**Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Unequal Graduate Transitions in England?**

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**Abstract**

This chapter draws on findings from a comparative, qualitative research project that investigated the decision-making of different groups of English higher education students as they graduated from two universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with final year undergraduate students (*n*74) at these universities in central England (46 studied at a Russell Group university and 28 studied at a Post-1992 university) about the key decisions they would make after graduating. Half of the students graduated in 2014 (lower tuition fees) and the other half graduated in 2015 (higher tuition fees). The students interviewed in 2014 (*n*37*)* were sampled by socio-economic background, gender, degree subject/discipline and secondary school type. The same sampling criteria were used in 2015. The study found that the 2015 sample of Russell Group graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds reported greater positivity in relation to having lower levels of graduate labour market anxiety, higher instances of having achieved a graduate job position or a place on a postgraduate course prior to graduation, and having saved money whilst studying. In stark contrast, the 2015 sample of Post-1992 university graduates (from both lower *and* average socio-economic backgrounds) evidenced more uncertain and precarious graduate transitions, which appeared to be strongly linked to their perceived levels of debt and future financial concerns. This chapter raises questions about whether a fairer university finance systems might avoid some graduates’ transitions to adulthood being so strongly influenced by financial considerations.

**Key Words:** student finance; student debt; higher education tuition fees; graduate transitions; graduate inequality.

**The rise of university tuition fees and debt-based student finance in England**

It is important to begin by setting the context for student finance reform in England. In 2012, university tuition fees trebled to a possible £9000 per year for most students. This cost to individuals is deferred and repayments only begin once a salary threshold is reached. The income-contingent nature of the loan repayment is considered by some to make the repayment model progressive as is the use of loans and grants to provide higher levels of liquidity to students upfront (Wyness, 2017). Crawford and Jin (2014) estimated that students leave university under the 2012 student finance reforms with nearly £20,000 more debt than those graduating under the previous finance system. Under the 2004-2012 student finance system, on average each undergraduate student graduated with a tuition fee debt of £11,807 plus student maintenance debt of £12,947, totalling a student loan debt of £24,754. However, under the student finance system introduced in 2012, students are graduating with, on average, tuition fee debt of £29,838 plus student maintenance debt of £14,198, totalling a student loan debt of £44,036. Student loans, however, do not make up the full student finance picture in England. At the time of this study, individual student finance packages could be made up of a combination of student loans, means-tested grants, means-tested institutional bursaries (which vary in size according to institution type) and family contributions (Wyness, 2016). The research discussed in this chapter contributes to knowledge on how students experience increased levels of student debt and how this influences their graduate decision-making processes in different ways.

Almost all students in England have to take out student loans to cover tuition fees and maintenance costs. In 2014, Dorling raised concerns about the inability of the maintenance grants to fully cover students’ living costs:

‘For the poorest students, a maintenance grant is just £65 a week – not enough to pay the rent in most cities, let alone also eat and buy a bus ticket. Should your parents’ incomes rise to £20,000 a year each, your grant falls to just £10.52 a week.’ (Dorling, 2014, online).

Existing studies highlight that the allocated grants and loans often do not cover the full of costs of studying at university, which means that students regularly experience financial shortfalls. This often comes as a shock and is experienced as stressful for students whose families cannot support them financially (West et al., 2015):

‘One recurring theme was a lack of information about the fact that the government financial support did not cover their children’s living and accommodation costs. The cost came as a surprise to some parents.’ (West et al., 2015: 31)

It is important to note that in 2016, the Conservative government in England withdrew the means-tested maintenance grant (Weale, 2016). This was worth about £3500 per year to students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, which they did not have to pay back. Researchers like Dorling (2014) and West et al. (2015) are concerned that changes to student finance policy that are debt-based will increase future economic inequality in England. This is compounded by the fact that there is currently very little published on how graduates of the 2012 student finance reform are experiencing their loan repayments alongside their graduate lives.

**Inequalities in graduate outcomes**

This is not a debate about student debt in isolation. There are increasing concerns about inequality in graduate outcomes. For example, there are regular reports in the media about graduate (un)employment and the perceived value of a university degree. These have led to headlines about disappointing destinations; constrained finances post-university; stunted independence; the slowing of the graduate wage premium; and impacts on future decisions and transitions to adulthood.

The global financial crisis (GFC) contributed to conditions for precarious socio-economic life. This means that young adults face declining full-time employment opportunities, and increasing competition in employment, where possessing qualifications alone loses out to experience (Howie and Campbell, 2016; Holdsworth, 2015). Such precarious employment situations have coincided with increasing costs of debt-based forms of higher education payment. Kelly (2015: 58) suggests that in response to neo-liberal hardships, young adults are expected to become ‘rational, autonomous, choice making, risk aware, prudential, responsible and enterprising’. However, in relation to higher education there should be a concern that this places responsibility for ‘graduate success’ on the individual, which risks creating ‘deserving winners’ and ‘undeserving losers’ of higher education.

Roberts et al. (2016: 321) discuss the nature of graduate trajectories by referring to the work of Beck (1992) who describes a post-traditional age in which:

‘predictable or ‘normal’ trajectories are disrupted, to be replaced by ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies: responsibility is thrown onto the individual to achieve ‘self-realisation’, including making decisions about career, leisure and education.’

This raises the question as to how prepared students are for this. How do graduating students make sense of DIY graduate biographies? Are all students equally positioned to respond to this?

As Arundel and Ronald (2015) note, transitions to adulthood are a key period for individual development, but also contribute to processes of social stratification. Transition dynamics today are characterised by increased complexity, postponement, diversity and individualisation. This means there is precarity in transition pathways, for example the rise of ‘yo-yo’ and ‘boomerang’ transitions, which leads to uncertainty reshaping routes to adulthood. As a response, young people develop coping mechanisms, but which young adults have to do this and what sorts of coping mechanisms do they create?

Abraham’s research (2016) explains how going to university is not the key to equality, evidencing the inequality in graduate outcomes (i.e. there are not equal chances of securing graduate employment). She points to the HE sector being increasingly stratified and argues that those students from non-traditional HE backgrounds remain less likely to study at Russell Group universities, which may impact on these individuals’ future employability. As Reay (1998: 1) warned, students must be wary of the ‘myth of meritocracy’ because it ‘normalises inequalities, converting them into individual rather than collective responsibilities’.

The chapter now turns to the findings of a recent research project which identified different approaches to graduate transitions between different groups of students at different universities.

**Research methods**

This chapter draws from a comparative two-year qualitative research project, across two distinct HE finance systems in England, that investigated the decision-making of final year undergraduate students in relation to their imminent graduate futures (Vigurs et al., 2016a; Vigurs et al., 2016b). We explored their decision-making processes whilst they were in their final semester of their undergraduate studies. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with students (*n*74) at two different universities in central England (46 studied at a Russell Group University and 28 studied at a Post-1992 University). Russell Group universities represent the leading UK universities that are characterised by being research-intensive and having high entry requirements for applicants. Post-1992 universities refer to institutions that were former polytechnics and only received university status via the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Many post-1992 universities have lower entry requirements and recruit a greater number of students from non-traditional HE backgrounds.

Half of the students were interviewed in 2014 (lower tuition fees) and the other half were interviewed in 2015 (higher tuition fees). The students interviewed in 2014 (*n*37*)* were selected by socio-economic background, gender, degree subject/discipline and secondary school type. This sample was matched in 2015 to ensure that another 37 final year students were selected from the same universities, socio-economic backgrounds, gender, degree subjects/disciplines and secondary school types as in 2014 (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Participant sample by year, institution, background and discipline

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Institution** | **Sample criteria** | **No. of 2014 participants** | **No. of 2015 participants** |
| Russell Group HEI | Lower SE background / STEM | 7 | 7 |
| Higher SE background / STEM | 6 | 6 |
| Lower SE background / Humanities | 7 | 7 |
| Higher SE background / Humanities | 3 | 3 |
| Post-1992 HEI | Lower SE background / STEM | 2 | 2 |
| Higher SE background / STEM | 4 | 4 |
| Lower SE background / Humanities | 2 | 2 |
| Higher SE background / Humanities | 6 | 6 |
| **Total Participants** | **RG = 23****Post-92 = 14****2014 Total = 37** | **RG = 23****Post-92 = 14****2015 Total = 37** |

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and were conducted by one member of the research team. In addition to the stratified sampling approach outlined in Table 1, all participants were required to meet the following criteria:

* Final year of a full-time, 3 year undergraduate programme;
* Studying either a STEM subject or an arts/humanities subject;
* Aged between 20-23.

In terms of ethics, informed consent was gained from participants via a project information sheet and a signed consent form before the interview was arranged. Student participants were each given a £15 voucher to spend online to thank them for their participation. Previous projects have shown that such incentives are necessary to ensure participation from targeted students. In order to ensure the anonymity of the student participants, pseudonyms have been allocated in this chapter. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then coded thematically to allow data analysis to take place.

This study has successfully generated rich data from a stratified sample of graduating students across two distinct student finance systems. As a comparative, qualitative study that comprises the views of 74 graduating students across two institutions as well as two finance systems, it is clear that the findings cannot be used as a direct basis for generalisation due to the sample not being statistically representative. However, that said, the research team did not set out to meet positivist benchmarks of reliability, validity and objectivity. Rather we were aiming for the study to be credible, confirmable and transferable (Robson, 1993), which are more appropriate criteria for assessing the quality and value of qualitative research. We believe that while there are a number of factors that make this study’s context unique, there are others that are likely to be identified in other contexts. Thus, some tentative generalisations to other HE settings in England and beyond may be possible, if not conclusive.

**Comparing graduand perspectives across the 2014 and 2015 sample**

Table 2 below presents a comparison of the total sample by year. We compared the sample on the following issues:

1. Were the students able to build up financial savings whilst at university?
2. Did they access professional work experience whilst at university?
3. Did they experience anxiety about entering the graduate labour market?
4. Had they secured a graduate employment post prior to graduating?
5. Were they actively seeking non-graduate employment post-graduation?
6. Were they planning to study a post-graduate qualification straight after graduation?

At first glance, a comparison of numbers by year against the above categories does not appear significantly different. In fact in some instances positive responses appear to have increased in 2015 (e.g. more students declared saving money whilst at university and more had secured a graduate job). At face value this might suggest that the introduction of the 2012 student finance reform in England had little impact in terms of students’ graduate decision-making and their perceptions of their graduate futures.

Table 2: Comparing graduand views across 2014 and 2015

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **No. of 2014 graduands (*n37)*** | **No. of 2015 graduands (*n37)*** | **Difference** |
| 1. Students who ***saved money*** whilst studying
 | 5 | 6 | > 1 |
| 1. Students who undertook ***professional work experience*** whilst at university
 | 15 | 12 | < 3 |
| 1. Students who declared having ***anxiety about gaining graduate employment***
 | 21 | 22 | > 1 |
| 1. Students who had ***secured graduate employment*** prior to graduation
 | 6 | 7 | > 1 |
| 1. Students who were actively seeking ***non-graduate employment*** after graduation
 | 18 | 18 | 0 |
| 1. Students who would be studying a ***postgraduate qualification*** after graduation
 | 6 | 6 | 0 |

However, what happens if we compare these six graduate themes by year, institution and students’ socio-economic background? Table 3 below presents this breakdown of data. In terms of the sample of students at the Post-1992 HEI who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in 2015: only 1 had taken part in professional work experience in comparison with 3 the previous year; all 4 were actively seeking non-graduate employment after graduation compared with 2 the year before. Interestingly, none of this group had saved money, secured graduate employment or chosen to go on to post-graduate study in either the 2014 or 2015 sample. For the sample of students also at the Post-1992 HEI but from higher socio-economic backgrounds, in 2015 none had been able to save money compared with 1 the year before; 8 stated they were anxious about entering the graduate labour market compared with 6 in 2014; 6 were seeking non-graduate employment in comparison with 4 the year before, and only 1 was planning to go on to postgraduate study straightaway compared with 3 in 2014.

In terms of the sample of students at the Russell Group university who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds in 2015: 6 had built up financial savings whilst studying compared with 2 the year before; 5 were seeking non-graduate employment immediately after graduation compared with 7 in 2014; and 4 were planning to go straight onto postgraduate study in comparison to 2 the year before. For the sample of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds who were studying at the Russell Group University, none had saved money compared to 2 the year before; 6 had gained professional work experience in comparison to 4 in 2014; 2 had secured graduate employment compared with 1 the previous year; 3 were seeking non-graduate employment straightaway compared with 5 the year before.

Table 3: Graduand views by year, HEI and socio-economic background

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Students by HEI type & SE background** | **Saved money at uni**  | **Professional work experience** | **Graduate employment anxiety** | **Secured graduate employment** | **Seeking non- graduate employment** | **PG study after graduation** |
| **Post-92 *lower* SE background***n8* | **2014** | 0/4 | 3/4 | 3/4 | 0/4 | 2/4 | 0/4 |
| **2015** | 0/4 | 1/4 | 3/4 | 0/4 | 4/4 | 0/4 |
| **Post-92 *higher* SE background***n20* | **2014** | 1/10 | 2/10 | 6/10 | 1/10 | 4/10 | 3/10 |
| **2015** | 0/10 | 2/10 | 8/10 | 1/10 | 6/10 | 1/10 |
| **Russell Group** ***lower* SE background***n28* | **2014** | 2/14 | 6/14 | 6/14 | 4/14 | 7/14 | 2/14 |
| **2015** | 6/14 | 3/14 | 6/14 | 4/14 | 5/14 | 4/14 |
| **Russell Group *higher* SE background***n18* | **2014** | 2/9 | 4/9 | 6/9 | 1/9 | 5/9 | 1/9 |
| **2015** | 0/9 | 6/9 | 5/9 | 2/9 | 3/9 | 1/9 |
| **2014 Total** | 5/37 | 15/37 | 21/37 | 6/37 | 18/37 | 6/37 |
| **2015 Total** | 6/37 | 12/37 | 22/37 | 7/37 | 18/37 | 6/37 |

This finer-grained, comparative analysis of the sample starts to suggest that some groups were experiencing more positive graduate outcomes and transitions than others. For example, it appears that the 2015 students at the Russell Group HEI who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds had the most positive outcomes of all students in the sample. It also appears that the 2015 students at the Post-1992 HEI, noticeably from both categories of socio-economic background, had the least positive outcomes in the total sample.

**The ‘winners’? Graduating students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the Russell Group University in 2015**

This study found that the sample of 2015 graduands from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the Russell Group University reported the most positive graduate transitions and outcomes. For example, 6/14 had been able to accrue financial savings whilst at university, 4/14 had secured graduate employment prior to graduation and another 4/14 had secured a place on a postgraduate course. Thus, 8 had secured traditional, ‘smooth’ graduate transitions, which was a higher proportion than any other group in either the 2015 or 2014 samples. A significant factor that contributed to such ‘successful’ outcomes, and that reduced the need to take on low paid employment immediately after graduation, was the accrual of finance through the act of saving.

***They were able to build financial savings during study***

The 6 students from lower SE backgrounds at the Russell Group University were the only group in the 2015 sample to have accrued financial savings whilst at university. For example, Max and Rachika shared that they had been able to ‘live comfortably’ and ‘save up’ whilst being students, which meant that they felt confident about committing financially to postgraduate study.

“[Finances are] the number one thing in deciding what I’m going to do next, it’s just whether I can afford it or I can’t… I will go to do my Masters either this year or next. I have money saved up… I’ve been able to live comfortably as a student whilst saving for my MA.” (Max, BA Hons)

“Paying for my Masters isn’t a concern because I have been saving up.” (Rachika, BSc Hons)

Similarly, Martyn used his savings to create a financial and psychological safety net, which meant he felt confident about negotiating the transition to graduate status, negating the need to rush into low paid employment for financial reasons.

“I am comfortable with my financial situation. Obviously I planned financially to leave university and I’ve got six months’ worth of money saved for my bills before I start worrying.” (Martyn, BSc Hons)

This group of students were unable to rely on their family for financial support. However, they were eligible for non-repayable student finance on an annual basis comprising the full maintenance grant of £3387 (which has since been abolished) and a generous institutional bursary (approximately £3000) as well as being able to access a repayable student loan for living costs. A number of them also had part-time jobs and/or paid employment over the holidays and most of them lived at home whilst studying. This mix and amount of financial support, particularly in the form of institutional and government welfare (bursaries and grants) was highly significant in covering their living costs and also making financial savings possible. These students valued being able to save money. It allowed them to make financial plans, which they saw as crucial for their short-term financial security, and to enable them to realise their post-university plans (such as postgraduate study, graduate employment schemes, etc.) in a careful and considered manner. Savings were also being used by Max and Rachika to avoid having to take on further debt to pay for postgraduate study.

***Fewer were seeking non-graduate employment***

As already mentioned, students from lower SE backgrounds at the Russell Group University were experiencing ‘smoother’, more traditional graduate transitions than the other sample groups (e.g. graduate employment or fulltime postgraduate study), which meant that they had security and certainty in knowing what they would be doing after graduation. For example, Yasir, Martyn and Kidjana had all secured graduate employment prior to graduation.

“The university is really helpful because I got an internship last summer with Lloyds and the university has a scheme where they provide you with funding for work experience, that could be for travel or accommodation. I’ve now got a graduate job as a tax consultant with an accountancy firm in London.” (Yasir, BA Hons)

“I’ve applied for quite a few graduate jobs. I’ve got two different offers to think about at the moment… I’ve worked at an NHS hostel for two years and I do Air Cadets so I’ve got a load of skills outside [of my degree].” (Martyn, BSc Hons)

“I’ve actually got a job… I’m going to be a trainee solicitor but that doesn’t start [for six months], so I have some free time before January 2016. I’m going to work at Waitrose in my home town until then.” (Kidjana, Law LLB)

The University’s funding scheme for internships helped Yasir to build the experience needed to achieve a graduate employment position. Without this support scheme it is unlikely that Yasir would have been able to access or take up unpaid professional work experience. Elsewhere, students like Martyn were mobilising their newly acquired cultural capital, gained through extra curricula activities whilst at university, to successfully market themselves to graduate employers. Kidjana was relieved to have secured a graduate position and was going to use the six months between graduation and starting the post to earn and save money. For these students there was a tangible sense of relief and achievement in having secured graduate employment before graduation. It also indicates that the traditional, smooth graduate transition remains possible for some.

***More were starting full-time postgraduate study***

It is important to note that for this group of students the availability of funding through institutional postgraduate scholarship and bursary schemes was a very significant factor in their decisions to continue their studies. Both Jayden and Sangita’s decisions to take up a postgraduate course was being largely driven by the opportunity to access non-debt based finance.

“I’m going to do a PGCE [teaching qualification] because I know I can get student finance. And also at [the post-1992 university in the same city] they do a bursary for PGCEs as well… They’ll pay my tuition fees and they also give me maintenance as well so I was like ‘Yay’, I can survive.” (Jayden, BA Hons)

“I want to get accepted on a Masters course given that I get funding for it. I’ve not done much research on the job market… I’ve got a lot of experience in schools… hopefully when I do a Masters course I’ll be definitely more sure of what I want to do [in the future].” (Sangita, BSc Hons)

For Sangita in particular the non-debt based funding for postgraduate study allowed the taking up of a postgraduate course to act as a drift mechanism (Bradley and Waller, 2018). Thus, the availability of funding allows her to experience ‘drift’ (usually due to a lack of clear career ambitions) with less risk. As noted by Bradley and Waller (2018), it is important to remember that ‘drifting’ does not equate with being lazy, rather it allows a slower, safer pace of transition.

**The ‘losers’? Graduating students from lower and average socio-economic backgrounds at the Post-1992 University in 2015**

This study found that the sample of 2015 graduands from both lower *and* average socio-economic backgrounds at the Post-1992 University appeared to be achieving less ‘successful’ graduate outcomes in the short-term. For example, none were able to save money, and many were seeking non-graduate employment and had high levels of anxiety about gaining graduate employment. In addition to the outcomes highlighted in Table 3, a high proportion of students from average socio-economic backgrounds disclosed suffering financial hardship (5/10) and were planning to move back to the family home immediately after graduation (4/10) to reduce outgoing expenditure in the short-term. The students in this sample from lower socio-economic backgrounds were eligible for non-repayable student finance on an annual basis comprising the full maintenance grant of £3387 and a modest institutional bursary (approximately £500 in their final year), as well as being able to access a repayable student loan for living costs. They also had part-time jobs and/or paid employment over the holidays and most of them lived at home whilst studying. None of the students from average socio-economic backgrounds were eligible for institutional bursaries, but some were able to access a partial maintenance grant if their parents’ combined annual income was between £25,001 and £42,620. A number of students in this group had more than one part-time job and most were living away from the family home.

***Experiencing financial hardship***

It was noticeable that the students from average rather than lower socio-economic backgrounds were the ones who struggled most financially. They found that student finance did not cover their living costs (e.g. accommodation, utility bills, food, travel, study resources, leisure), which had come as a shock to most. Students from both lower and average socio-economic backgrounds felt unable to ask their families for financial support, which led to most of them taking on at least one part-time job whilst studying, often working a significant number of hours/shifts in a low-paid position. Ari had particularly struggled with covering her living costs due to choosing not to take out the student maintenance loan for religious reasons:

“I struggled financially because I’d not applied for the loan because of my religious reasons, because I didn’t want to be in more debt because of the interest… so I just had a small maintenance grant but because I’m travelling to a different city [it’s difficult].” (Ari, BSc Hons)

Ari attempted to lower her costs in other ways (e.g. living at home and commuting to university) but these outgoings were still difficult to fund without taking out a student loan. Siobhan also struggled to cover her living costs, particularly in her first two years of study:

“Student finance doesn’t quite cover my living costs. This semester it’s been okay because I had some [student loan payment] left over and because I have a job on campus, I’m able to like fund myself… but last year and my first year I struggled with money quite a bit.” (Siobhan, BA Hons)

Jamie had hoped to save money whilst studying like some of the students at the Russell Group University from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but he never managed to achieve this:

“I’ve always had money concerns… I’m not particularly great at saving. I have been meaning to put a little bit of my student loan away each time for that period when I don’t have a job and I’m not in uni and so far I’ve saved none of it.” (Jamie, BSc Hons)

It is interesting that he blames himself for not being good with money, therefore individualising the issue, rather than picking fault with the student finance system. Jamie presents his precarious financial situation after graduation as a personal failing. The implication of not being able to build up financial reserves and not being able to ask family for financial support means an imminent lack of financial security. This influences graduate decision-making for these students. Their transitions cannot be unrushed and carefully considered. Indeed, a student finance shortfall created extra pressures and strains for these students, which impacted on what they felt they could and could not do after graduation. This further highlights that the same graduate options and transitions are not open to everyone.

***High levels of anxiety about entering the graduate labour market***

At the Post-1992 University in 2015, 11/14 students expressed high levels of anxiety about gaining graduate employment. For example, Mark did not foresee a smooth graduate transition. He feared increased competition in the graduate labour market due to the massification of HE and a perceived lack of graduate jobs. Mark also thought his humanities degree might disadvantage him in the labour market:

“I don’t feel like I’ve got as much of an advantage on those who don’t go to university as say ten years ago… it might be my degree as well. I just don’t think there’s an availability of jobs.” (Mark, BA Hons)

For Joanne there was a mystique surrounding entry to the graduate labour market and this lack of knowledge made her decisions feel precarious and risky. Not being able to visualise the future and being unsure as to whether she would be able to cope financially was a stressful part of her graduate transition:

“I think it’s so uncertain, like you’ve been at uni for three years and now everything’s going to change… you don’t know what’s going to happen… uni is a bit of a safe haven and then you go out, you don’t know what is going to happen, you don’t know whether you’re going to be broke.” (Joanne, BSc Hons, lower SE background)

Finally, Craig conceptualised the process of achieving a graduate job as a game. He tried to join in by being pro-active and using his initiative, but he did not know the rules of the graduate labour market game. He had not developed the required levels of social and cultural capital:

“I’ve tried to get a few work placements but, when you’re still at uni, firms try to fob you off. I’ll tell you what would be good, a module on writing personal statements and applying [for jobs] and when to apply and what’s available, because we just write a personal statement but then you don’t really know what to put in and what not to put in.” (Craig, Law LLB)

From Craig’s narrative it appeared that his HEI had not provided enough support to facilitate gaining relevant and meaningful professional work experience. A lack of access to graduate work experience and paid internships stemmed from both low levels of knowledge and an absence of opportunities.

***Actively seeking non-graduate employment after graduation***

10/14 students at the Post-1992 University in 2015 were seeking non-graduate employment immediately after graduation. There was a desire and perceived need for urgent financial stability and security, which was directly influencing decisions to return to the family home and apply for low-wage, non-graduate jobs. For Lawrence, gaining a regular income ends up outweighing his desire for graduate employment related to his degree subject:

“Hopefully I’ll get a job within the [web design] industry but, being realistic, that might not happen initially or it might take a while because of the current climate… I’d be happy to take a job that isn’t actually in the industry to at least get paid, obviously.” (Lawrence, BSc Hons, lower SE background)

Annie was aware of the potential trap of earning a regular wage through low paid employment. Her trade-off was whether to move out of the family home after graduation but risk becoming reliant on the money she earned at McDonalds or to forego adult independence for a few more years whilst building up savings and additional experience:

“I panic all the time, because I live at home and I’d like to move out but then I couldn’t do that on just a McDonalds’s wage. Well, I could but I feel like I’d be stuck in that job forever.” (Annie, BA Hons, lower SE background)

For Dan the trade-off was between developing a freelance career linked to his degree (perceived as risky and costly) or using a full-time, minimum wage job and moving back home with his parents to allow him to save money for a deposit to be able to buy a house.

“I’m going back home because of personal circumstances, it has become the most viable option because of money. I need to keep my bank level up… the plan is to find my first full-time job to save up for the deposit on a house… I just need to be secure in my personal circumstances, that’s the main consideration at the moment rather than being a freelance creative kid.” (Dan, BSc Hons)

For 10/14 of these students there was a real sense of urgency and desperation as they approached graduation. Their narratives suggested that their transitions to adulthood, and potentially the graduate labour market, would be experienced as stifled and prolonged. Their priority was to keep costs low post-graduation and their strategies for achieving short-term financial security included living with parents/family and getting full-time, low wage employment.

**Discussion**

We found that a higher proportion of the students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the Russell Group University in 2015 were experiencing the predictable, traditional, ‘smooth’ transitions as referred to by Roberts et al. (2016). Generous annual institutional bursaries, maintenance grants and student loans meant that they had been able to accrue financial savings whilst at university, which they were using to ward off short-term financial uncertainty and risk as they approached graduation. These savings became a protective factor that their families were unable to provide. The savings were reported to create a transition safety net that allowed the students time to think, reflect and importantly, not to panic about their next steps.

It could be argued that the RG university was playing the surrogate role of an affluent, middle class, well-connected parent. Not only did its students from lower socio-economic backgrounds receive large bursaries (made possible due to fewer students from these backgrounds attending this institution), but the institution also ran programmes and activities that directly increased these students’ levels of cultural and social capital (such as paid internships with graduate employers and funded overseas networking events). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010: 1105) suggest that ‘When habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty,’ however, our study suggests that the RG university had been successful in minimising tension and unease for its students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The investment the institution makes to increase the levels of financial, social and cultural capital of these students clearly led to positive outcomes for the individuals we interviewed. However, it is hard to ignore that such approaches are also likely to perpetuate wider social stratification in higher education.

The fact is that the same graduate opportunities and transitions are not open to everyone. However, this can often be overlooked in the literature. For example, Farenga and Quinlan (2016: 782) argue that more students are investing time and money ‘into crafting a self that they can sell to employers.’ Elsewhere, Jackson and Wilton (2016) argue that undergraduates need to become ‘players’ who engage in extracurricular activities to enhance their own employability. They suggest students need to do this to ‘accrue evidence of required capabilities and to gain positional advantage’ (p2). Furthermore, they suggest that skills in effective career self-management are crucial to seeking appropriate career development opportunities in relevant labour markets, highlighting the importance of meta-skills such as entrepreneurial behaviours including risk-taking, flexibility, networking and creativity. However, our research found that the impacts of the 2012 student finance system were preventing some students from demonstrating such behaviours and that others were better positioned to develop such skills and dispositions. It is not a level playing field.

As Antonucci (2016: ix) points out, some students have ‘a materially disadvantaged experience of higher education’ and this can be the case for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds but also ‘those from intermediate backgrounds (the ‘squeezed middle’)’. She highlights the ‘difficult paths of transition for young people lacking state and family support’ (p5), which in our study applied to the students from both lower and average socio-economic backgrounds studying at the Post-1992 university.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, maintenance grants have since been abolished in England, which means that, looking ahead, institutional bursaries are likely to form an increasingly important part of the student finance landscape. However, we have seen how the Russell Group university was able to provide a much more generous bursary to its students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed their annual bursaries were five times more than the bursaries received by the students at the Post-1992 university. It is disappointing that there is still no centralised information on bursaries, meaning that students have to find out about provision for themselves. Our evidence indicates that such support, especially when the amount provided is generous, is vital, both economically and symbolically. Student support is vital to addressing the inequalities of the university experience.

However, financial support is becoming increasingly individualised. We saw evidence of students internalising the fact that they could not build up savings; blame for their ‘failure’ was being individualised. Burke (2017: 394) reminds us that ‘the reproduction of relations and positions within social space, that while being characterised by inequality, are understood as ‘how things are’ and where a certain individual belongs, directing and limiting individuals to certain pathways and regions of social space’. This suggests that the current student finance system in England could be conceptualised as conducting symbolic violence on certain groups of students at particular universities. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 167) comment that ‘symbolic violence… is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’. Burke (2017: 395) explains that the act of symbolic violence is often ‘facilitated through misrecognition, agents are aware that the social structure is based on disadvantage but accept it as being so, failing to understand that a violent act is occurring’. Exploring the lives and decision-making of graduating students has allowed us to understand how processes of social reproduction of inequalities are being reshaped in the current student finance climate.

**Conclusion**

This comparative study raises concerns about issues of equity in graduate transitions in the wake of higher university fees, higher levels of student debt and increasingly individualised financial support available for students in England. In particular, it highlights how some groups of graduates might be more disadvantaged than others under the 2012 student finance system. This disadvantage provokes coping mechanisms by some groups of graduates that are adopted to offset financial uncertainty and risk, which may lead to graduate transitions that are delayed, disrupted and individualised. Such processes will contribute to further social stratification between graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds and different types of HEI. There is an increasing need for HE stakeholders (including students, families, employers, academics and policymakers) to come together to discuss and tackle how to make graduate transitions less contingent. Indeed, it is clear that entering HE is not the key to equality, thus more research and work is needed to explore what collective responsibilities are required to move beyond stratified advantage.

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