulting in assimilation, adaptation, and becoming; with happenstance playing an important part (agentical dimension);
- Transitions are embedded a) socially, in relation to natal contexts, relation- and friendships, and broader social groups, b) institutionally, within a complex university system with enabling and constraining capacities, and c) locally / nationally through school-university-work transition systems – thus making student / graduate life inherently political (structural dimension).

Research design and methods

The longitudinal tracking project this paper reports on was set up to understand the complex, diverse and ever-changing nature of student experiences in the context of the post-2012 tuition fee system. Drawing on interviews with home, undergraduate full-time students at an English northern red brick university (NRBU), this research focused on how students understood, and made sense of, their experiences of student life as they moved into, through, and beyond university. Taking a longitudinal approach it followed a sample of 40 students over a period of four years (n_1=40, n_2=40, n_3=38, n_4=33), starting in the in the second semester of 2013/2014 and approaching students on an annual basis. The fourth round of interviews were conducted in the academic year 2016/2017: interviewees on three year degrees were also followed up in their first year of employment or postgraduate course, whereas others were interviewed in their fourth year of their longer degrees. The study specifically sought to address aspects of transitions in the arenas of learning and teaching, social life and housing, health and wellbeing, careers and employability, and, financial aspects of university life (Hordósy 2018). Covering these five arenas each year, the interview schedule and follow-up questions also built on both the previous years' overall findings, and personal stories. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, ensuring continuity and a good rapport with the participants. The data-collection would eventually result in a total of 151 interviews and, following transcription, a corpus of over 1,500,000 words for analysis. Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the sample for the first, and the fourth year of interviews.

Table 1: Overview of sample demographics in the first and fourth years[2]

	Respondents, Y1	Respondents, Y4
Gender		
Female	26	21 (23)
Male	14	12
Faculty		
Arts and Humanities	7	5 (2)
Engineering	5	5
Medicine, Dentistry, and Health	7	5
Science	11	10
Social Science	10	8
Age		
18 years	23	18 (20)
19-20 years	11	11
21+ years	6	4
Ethnicity		
White	27	23 (25)
Black	3	2
Asian	5	5
Mixed/Other	5	3
Postcode on entry		
Local Postcode	9	7
Other or missing	31	26 (28)
Total number of interviewees		
Total	**40**	**33 (35)**

Given pressing concerns around how the tuition fee changes in 2012 would impact social mobility, and general policy interest in the effectiveness of the schemes of non-repayable grants and bursaries that accompanied the changes, the project also oversampled for lowest income students, measured by their eligibility for a tuition fee waiver (n=18)[3]. This maximum variation sampling strategy purposefully selected a wide variety of participants so that any similarities between them can be identified. At case-level we selected two or three departments in each of the five faculties based on varying aspects of size, and ratio of students in receipt of financial support. At participant level, we matched a non-fee waiver student to a fee waiver student within the sampled departments, and balanced the sample based on age, gender, and ethnicity (see also Hordósy 2018). The study was carried out in accordance with the host institution's ethics procedure[4] and all interview excerpts have been made anonymous.

Following transcription, interviews were analysed using QSR Nvivo, drawing on the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This allowed for themes chosen by the researchers based on the initial aims, such as discussing students' experiences of the broader arenas mentioned above, as well as those emerging from the subsequent cycles of interviews to be concurrently pursued. The six-stage process of familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting was repeated yearly for each interview cycle (ibid). A key concept cutting across several themes was that of transitions, as discussed elsewhere in relation to the research and teaching nexus (Clark and Hordósy 2019a) and career planning (Hordósy and Clark, 2018b, 2018c). This paper looks at the complex, diverse and multiple transitions through the whole student lifecycle, focusing on the social,

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[2] Additional two students declined to be interviewed, but kindly provided a brief outline of their next steps since graduation. The figures in brackets in the table represent these two students.

[3] Eligibility for a tuition fee waiver (n=18) was dependent on both family income and the Index of Multiple Deprivation ranking of their home or parental postcode. Such financial support was provided to the first three cohorts after the change in the tuition fee system in 2012 and enabled comparisons in experience between those students who received a non-repayable grant or bursary and their higher income counterparts.

[4] This study gained ethical approval from the host institution's ethics co-ordinator at the sociology department on the 31st of January, 2014.

academic and career dimensions, with reference to the cross-cutting aspects of health and wellbeing, as well as financial situation.

The potential limitations to a single institution case study design need to be acknowledged. First, NRBU is a high entry tariff institution that Brennan and Osborne (2008, 184) describe as 'relatively low diversity of intakes and reasonably high levels of shared experience of students, typically living away from home for the first time, just having left school and having few commitments outside the university'. It remains to be seen whether the results presented here resonate in institutions both less and more diverse than NRBU. Second, this study only looks at entrants of 2013, with the experience of substantive change in funding policies for later cohorts not captured. Nonetheless, it is possible to make what Williams (2000) terms 'moderatum generalisations', and see the results presented here as illuminating the broader student experience in English universities in the 2010s.

Results – university as a transformative experience

University life is often perceived as transformative and is experienced through multiple dimensions and in diverse ways by participants. The results section initially reflects on the time and space of this transformative experience, before turning to the changing foci of the university experience.

For traditional-age students higher education is also liminal period between childhood and adulthood, partly due to their financial dependencies (see also Antonucci 2016, Hordósy and Clark, 2018a). As Rachel suggests in the second interview, she has a secure budget through the support from her parents, without the concern of having to pay the bills: 'I wouldn't say we were grown up at uni, especially not me, I'm not independent, 'cause I just run home'. Most students do not live with family or siblings anymore, but have not yet chosen a household of their own. Instead, they live with a random group of individuals as sorted into halls and flats when starting their first year, often changing housemates between academic years. Similarly, local commuter students who do not move into student halls, see crucial changes in friendship groups, marking an important social shift, whereas mature students become someone with a university degree, often the first in their family.

The geographical location is mostly different to students' hometowns, or the parts of the city they knew, but not necessarily a place where they see themselves for the rest of their lives. James describes how the NRBU and its city as the spaces for reflection and internal conversations are intricately linked to who he became throughout the four years of his BA and MA:

> You, kind of, realised the limits of yourself and you realised the potentials of yourself, and that means that it harbours a weird significance, (…) that, kind of, roots you here. Not as intimate as it is your home, but as a second home of a place where you can feel like you belong, and that it is your city.
> James, fourth interview

The overall university time is often understood based on the cycles of the academic year, chronicling how their approach changed to the wider community, their own learning and their future. Assessing her university time, Mary discusses the complex interlinks of exploring questions of identity, her relationships to others, and shifting focus on her university studies:

> I think I can't imagine my life if I hadn't gone [to university]. It's probably been the most important thing I've ever done. It's made me the way I am, I think. I absolutely loved Uni. Each year was so different as well, for me it was quite distinct. The first year was sort of a bit mental and kind of discovering who I was and all that… Second year was probably the worst. I just didn't enjoy it. I studied really hard. (...) I got a First but I don't know, I think the change from the first year felt difficult. The transition from first year, from just living in halls… I tried to calm down a bit in the second year but I went too far and I just had a boring time. And then third year I kind of had a bit of a balance between the two. It was two and one combined and it made a really good year, my life here was set up and I liked the house, and I was in a good relationship, do you know what I mean? And the course was getting really good and the dissertation...
> Mary, fourth interview

Similarly, Dylan emphasises the substantive changes he can chart over his time throughout university: arriving 'to uni' as 'a kid' but leaving as 'a man'. He discusses how these are linked to the diversity of the wider community, as well as the broadly conceived learning experiences he has had:

> […] every single year since I've come to uni, I've been a different person […]. You're learning new things and meeting new people, you're living in different places, all these things are things that make you, (…) that change you as well. So I felt like I came as a kid but I'm leaving a man.
> Dylan, fourth interview

Indeed, the wide-ranging experiences prompt changes that constitute a truly transformative university education. Students in their third and fourth year interviews reflect on who they have become, and how they imagine their 'present future' (Adam and Groves 2017). The transformative experience is not only about becoming a young adult, as the example of two mature students, Amina and Ade shows. They both talk of a deep and all-encompassing change they have been through in regards to how they understand the world and themselves in it. Ade discusses the pride her children take in their 'mummy [being] in university' and becoming a health professional (third interview). Her children grow up seeing their mother study hard for her degree as the first one in her family, setting an important example, all the while Ade now feeling confident to 'contribute[s her] own quota to their homework'. Further, she talks about the importance of critical thinking to understand diverse perspectives, the 'two sides to a coin'. Likewise, Amina reflects on how her university time has transformed who she is:

> I have changed, it's been, I don't know how to describe it, (…) I'm not the same person I was when I first initially started personality-wise. I've got so much more self-confidence in me as well, which I've never had and I've learned so much over the past three years… I've changed massively, I myself can notice that I'm not the same person that I was when I first started this degree and I'm so much more wiser… it's, I've changed in every possible way someone could change.
> Amina, third interview

The following sections discuss the vertical and horizontal dimensions of university transitions further: learning the rules, structures, and shortcuts in becoming a student in higher education. The paper looks at different, broad foci of transitions: the initial focus on becoming a member of new social space gives way to the academic duties, to subsequently orienting towards the future, post-graduation life. These correspond broadly to the three levels of a standard undergraduate programme, and the following discussion will reflect the shifts in focus. However, it is important to note that there is large diversity across the board in how students experience university transitions.

The social aspects of acclimatisation

The start of the first academic year is characterised by a sense of arrival at the place where students have been expecting to get to, university in general and a subject area in particular. Indeed, in the case of young, traditional-age entrants, choice over university is likely to be the single biggest decision they have taken, or, as Kai suggests in the first interview, pushed into, given 'everyone pushes you that way, to get into university'. However, the multidimensional nature of university transitions is often emotionally overwhelming, regardless of background. There is a vast array of new terms and concepts to be learned in a new environment, under a new timeframe, with new peers. The negotiation of these 'contextual discontinuities' (Archer 2012, 126), the geographical, emotional and potentially intellectual distance from family, and home and school/college friends varies of course, but is an involved process for resident and local commuter students alike. Previously close family and friendship bonds become distant, it is therefore no surprise that the predominant stressor throughout this period relates to the social requirements of university life. The heightened focus on individual students developing their friendships and university community makes the first few weeks even more tumultuous (see also, Read et al. 2020), requiring constant reflection as Sandra points out:

> [throughout the first weeks] it was all very, (…) confusing, and it was kind of hard to adjust to living in a new place, I guess. And you kind of have to be very open with yourself, and be very friendly with everybody, because everybody wants to make friends, which I mean is nice, but it's kind of very draining to be so perky and happy all the time…
> Sandra, first interview

Given Tinto's work on the importance of belonging regarding retention, centring the social elements such as living in university halls, joining sport clubs and other extracurricular participation 'can exclude as much as they include, particularly where they are based around excessive [alcohol] consumption' (Hordósy and Clark 2018c, 430, Holton 2016). The initial space of socialisation relates to halls,

getting to know the random group of people they moved in with through 'pre-drinks' and 'going out', making it harder for those not wanting to join to find common ground with their course mates – as Khaled, a local commuter student recalls about his first year:

> When you try hard for the first month and people aren't really getting to know you, you, sort of, say, 'Well, then what's the point? I'm not going to bother'.
> Khaled, third interview

Having established their basic social circles, most students start to open beyond their immediate (house-mate) groups, towards those on their course, sharing their interests, or found through happenstance and mutual sympathies – as Mo shares his intrigue in how he ended up with his wider circle:

> When we talked about [our friendship group] the other day and we're like 'why are we all just ethnic here, except like [Pete] who's white', and everyone else is (…) Asian, and we were just like 'it doesn't really make sense', but it's just how it's formed. It's not like we've bonded over cultural sub-narratives. I'm just like, we became really good friends, but that's it.
> Mo, third interview

Students who decide to defer their participation in mainstream student culture in their first year tend to want to focus on their academic duties, have caring or work obligations, or feel a lack of fit with what seemed to be on offer. Many of these students find ways to participate in the broader 'university life' at later stages of their degree, especially in activities not visible to them throughout the first academic year.

Finding a university community is key: the experience of being a student is constructed in social spaces, to be retained through the friendships made, as 'the people who I've have met here, who I'll keep in touch with forever' (Chris, fourth interview). The importance of peer groups relates to solving everyday issues and information

gaps, support in their studies, and learning from and about each other in a broad sense, whilst also discovering their personal concerns, as Olivia points out:

> I think just learning off people has been, like, probably the most important thing actually, and not even from studies. (…) the people that you meet and the groups that you go to, through university, things you feel that become really important to you.
> Olivia, fourth interview

Similarly, James also talks about the need to understand the different experiences and values 'multicultural strangers' (Archer 2012, 126) in a large university student body will have, and being able to engage in a dialogue:

> I feel like what I learnt, especially in first year, (…) is to be compromising and to talk to people about their experiences, and because someone has a different experience to you, [that] doesn't mean they're necessarily a bad person. (…) As soon as you get out [of the place you grew up in], you meet people who have had completely different experiences to you economically, politically, whatever. What university teaches you to do, I think, is to just not shout at them and say, 'Oh my God, how can you believe that?' but to just calmly be like, 'Well, that's not everyone's experiences.'
> James, fourth interview

Upon finding a social fit within the university community, students talk about seeing beyond the initially perceived homogeneity and coming to appreciate the diversity across the institution. This also then allows them to 'stick out', so they 'don't look like a traditional law-kid' (Natasha, second year), and 'just socially not caring what others think' (Sara, fourth year). Crucially, finding certainty in terms of the social aspects also supports finding a good 'work-life balance' (Taylor, fourth year), such that they can orientate themselves towards their academic duties, as discussed in the next sub-section.

Second year counts – learning to be academic

University studies are often compared and contrasted with school and college, given learning experiences exist on a continuum within the life course (Clark and Hordósy 2019a). Students will initially attempt to adapt their (sometimes unsuitable) learning and revision techniques (Gravett and Winstone 2019), along with grappling with a new learner identity. This, for Claudia (fourth interview), is partly about having been a successful student 'right up until [students like me] get to uni, and then they're surrounded by a big group of the smart ones'. In the context of constructing the 'uni student' identity, the first year also serves to re-evaluate and question the institutional and subject choice. Occasionally, this results in seeking to change course. Holly for instance suggests she became a lot more engaged with her studies after enrolling onto a different programme:

> (…) it just made me more excited about the course and stuff rather than *just being* at uni. (…) when you're up-to-date with the readings and you're going to everything and you understand everything, you just get so much more out of it then. (...) That sounds like something a lecturer would say, but it is true.
> Holly, fourth interview

However, the structural constraints on such changes are substantive, given the limits on how many years' worth of tuition fee and maintenance loan one can use and the financial penalties of non-completion. As Natasha suggests in her third year, 'the practicalities of [dropping out] always made me stay, like having to pay back the money, no thank you'. Crucially, Katy's complex health problems only emerge late in her second year, thus making it impossible for her to start over on a seemingly more suitable degree. It was mainly her family that supports her to finally complete her studies, 'and I think my own drive of, I've come this far, I can do this' (Katy, third interview). A quarter of students mention a particular university course in their latest interviews that they thought would have suited them better – however, none of them suggest that they would reconsider enrolling to university in general.

After the initial acclimatisation, the academic aspects start falling into place, with the majority of students finding their academic fit, some level of familiarity and comfort with how the university operates. This tends to coincide with their second year, where the narrower and deeper focus on the subject area is compared to the broad and disjointed nature of the first academic year. The second year grades counting towards their final degree classification[5] helps to focus on the academic duties – however, it also brings substantive concerns over their own capabilities. To conquer the complex and unbounded nature of university knowledge, most students start actively prioritising and being selective on the basis of perceived importance within and between modules, tailoring the academic experiences to *their* needs. For instance, Chris says in his third year that he de-prioritises some of his modules aligning with his personal concerns, as 'I don't feel it bears much relevance to me, or anything I will do in my future'. Here Sadie explains how she weighs up work between modes of delivery, and substance:

> I do a lot of work for my seminars and if I have lecture stuff to format, then I'm normally quite good at that, but I don't do all the reading. I read the stuff that's relevant but if there's a few articles about the history of something, then I know that's not going to be in the exam, so I'm not going to read it.
> Sadie, second interview

Similarly, module choice becomes highly personalised and actively adjusted; it takes into account the personal concerns and broader interests, as well as the perceived difficulty of assessment, preferences in working with academic staff, and timetabling. Students actively seek out more personalised relations with university staff as well. The institution gains multiple different faces and characteristics, with enabling and constraining capacities, and students start

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[5] In the UK Honours degree classification system a First-Class Honours (1st) is the highest classification that can be achieved, given to those who reach 70% and above; an Upper Second-Class Honours (2.1) is the higher of two levels of second class degrees, given to those who achieve between 60 and 69% (BBC 2018)

recognising the wide range of attitudes and interests of their tutors and lecturers. For instance, Kim discusses how her relationship with one of her lecturers changed over time:

> I think it definitely gets more friendly towards third year, there was one lecturer that we had in first year who was terrifying. (…) But then we've had her for a module this term and she just chats to people, she makes jokes in the lectures, she'll show you pictures of her dog and stuff. I feel like they become a bit more friendly with you, as if you're on the way to being on their kind of level intellectually maybe, as well as more mature.
> Kim, third interview

Parallel to recognising staff diversity and countering the alienation and distance of the first academic year, second and especially third year students start to feel that they are known, and seen as individuals. The personalisation of learning along the clearly defined interests and the growing independence allow for creation of knowledge. Dissertations as capstones mean students become experts in an area they are passionate about (Clark and Hordósy 2019a). Similarly to Aina, who in her Masters year expresses her goal of 'contributing to the actual field [of research] and just developing my career' through a PhD, Khaled also talks about how his interest turned into a passion, and a future career plan:

> I think my interests really just sort of developed this year, whereas before I was just kind of trying to work my way through my degree. (…) But then this [final] year it's just became a bit obsessive, in that I'm reading more than I've ever read and I've almost... you almost read so much that you begin to know things just off the top of your head. That was really weird, I was in one of my seminars and we were talking based on the subject that I know pretty well, which is what my dissertation is based on. And I think somebody said something and because [in] the discussions (…) people throw in their opinions, and it's just sort of that feeling when you know something is wrong, do you know what I mean? (...) And that person is saying it with such confidence, and you're just like no, no, no! And so I was just kind of like "well this study said this, and this study said this, and this

and this", and everyone was just looking at me like "whoa". (…)
So yeah, I mean it was at that point where I realised, I really like
this; I'd like to be an academic in this, I'd like to just research
this for years, (…) that's the way I feel now.
Khaled, fourth interview

It is indeed through becoming passionate via the university studies,
extracurricular activities, internships and part-time jobs that helps
formulating future career ideas – however, these only constitute the
very first thoughts on what comes next (Hordósy and Clark 2018b,
2018c), given most students have not, just yet, merged their
personal concerns into a coherent and satisfying modus vivendi
(Archer 2012).

Towards becoming a graduate

Throughout the final year, time once more becomes tumultuous,
given the concerns around finishing university and figuring out what's
next – again from different angles. Megan says in her third year that
'you want to be able to enjoy your final year because it's the last year
you'll probably living here, (…) but it's just a bit difficult to balance
everything'. Especially in the case of young, traditional-age students,
their paths have been charted within educational institutions up to
this point, whereas after university things are 'not laid out for you in
the same way' (Mo, fourth interview), and it is unclear 'what there is
to aim for [apart] from having a family, a house' (Kai, fourth
interview).

As opposed to initial career plans that looked at the 'rest' of
their lives, the third and fourth interviews saw the time-horizon
'reduce their field of vision to more short-term goals' (Hordósy and
Clark 2018, 12). Beyond perhaps medical and health professional
training, students perceive, and indeed want to keep, their options
open – it seems that upon mostly completing the phases of
discernment, the deliberation throughout university does not yet give
way to dedication yet (Archer 2012). For instance, Robert tentatively
embraces the uncertainty, whilst he hesitates between a wide range
of potential careers. These range from academic research,

engineering, finance to teaching, whereby the upcoming decisions feel rather momentous:

> It's not like I'm stuck down one route now. I've still got a whole load of different things to choose from, which is bad in a way, because it means I've got to make a decision at some point about what I'm going to do and it might be easier if someone just went "there, do that".
> Robert, fourth interview

It is perhaps this element of making important decisions that prompts a distinction of 'proper jobs' versus 'bog standard jobs', with some graduates opting for what Vigurs et al. (2018) described as 'graduate gap years'. In fact, given the pressure of getting a "good" degree classification of a 1st or a 2.1, as well as the time, and sometimes financial dedication graduate-level job applications require, it is unsurprising that 15 students decide not to apply for such roles at the end of their degrees. Further 11 students continue their longer degrees, or onto MA and then PhD programmes, generally linked to clearer career pathways. Comparatively, only 9 students start in a graduate job upon leaving university.

What some participants describe as a 'random', 'bog standard', 'shitty', or 'normal' job, tends to be in an industry not related to their degree: in catering, retail, service industry or the care sector. Such roles are considered short term, offer substantive flexibility *for* the graduate, do not require specific qualifications, and are not competitive – simply put, students are not invested in them. Importantly, they are to be found near where the graduate decides to live, whether that is the parental home, or housing with friends or partners. Vigurs et al. (2018) saw four types of pathways of graduate gap years emerge, with graduates choosing to take out time to build up experience; work out the next steps; take a break; or to earn money. In this research graduates tended to couple and sequence these aims, for instance Lauren working in retail, whilst also gaining some teaching experience to start her teacher training after she has been travelling – this latter being a long-term dream of hers:

> It's all good, because I'm working in [large retail company], full-time, and everyone knows I'll only be there for 18 more months until like next September, which is hopefully when I'm going to go traveling (…) for six months to a year. (…) And I know it's not for the rest of my life, it's just kind of an interim thing until I do what I want to do next, so it's good.
> Lauren, fourth interview

The gap *year* was loosely understood, with timelines set out for acquiring sufficient money for the next move, such as travelling or a postgraduate course; or having had enough time to relax, experiment, or gain experience. For Gemma it is the gaps in her post-university budget, and concerns around how her 'time out' will be perceived by employers, that prompts a search for graduate jobs half a year upon graduation:

> I think finishing University, you feel a bit lost. I kept saying to myself, "Oh, I'm taking some time out, it's fine. It's normal to do that. Don't panic". But then at the back of my head I was thinking all the time, "I can't take too long out, what are my employers going to think in the future, I need to be really careful". (…) And then my hours were getting cut down [in catering] and then you spend [your pay] and I think you realize once you are not at University and you haven't got the loan and everything, that it's difficult.
> Gemma, fourth year

Conversely, graduate jobs are described as 'real', 'adult', 'proper', 'a more academic', a 'career kind of' job that they 'would enjoy'. These are in sectors and industries they are striving to work in, and necessitate a degree and some specific skills. These competitive roles require flexibility *from* the graduate, but remunerate better, whilst also promising career progression. The 'real' jobs necessitate emotional investment and dedication, with constraints on leaving these roles; however, the graduates retain the prospect of a new phase of deliberation-dedication opening later. Adam here recalls a conversation with his parents about the job that looked ideal for him, but turned sour due to work conflicts:

> Even though it's going to be painful, it's actually better if you go through that and don't quit when the times get tough, because to another potential employer it kind of shows a lack of commitment and willingness to fight through the conflict and try and work it out (…). So, I decided, 'I'm not going to leave the job unless I have something else to go to.'
> Adam, fourth interview

There are three key features of how graduates in this research chart their futures, rooting it in who they have become throughout their university time. First, in seeing themselves as a graduate of NRBU, they link to the course they studied; whether this is working in a related sector, using their disciplinary knowledge beyond, or employing the specific skills they developed. Often referring to how much they miss disciplinary learning – if not the stress of university assessment – they also thrive to keep on educating themselves, related to their professional goals. Mary, for instance talks about how she is employing her psychology knowledge in her HR role:

> It's people management, and sometimes it already feels like I'm a counsellor because the way people come into the office and just tell you everything (…). I was doing some stuff on diversity… inductions for new starters and I sort of created my own little presentation and sort of just using some stuff about (…) intrinsic motivations at work and what makes happy workers, what makes workers effective; being respected, you know, motivates you to work harder, you know, that kind of shit.
> Mary, fourth interview

Second, graduates aim to find an employer or role they can believe in, wanting to see the value of their work on a smaller scale and generally do good in the world – this is sometimes juxtaposed with prioritising earnings. For instance, Khaled in the third interview talks about a 'materialistic view' of 'just doing [a job] because I'm getting money' not fitting with how he 'was brought up to think', connecting this to his working-class background. Similarly, Natasha in her third

interview discusses wanting to work on the 'other side of law', 'not putting people in prison but helping the people that are in prison'. Discounting large corporations, Megan suggests in the third interview that she wants to work 'somewhere where you can actually make a difference in a way, and see the difference you're making'.

Finally, an important outcome several graduates reflect on has been their newfound confidence: in their abilities, them as people in social contexts, knowing their own strengths and weaknesses. It is this confidence that allows graduates to embrace the complexity of potential options and the trade-offs, as well as non-linear and serendipitous futures. Similar to Mo, who does not 'have a plan or some grand scheme', Daniel echoes the realisation that career transitions are much more serendipitous than he previously has thought:

> Everyone's just, kind of, winging it all the time, because before you go to university, you used to think that people who had jobs were smart and were older, knew what they were doing and where they were going. No-one really knows what they're doing or where they're going. Everyone's just making it up as they go along, and that's alright.
> Daniel, fourth interview

Recognising the multitude of dimensions that are at play, a diverse and interlinked set of future plans emerge, entangled in a commitment to personal concerns, values and identity, social relationships, belonging to a community and a place, as well as the wider structural constraints of transition systems. Such limits are linked to financial insecurity and a sense of urgency to find a job, any job – the lack of substantive savings also limiting the potential location. Further, with fewer family connections future graduates are less likely to gain suitable work experience or help with job applications (Hordósy and Clark 2018, Bathmaker 2021)

Discussion and implications

This paper provides an account of university transitions resulting in a transformative experience for a diverse cohort of students, now mostly graduates of NRBU, following the changes of focus from the social, to the academic, and to orientating towards the future. These foci can also be understood as stressors, where budgeting constraints and financial futures cut across all else, and can cause constant friction for the poorest students, as discussed elsewhere (Hordósy and Clark 2018a). Similarly, physical and mental ill-health of students, their families and friends, sometimes with tragic outcomes, can have a profound impact on their experience and outcomes. Throughout the course of the four years, interviewees have to grapple with the illness or death of family and close friends, as well as their own mental and physical ill-health.

Through understanding transitions as non-linear, multidimensional, diverse and embedded in the wider structure, this paper charts how this generation of students become (mostly) independent and (certainly) reflexive adults with diverse and changing relationships, their personal concerns, and an emerging modus vivendi (Archer 2012). The reflexivity in these accounts exemplifies the *transformative transitions in becoming a student and graduate* within university *space and time*, capturing the all-encompassing *changes and movements*.

There are a number of takeaway points related to the three foci of university transitions. First, upon the contextual discontinuities of an emotional and often overwhelming arrival to the university, most students find their social fit within the institutional structures and through happenstance (Archer 2012, Plugor 2015). Indeed, through meeting and engaging with the multicultural strangers that make up the university community, students reflect on both their points of departure and the changes in themselves, as well as the diversity of the world around them (Archer 2012, Clark and Hordósy, 2019b). However, the potential exclusionary properties of the social elements of university are important to note (Holton 2016, Read et al. 2020), especially regarding the budgetary constraints to lower income students (Hordósy and Clark 2018a, 2018c). Second, given learning experiences exists on a continuum, the development of a new learner identity also means a reflection of prior and future choices, in the academic here and now. Being known and knowing other university

constituents, as well as a narrowing focus through selection and prioritisation of academic knowledge results in the formation of expertise, and developing transformative relations to knowledge (Ashwin 2020, Clark and Hordósy 2019a). Third, in the face of uncertain futures, most graduates delay a dedication to a particular modus vivendi, keeping their option open (Archer 2000, 2012, Hordósy and Clark 2018b). This is either through committing to a 'real' job and anticipating change in the medium term, or settling for a 'random' role for a gap year, to continue deliberating (Vigurs et al. 2018). Importantly, the orientation towards the future is underpinned by principles that are not necessarily instrumental, commodified or financially oriented (Muddiman 2018, Budd 2017, Tomlinson 2017). Graduates want to link to their expertise and knowledge gained at NRBU; to find intrinsic value in their role and community; and to build on a confident and reflexive self throughout.

This paper highlights how university as a transformative space and time is much more than an investment into one's human capital that should pay off as employment opportunities and earnings, or the way to fulfil short-term labour market needs (Burke et al. 2017, Galbraith 2021). Graduates become engaged members of a broader community, gain substantive expertise in their chosen area of interest, and develop a broad plan for their futures. The results presented here also point to the structural enablements and constraints that higher education institutions and policy makers can and should mitigate in responding to the inequalities of access, experience and progression. To foster transformative transitions for all, embracing the diversity in student and graduate experiences that also change over time is key. This means, first, knowing who students are, using sufficient scaffolding to make knowledge accessible, and fostering an inclusive university community (Ashwin 2020). Second, a whole-institutional support provision throughout the student lifecycle that understands transitions as changeable and diverse could ensure more equitable access (Kift 2010). Finally, as argued extensively elsewhere (Clark and Hordósy 2019b, Hordósy et al. 2018, Hordósy and Clark 2018a), stable and substantive non-repayable financial support is fundamental to level student experiences for those from poor backgrounds, and to avoid the 'double-deficit' of part-time work.

Acknowledgements

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