What Matters to First Year Undergraduate Students in the Post-2012 Era of Full Tuition Fees at a British University?

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Abstract

2012 saw a change in the landscape of the funding arrangements of undergraduate programmes in Higher Education in England and Wales. This new fee regime sees students taking out state-sponsored loans to cover the full cost of their tuition. One implication of these changes that has been much discussed, but is yet to be assessed, is how these changes in funding could lead to changes in the expectations, attitudes and experiences of incoming students toward their University education. At the same time, there has also been much concern relating to the impact that these new funding arrangements will have on lower income groups. This paper draws on focus group data (n=34) collected at a research-intensive English university from undergraduate students about their first year experiences in 2012. However, rather than identifying particularly novel experiences of the first year, analysis revealed some familiar arenas of concern: academic, social, and financial.

Key words: student experiences in higher education; first year in higher education; student support in higher education; attitudes of students in higher education; narratives of becoming an HE student

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Introduction

The student cohort of 2012 is the first to enter Higher Education (HE) in England and Wales under the new tuition fee regime. As a result, there is increased attention and interest regarding how they experience learning, teaching and university life as they progress through their programme of study. Indeed, the transformation of the student finance system has – it is often argued - fundamentally changed the relationship between the university and its students, with students now paying all or most of the costs of study (Montgomery & Canaan, 2004, Dearden et al., 2011, McGettigan, 2013). Blum and Ullman (2012) argue that this can be understood within the wider process they term the ‘market-mantra’, transforming the social good into products that can be bought and sold.

One implication of these recent developments that has similarly been much discussed, but is yet to be assessed, is how these changes in funding could also lead to changes in the expectations, attitudes and experiences of incoming students toward their University education. Not only could this create significant challenges for English and Welsh Universities in terms of the recruitment and retention of students generally, those arriving from different income backgrounds may face substantively different challenges, needs and expectations - or just be put off altogether (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). Whilst long-term changes in the demography of university populations attributable to new the fee regime will take some years to filter through (see OFFA, 2014), and there is no indication that the gap has widened thus far (HEFCE, 2013b), the existing gap between the more and less advantaged areas is already large, ‘with an average of 12.2% of individuals from low-income backgrounds studying for a degree compared with 30.4% from high-income backgrounds’ (Dearden et al., 2011: 18). The challenges that these ‘lower income’ groups face upon arrival, and the transitions they experience as they progress into HE, remain unclear. Of course, much policy work within the context of Higher Education has been directed toward ‘Widening Participation’ (WP). This is defined by HEFCE (2006: 3) as ‘all those activities undertaken by HEIs and further education colleges, both individually and in partnership, to widen access to HE for those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, including those on vocational programmes’. However, in the context of these new changes, how student populations - and lower income groups particularly - experience early transitions into HE are, as yet, unarticulated. By attempting to map the experiences of the cohort of 2012 and ‘lowest-income’ students especially, this paper aims to provide some initial and exploratory findings from a study based at the University of Sheffield (TUoS) that seeks to explore how students make the transition into, and through, university in the context of the changes to the new fee regime.
**Student experiences in the first year**

There is a growing literature about the first year of higher education that suggests it has a special relevance - especially regarding performance and retention (See for instance: Tinto, 1987, Yorke, 2000). In a systematic review of the first year university experience (FYE), Harvey et al. (2006) note that many studies explore specific support or learning and teaching techniques for the entrants to HE more generally. Some of these studies concern specific induction programmes for first students; others concentrate both on academic and social aspects of transition; whilst some explore the development of learning communities that challenge the traditional view of university (Yorke and Longden, 2007, Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001, Kantanis, 2000, Clark and Hall, 2010, Perry and Allard, 2003).

However, other researchers have also argued for the need of a holistic approach to university experience (Lumsden et al., 2010, Kift et al., 2010) and that the first year should be viewed as a part of the student journey:

(...) to decontextualize the first year from the entire student experience deflects from a need to ensure a positive learning experience suited to the evolutionary stage of the student. (Harvey et al., 2006: VII)

Similarly, Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & LaValle (2010) note that FYEs are crucial in the student life-course as a successful transition can be the difference between a good degree experience and a weak one. According to Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & LaValle (2010), early student experiences can set the tone for engagement, standards of effort and achievement, and empower students for participation in study, employment, and lifelong learning. Or they can, of course, function as the opposite where students: are confused about university procedures and structures; experience anxiety with respect to their ‘fit’ with their new house and course-mates; suffer acute uncertainty about what is expected of them and whether they can achieve it; and, question the relevance of a university degree qualification. Indeed, FYEs are of particular interest to University teaching and administration because this is where the challenges of engagement are most acutely felt. Larger class sizes, a reliance on post-graduate teaching, general interest modules, and ‘unrestricted credit options’, for example, can all increase the perception of distance between students, their degree, their department or school, and their chosen institution more generally. Ultimately, they can all be compounding risk factors that lead to withdrawal.

This paper aims to provide a tentative qualitative insight into the understandings of students who are in the process of experiencing the transition phase associated with their first year in the context of the higher fees. More
specifically, using focus group data (n=34), the paper aims to explore the experiences of students in the 2012 cohort. The data alludes to challenges faced in terms of the academic and social integration, as well as providing an overview about the financial concerns of students.

About the University of Sheffield

This paper further adds to the ‘small scale, single institution empirical studies’ mentioned in the review by Harvey et al. (2006: 106) as it provides information about an English Russell Group university and its cohort of students starting their undergraduate studies in 2012. To provide some context about this institution, TUoS had one of the youngest entry population within the Russell Group for 2012/2013, with the most selective universities having a higher ratio than that of 93.2%. Compared to the Russell Group, the university admits a high proportion of state school students (85.2%). Although this is approximately 4%-points below the average of all UK universities, it is the seventh highest within the Russell Group. In terms of the socio-economic background of the student, only 20% of those entering in 2012/2013 were from the NS-SEC classes 4-7 (HESA, 2013). The UK-average for this indicator is 32.3%. In terms of recruiting from low participation neighbourhoods, TUoS is at the top within the Russell Group with 7.1% of the 2012/2013 entrants coming from a POLAR 3 or 1st quintile neighbourhood. This is nearly 4%-points below the UK average (HESA, 2013, HEFCE, 2013a).

Support provision at TUoS

The National Scholarship Programme was devised by HEFCE to ‘benefit individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds’ who enter higher education (HEFCE, 2011). With a government premium of £3000 per student, institutions were expected to outline in their agreement with the Office for Fair Access their matched contribution and details of the delivery of their financial support programme. The government provided a list of suggested options, including fee waivers, free foundation years, discounted accommodation and cash awards (HEFCE, 2014). Under HEFCE guidelines and through the National Scholarship Programme, TUoS introduced in 2012 a financial support package to support students from low-income families and deprived areas. Tuition fee waivers were allocated to students who had a household income of £25,000 or under and, using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), were considered to be from a deprived area. Following a consultation with the Students’ Union, it was decided there would also be an option to take part of the fee waiver as a cash award.

Beyond the general support throughout the student journey, there is further support and guidance to students with a particular focus on key points of transition.
These transition points include, arrival at university, exam times, returning from the first Christmas break, change of academic expectations year on year, leaving university whether studies have been completed or not, taking or returning from a leave of absence along with any unexpected life events. The student groups identified in need of more comprehensive support are: mature students, under 18s, local/commuter students, students returning from a leave of absence, student parents, students from a care background and students with caring responsibilities.
Methodology

The data that forms the basis of this paper are part of a wider programme of research based in Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU) at TUoS. Entitled ‘Sheffield Student 2013’, the project follows the undergraduate cohort of 2013 throughout their University of Sheffield experience until they leave in June 2016. This project aims to examine the expectations and realities of contemporary student life and the multiple transitions and adjustments students make in their academic, social, and financial lives during their time here. Utilising a longitudinal design, with quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, the project will explore how these experiences resonate with, and are supported by, the university’s support networks.

Serving as a pilot-study to the 2013 project, the focus group data analysed in this paper sought to examine the following question: when asked about the experience of transitioning to universities, what are the main concerns that students start talking about? The paper offers a cross-sectional account of focus group interviews that were conducted with the cohort that entered TUoS in September 2012 – the first cohort under the new fee regime. There were two cycles of focus groups conducted, one in November 2012 (3 interviews) and one in March 2013 (7 interviews), see Table 1 for the details. In tandem with the overall goal of the paper, the interview schedule was partly developed to explore student experience of different services, especially on behalf of the Financial Support Team and the Student Transitions and Support Team.

Table 1: Focus group interviews

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<td>A-FW</td>
<td>Fee Waiver: 3 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-NFW</td>
<td>Student: 4 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-NFW</td>
<td>Student: 4 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>1a-FW</td>
<td>Fee Waiver: 1 person</td>
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<tr>
<td>1b-FW</td>
<td>Fee Waiver: 2 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>2-NFW</td>
<td>Student: 4 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-FW</td>
<td>Fee waiver: 3 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-NFW</td>
<td>Student: 4 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-FW</td>
<td>Fee Waiver: 4 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-NFW</td>
<td>Student: 5 people</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>10 interviews, 34 students</strong></td>
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A total of 34 students participated in the focus groups, 13 of whom gained a fee waiver and 21 did not get such support. The fee waiver students were recruited from the 179 full-time students in receipt of a fee waiver, offering them a small incentive
for taking part in one of the focus groups. The sampling frame for the non-fee waiver group was the same—sans waiver—to those fee waiver students, who were defined for the project as undergraduate home students temporarily, fully or provisionally registered. Participants were opportunity sampled. Initial emails were sent to all registered students outlining the research rationale and the particulars of participation. In addition, a list of those students receiving a fee-waiver were extracted from administrative data and sent a separate email requesting participation. Whilst this strategy produced a viable sample for the non-waiver group, the ‘low income’ group were further targeted through direct telephone calls to potential participants inviting them to participate in a focus group.

All resulting data were transcribed and the analysis for this paper was conducted at the end of 2013. Broadly, the analytical technique employed followed the basic tenets of thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). Data was themed according to content, with these themes being interrogated further to reveal more fine-grained properties of the original issues identified. More specifically, the interview data was first coded according to content and organised under relatively broad substantive issues that connected particular parts of the discussion. These initial categories were: academic, social, financial, external support, and individual characteristics/difference. These codes were analysed further in terms of their conceptual similarity and difference and subsequently sub-divided into more specific topics. For instance, the social category had a number of dimensions around settling in, living arrangements, course-mates, fresher’s week, societies, the role of food, the role of alcohol etc. Cutting across these sub-categories were a number of common dimensions such as making friends, differences in groups, independence, etc. The data from the fee waiver and the non-fee waiver groups were analysed together, pointing out the similarities and differences in opinion if, and when, they emerged. Indeed, an emergent property of the analysis was revealed to be the vicarious relationship of expectation, previous experience, and the experience of the present. A discussion of the complexity of this relationship with respect to the emergent categories of interest of this paper—the academic, social, and financial concerns—is presented below and discussed particularly in the discussion.

Of course, as there was no data collected from previous cohorts, it is not possible to assess whether these experiences are different in any respect from those of students of previous years taking up a substantially smaller financial burden (Gorard, 2013). Similarly, the non-probability sampling method within the cohort, combined with the case-based approach to the TUoS sample specifically, means that generalisations across the TUoS cohort are problematic, as are any comparisons to other institutions. However, the convenience sample of the 2012 entrants provides a useful breadth of information to start exploring the university experiences of a
cohort that pays substantially more for their education that the preceding generation. Indeed, the paper provides a first sketch of student voices with respect to their transitions into, and through, their FYE at a time when changes to the student experience are commonly thought to be taking place. More specifically, it provides some contextualisation of how issues regarding the participation of lower income groups are being assessed by large Universities in England and Wales, and how this might impact on the students who study there.

The remainder of the paper is structured around the main concerns that students mentioned regarding their experiences at the University of Sheffield within the first year of their studies. These findings are organised under three main headings: academic, social and financial.

**Findings**

**Academic concerns**

Students’ academic concerns are those that relate to their experiences of, and performance in, their chosen programme of study. The focus group data revealed a number of substantive challenges to academic progression that were commonly identified, and experienced, by students within the sample. These include: familiarity with teaching styles – or not; contact with and distance to lecturers; the importance of feedback; and, the situational differences of life external to the university experience. In these terms the data compares to similar studies that have sought to explore the experience of students entering university (Harvey et al., 2006, Lumsden et al., 2010). However, within the context of this study, two inter-related themes that contextualised the discussion were prevalent that have not been readily identified elsewhere: ‘uncertainty’ and ‘difference’. Whereas uncertainty relates to the level of resonance between what is expected from them at university and whether they are capable of reaching those standards, ‘difference’ is articulated from the perspective of an assumed dissonant experience between the past and present self, and the self and others. This includes the distance between the here-and-now of the present with their own past experiences at school, college and elsewhere, but also the distance between their own experience and those of their peers and other significant others. These differences are given form through contrasts made in terms of teaching styles and time-frames of the university, as well as divergences between more familiar learning styles and developing understandings of autonomy.

Undergraduate students in their first year are – unsurprisingly – uncertain whether their skills and competences are good enough for them to succeed in their studies. These concerns relate to a broader concept of their capability of getting through their course duties. The implicit assumption within much of the focus group
data suggested that the experience of struggling with respect to transition has the potential to be interpreted as a deviation from normative expectation and experience. Indeed, being able to negotiate this difference between experience and expectation successfully appears to be a key part of managing the uncertainty that can be associated with transitioning. Here, an interviewee compares their experiences at school to those at university in terms of the scale of the learning and the amount of knowledge that could be covered. The student is uncertain with respect to the level of 'knowing' that might be deemed enough – as opposed to school, where the aim was to gain enough to pass with a good mark:

(...) at A-level [...] you’re learning to pass the exam and you can learn ‘too much’. Like you just need to learn what they want you to write. Whereas in my class now, the exam, they don’t tell you what it’s on. It can be on anything because at the end of the day we’ve got to know everything by the time we qualify and you can never know too much. (4-NFW)

Their previous experience at A-Level then formed the basis for their expectation at university, which turned out to be discrepant from the experience of now. However, in order to negotiate this uncertainty, the student in question offers an intriguing method of managing this new reality: ‘qualification’, in terms of being prepared for (work) life, is aligned with the notion that ‘you can never know too much’. In the process, their past experience is transformed into the deviant experience with the reality of the here-and-now ascribed normative status.

The increased level of independence and gaining ownership over one’s learning is often different from previous experience as well, as another student highlighted:

(...) I think as well as the independent bit being good, the whole fact that I’m used to A-level teachers being basically like this is what you have to know, now go away and drill it into you. At uni it’s such a like massive course, it’s like well, it’s up to you now basically. You’ve got to know all of this, and so I think I just found that a little bit overwhelming, because you don’t know what to expect from your exams. (2-NFW)

Again, negotiating the uncertainty associated with independence – and viewing it as positive - was key to managing any potential deviance between past and present experience. Another student articulated similar concerns:

There’s quite a big difference between A-levels and university academically because you’re actually learning on a different scale. Like at A-level it was kind of like they teach you how to pass the exam. (...) Where actually here this is how you do the subject which is a big difference and for journalism it’s a case of they’ve given us a patch of
Sheffield and they've said right go away and write some articles on it and it's a case of this is actually how you do it instead of this is how the exam is going to be laid out. This is how the coursework should be. This is how we’re going to mark it. There’s no mark schemes. There’s no hints so it’s a case of do it and learn how to do it like in the real proper way. (4-NFW)

Any uncertainty that could be attributed to the discrepancy between past and present is negotiated by the recognition that this is the ‘real proper way’. Transition, therefore, becomes a positive, rather than negative, experience. The reference point of the student in terms of ‘how things are meant to be’ has shifted so that it aligns with, not just the university’s approach to learning and teaching, but more broadly with an assertion that these methods are closer to a valued reality that resonates with the wider world. Again, the past experience at A-Level which initially formed the expectation of work becomes deviant in this new context.

Indeed, for students who are more successful in making the academic transition through their FYE, this uncertainty seems to become clearer as they progress through their first year and gain feedback on their work. Prior to this, some expressed frustration ‘that you can’t see if you’re doing it right first time, you have to sort of take that step in the dark and then improve upon it with the next one’ (4-NFW). Formative feedback, however, can act as a mechanism that allows them to negotiate the uncertainty of performance as it serves as positive reinforcement that they are, more or less, successful in making the transition. Some students also negate discrepancies between experience and expectations with respect to assessment – measureable evidence of transition - by pointing out the importance of recognising that the first year does not count towards their final grade:

So it seems to be the whole point of the first year, apart from teaching the knowledge you need for the second and third years, it’s to get you into the right sort of direction of study and how you work and how much you need to work. (5-FW)

In this instance, the impact of any perceived discrepancies between expectation based on previous performance and experience of the here-and-now are lessened through an appeal to the promise of future performance.

These narrative resolutions can be contrasted with another student finding it harder to cope with their university course, partly due to the differences between previous and present experience in terms of learning and teaching style, and workload:
I don’t want to sound thick but it’s really hard. They asked for two As and a B and I got two A* and an A and it was like okay I should be able to do it and I can’t. (...) I thought I’d come to university and... this may sound ridiculous but feel I’m learning this, I’m learning this and I’m just like I don’t know how I’m ever going to apply any of this stuff and it’s not fun. Whereas I used to find learning fun. (6-NFW)

Unable to remove past experience from current expectation, and incapable of appealing to an (imagined) future or wider world to make sense of the experience of transition, the student suffers from acute uncertainty of transition: their experience of the here-and-now is seen as negatively deviant. Indeed, the student struggles to resolve the narrative tension associated with their interpretation of the discrepancy between past and current self, and the situation they have found themselves in.

Beyond the difference regarding the learning styles and the broader view on knowledge, students can also perceive a further ‘difference’ from their school experiences in terms of the distance from their lecturers:

(...) by the end of A-Level’s you had quite a good relationship with your teachers, whereas now the lecturers never know your name or anything to that same extent. But I think it’s just getting used to that and knowing how you can contact people if you did have a problem. (6-NFW)

The majority of the students seem to adapt to this distance between them and their lecturers so that it becomes the general expectation for those experiencing normative – that is, non-problematic transition. However, the interviewees who have closer relationships with some of their lecturers seemed to be very fond of these relations and expressed surprise over the fact that they gain some of the attention and time from academic staff. In these terms, they were perceived as ‘added value’ rather than serving to shift the (now) normative expectation of distance. This is despite common suggestions that the perceived distance between student and lecturer has substantial impact on their learning:

I had a mixture of like small lectures as well as these big massive lectures, which I found quite daunting as well when there’s 90 other people and everyone wants the teachers attention, you can really tell a difference between how much you really take from the lessons with the two styles. (6-NFW)

Another student who found themselves in a smaller department also expressed surprise at the level of support offered:

(...) I think it’s because my department is so tiny, I felt like they were, for each individual module, each lecturer had said like, this is a number that you can call, this is
the email that you can ask questions for, and then my tutor was like, do you need any help(...) (2-NFW)

Given these concerns, and whilst the analysis of focus group data cannot substantiate this unequivocally, the data offered here suggests that students expect distance between themselves and lecturers. This particular student had only ever experienced this level of (close) contact but was still surprised by it. Indeed, students appear to experience closeness as a positive deviation from the expectation of distance. This means that past experience of student-lecturer relations at A-Level are not used to form the expectation of experience at degree level study. Instead of their own experiences, more general assumptions about the nature of university lectures, lecturers, and lecturing influence the expectation of distance – however outmoded those assumptions may, or may not, be.

The university means substantial freedom with one’s time and some respondents suggested problems in negotiating the fast pace of events. Those making successful transitions are able to resolve initial uncertainty by appealing to a growing familiarity with what is expected of them: ‘it’s just getting used to the whole system and fitting in and stuff like that’ (5-FW). However, it was notable that issues of uncertainty in this particular area seems to be a special concern for students with caring responsibilities and established networks – many of whom also happened to be in the lower income group: for them the university is another time-consuming duty in addition to pre-existing ones. One interviewee suggested:

I don’t think I’ve settled into university life, ‘cause I am a mature student and I commute and I am a single parent. So, I think it’s just like an extra thing to my life that I already had. (...) I can’t really join in with things, as I don’t have extra evenings etc. (1b-FW)

The experience of university life is realised in an assumed deficit of academic experience. Similarly, another interviewee noted:

And if there’s anything else it’s quite difficult for me to come to all that extra stuff [being a commuter student], like we have visitors coming in, employers and stuff like that. (5-FW)

In both cases, primary goals elsewhere – in home and work respectively - were seen to impinge on the expectation of engagement for themselves, and the experience of engagement for (collectivised) others.
Social concerns

‘Fitting in’ within the social setting of the university was of general concern that affected many students regardless of income level. Indeed, many mentioned the turbulence of the first week of the university and the ‘imperative’ of making friends as fast as possible, as mentioned by this student:

(... it's a crucial time for bonding with your flatmates, stuff like that, so if you say no, it's like people get ideas about like, your personality and character, and like, she's not much fun, or something like that. (...) So there's a little bit of pressure there... (2-NFW)

In these terms, the expectation of social engagement actually served to directly influence present behaviour in order to avoid any uncertainty associated with transition of friendship. However, any dissonance between the expectation and experience of meeting people in the first week can be negotiated to resolution after ‘fresher’s week’, as this student pointed out:

(... I get on with my flat now well, but we didn't really have a lot in common, so I found it like, the first week was quite difficult, when everybody else was going out with their flat, I still went out with my flat, but I think it's got a lot better for me, since I made friends with common interests. So I think that's... it's definitely... after the second week, when I started my course, and that people were... I think that was probably when I started to settle in. (2-NFW)

For some students, especially those who commute from further away and do not have the possibility for joining extra-curricular networks – many of whom were located in the lower-income group – the concern still remains: Where and how could they get to know fellow university students?

If you are sat in a lecture with 300 people and you might sit next to the person and talk to them, and then you're friends, but then you never see them again. And a lot of people have the groups or their in sport way or the live way or they are in club swing, because I am not involved in that, I've got to get on and now it is really difficult. You're on your own. (1b-FW)

Indeed, the concern of ‘fitting in’ is especially strong in the narratives of those who emphasise individual differences and construct an identity where they are not the ‘usual’ university student. Being ‘unusual’ within this set of participants meant being a mature student, having caring responsibilities, being from a working class background, being from a different ethnic group, country or religion than the perceived ‘average’ student – as well a combination of these identities. Unsurprisingly, these types of differences are articulated often in the low income
group and are seen as a potential barrier to getting on with others, although not everyone negotiates this difference in the same way:

I think it’s scarier because I’m older than people, so I didn’t think people were going to talk to me. But it’s been fine. Everyone just gets on with everyone, so, age isn’t really an issue. So, it’s good. (1a-FW)

Another, however, suggested:

I haven’t yet found the people of the same experience as me. I think the majority of people that you do talk to are 18 – 19 and they just look at me in disbelief when I say, I have a child and I am divorced and I’ve got a mortgage. (1b-FW)

For students who think of themselves as being ‘unusual’ within the university setting, the sense of entitlement is an important concern: are they ‘supposed’ to be at the university? As the following student suggests, this is part of a wider process of socialisation that influences their expectations of university life. In this example, the interviewee relays a story about her mother who felt uncertainty about her background and its difference from the university context:

Like my mum was saying to me the other day that she feels funny come up to my uni because she feels like she shouldn’t come up, she’s a bit embarrassed because of what she does and that she can’t give me money like my flatmates get and stuff. I’m like, “Don’t be daft,” you know, I feel the same as them, I’m here and I’m doing what I’m doing – why not? (5-FW)

Whilst the expectation of the mother with respect to university led to a problematic experience for her, the reality of the student’s current experience – where they had felt acceptance – meant that they could successfully negotiate any perceived difference. However, others in the lower income group had similar concerns about whether they would be accepted within social networks. In the majority of instances, these ‘unusual’ students expressed relief, suggesting that the local community, in most cases, was accepting and any difference that could have been exacerbated was negligible:

Yes [difference from others] was one of my concerns – not only my age – but because I am from[...] and I have got a Yorkshire accent, and I have a slight working class chip on my shoulder, as well, and I just thought Oh! I am never going to fit in! And I were amazed at how friendly everybody is and there doesn’t seem to be a barrier about age, there is a difference but no barrier and everybody is really lovely and friendly. (A-FW)
There are, of course, very good reasons why these ‘non-traditional’ students who are variously, mature, from lower participation neighbourhoods, part-time carers, or local to the university, expect to feel different from the general populace of students – in many cases their circumstances dictate that they are. However, that is not to suggest that there is anything else essential to their shared identity other than the expectation and experience of difference:

I mean on my course there are three other mature students and we sort of found each other and we’ve sort of stuck together more (…), but again we’re all very different, one is a parent as well and the other two are sort of in their early 20’s. So there is still quite a diverse group there but we’ve got that one thing in common, which helps. (5-FW)

Indeed, some of these non-traditional groups were not actually in the fee waiver group at all. As a result, drawing any concrete lines of common difference or similarity across these ‘lower income’ and ‘non-traditional’ groups is difficult. Difference and similarity are context dependent. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many were no different from the general populace in terms of their trepidation about how they would ‘fit in’ with other students. Here the local ‘commuter student’ retained the experience of difference whereas it was quickly negotiated by the student from the general populace:

I think it’s a bit more difficult. Like I’m quite independent myself anyway, but your first week, (…) like you’re on your own and it’s a bit like oh! (…) it’s quite difficult to make friends I think when you’re actually a commuter. (5-FW)

Indeed, many of the mature students across the groups also suggest a clear dividing line between them and the younger student populace. In particular, their approach to socialising in terms of time constraints and preferences were perceived to be different, as well as their experiences in life and the responsibilities they have to negotiate. Therefore, the majority of the mature students pointed out that it was important for them to meet others like them to cope with the university environment:

You know, there’s a few international students like myself, in the flat, and there was… also most of us are mature students, so it’s quite good to have like-minded people and you get on with them better, so that you can settle in better than if you know… if I was with all British students, all aged 19 or 18, I’d probably find it more difficult, because I would feel isolated. (B-NFW)

Of course, whilst this approach to making friends allowed the student to experience similarity with others, it also reinforced the difference between them and
more generalised groups of students: the difference experienced in the here-and-now of the present became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Financial concerns**

The financial concerns during the first university year are constituted from the amount of student and maintenance loans; the availability of support from their family or through their own savings; and the financial support from the university. Like social concerns, the issue of finance was also one that was marked by individual differences across both fee waiver and non-fee waiver groups. Indeed, in spite of the label of ‘fee waiver’ suggesting similarity, the wider circumstances by which students came to university inevitably influenced their experience of it.

A necessary evil, many students took out a loan for their university studies appeared to have surrendered to the idea of being in debt for a long time after university:

‘I think you only look at fees, the debt thing, as a bad thing if you’re on the fence about coming to university – if you want to come you want to come and it doesn’t matter’ (5-FW).

Many expected the debt, were relatively comfortable with the conditions of the loan repayment, and they expect to pay the amount back in the future. In these terms, their expectation was that the loan would not put substantial financial constraints on them whilst at university and it did not affect their day-to-day experience:

It’s not a high pressure loan or anything that you’re going to have debt collectors chasing you, so it’s not really a big worrying thing, but it is something to think about because it’s going to be there, but it’s no pressure. It’s quite good really. (5-FW)

For some, however, the safety of large numbers meant that the time-scale of the debt and the conditions in which they are provided, also lessened the implications of taking a further few thousand pounds in student loans as it did not seem to make a tremendous difference on their longer term repayments. Thus, some students indicated that they had a preference for the more expensive accommodation, or chose a more expensive university town with little regard as to the increase in cost. In this case, both the expectation of taking on debt to undertake their studies, as well as the practical impact of the loan being negligible on a day-to-day basis actually influenced their approach to financial budgeting.
For some, the reality of taking more money was negotiated by the amount of support the student’s family can put towards their education. The majority of the students suggested they would ask for help from their family before trying to gain university support. This, of course, is substantially different for students whose parents cannot support them:

I can’t ask my family because my mum doesn’t work and I’ve got a really bad credit history, so I couldn’t get an overdraft. Like I said before, I ensured I knew everything I needed to know [in terms of the financial aspects] before I came, should anything go wrong. (6-NFW)

It is also somewhat different from the perspective of mature students, students with caring responsibilities and students from lower income background generally. Although all appreciate the conditions of the student loan, these ‘non-traditional’ students were more wary of how to use their fiscal resource. These students – who were not necessarily from the fee-waiver group - seemed to have done more planning through calculating the financial burdens of a loan, the available university and national support they could get, the available family income they could put towards their studies, as well as their foregone earnings.

Of course, whether the financial support had an impact on the decision of the interviewees of going to university is impossible to assess as their answers cannot be compared to those who considered university but were actually put off by the financial burden (Gorard et al., 2006). The students interviewed here are those who considered the financial consequences of going to university and decided they will take those risks. It does, however, suggest that given general differences between ‘non-traditional’ students and the general populace, ‘non-traditional’ groups are more likely to be aware of the immediate and long-term financial implications of university study.

There were also marked trends between the responsibilities felt with age. Whilst the main concern for younger students seemed to be their newly gained financial independence, for older students the main concern was how they could keep a good balance between university expenses and home life – whatever it might be:

I found it really difficult but I think that is from moving from full time employment to being a student and working one day a week. There is a lot of things that you can’t cut back on. I can’t not pay my mortgage; I can’t not feed my son. So it’s quite... I think it’s been really difficult trying to balance it. (1b-FW)
This student also suggested that they considered dropping out due to the pressures they are constantly facing through juggling multiple roles. The day-to-day experience of university was felt to be in competition with the primary goals of their home life and it was only support of the family and friends helped them to stay on the course.

For students without caring duties, the bursary and the waiver did seem to be important in reducing uncertainty in terms of their finances. Some respondents, for example, suggested that as the financial aid took pressure off them, they could more easily concentrate on their studies as well as gain a more ‘complete university experience’ - referring to being able to afford books or participating in the social aspects of university life. For students with caring responsibilities however, the option to have some of the tuition fee waiver as cash seemed to help balance their family budgets:

We’ve sort of got our budget really well managed, but it is very close and tight, so like the extra support with the bursary and stuff and the fee waiver, I chose to have the extra £1,000 to me which has been a great help, and all the sort of financial support available is really, with my part-time job, almost like a full-time wage. (S-FW)

Discussion

In the context of changes in the funding landscape of Higher Education in England and Wales, a main aim of this paper was to provide some early understanding the main concerns of students who are in the process of experiencing the transition phase associated with their first year. The findings of the paper compare to similar studies that have sought to explore FYEs and there is little evidence presented here to suggest that the impact of change on the experience of transition has been marked.

The paper highlights three areas of transitional concern articulated by students: academic, social, and financial. Academic concerns are those that relate to issues of teaching and learning and include: issues of the level of knowledge required; expectations of independence; the role of formative and summative feedback; distance between students and lecturers; the pace of adaption needed; and, the ability to engage with extra-curricular activities. Social concerns, on the other hand, relate to the peopled networks that students move through during their first year. Concerns in this arena include: ‘fitting in’; making friends; developing and negotiating flat-mates; finding course-mates in the context of large group teaching; negotiating perceived similarities and differences between the primary identities of self and others; and, managing expectations of significant others. Finally, financial concerns
are those that relate to the funding of the programme, the day-to-day living expenses that need to be negotiated, the inevitability of student-loan debt and future financial provision and circumstance.

However, what is also clear from these exploratory findings is that the experiences do not take place in a vacuum and are, instead, informed by a range of individual circumstances that are themselves contingent with a range of other influential social contexts – all of which exist beyond the funding changes themselves. Indeed, what appears to be important in the specific articulation of concern is the relative distance between expectation and experience that can, in some instances, prompt feelings of uncertainty and difference. Whilst the recognition that past experiences influence expectation which, in turn, can then be used to interpret the present is hardly a novel one, it appears some students are better equipped to be able to negotiate the negative feelings associated with uncertainty through the deployment of various narrative strategies that neutralise difference. These 'successful' students manage any potential dissonance between expectation and experience by: reinterpreting past experience as deviant; reinterpreting the present as normative; appealing to a normative future; valuing external positive reinforcement; disregarding past experience as useful for interpreting the present; changing present behaviour so it aligns with current expectations; altering behavioural strategies designed to negate potential deviance; changing group reference points; and, thorough planning that includes an assessment of different alternatives so that none are experienced as deviant.

Where these strategies are not present, the evidence here suggests that students are more likely to view themselves as different and 'unusual' with respect to the environment they find themselves in. Whilst this is not, in itself, necessarily problematic, it can become so if that difference is seen in terms of a deficiency that will hamper progression. Such deficiencies are likely to become even more challenging where these differences associated with negative academic, social, and financial deviation are multiple and thus compounded. Indeed, in spite of the diversity of students and their experiences, the 'unusual' status provokes uncertainty with respect to ability to complete the cycle of progression and, in these terms, some students struggle to reconcile their expectations of university with their actual experiences of it.

This paper is useful, therefore, because it helps to highlight those areas of concern where problems can be articulated and, at the same time, offers some insight into how they can be ‘talked about’ to encourage more successful forms of transition. Indeed, in this respect the naturalistic setting of the focus group was deliberately deployed to (re)create the context by which students discuss issues of
concern, and how they (re)present them negatively or positively. If these methods of neutralisation can be mimicked within the support offered to students, students might be able to negotiate them to resolution more successfully. Moreover, the paper points to the important role that expectation and past experience play in contextualising the experience of the present suggesting that they can both positively and negatively contextualise the interpretation of the here-and-now. As such, not only does the paper offer some insight into where problems occur and how they might be better negotiated, it also highlights where those expectations might be utilised to give added value within the cycle of student transition.

Regarding the differences in FYE between low income groups and the general populace the findings presented here are much more opaque. Whilst there seems to be some evidence of a more rigorous approach to financial planning and budget management in the fee waiver group, as well as more general concern with respect to making the social transitions necessary to the FYE, given the nature of the complexity of qualitative data and the problematic nexus of individual differences, identifying clear and consistent themes with respect to any differences between those few waiver and non-fee waiver groups, is difficult. No doubt this also results from the terms of the fee waiver itself.

According to Jenkins (2008), a categorical identity is one that is applied externally to an individual, not one that is necessarily internally identified with by the individual themselves. Whilst categorical identities can achieve significance so that they are assimilated into the everyday reality of one’s social identity, this is not necessarily, or essentially, the case. In these terms, it appears that those in the low-income group constructed by the fee waiver categorisation – and reproduced within this study – do not necessarily experience themselves as having something in common with each other than their fee waiver status. Whilst the evidence presented in the financial concerns section of the paper suggests that the fee waiver did have significance for the individuals in question, and there were some commonalities between the members of the cohort, there were also many differences. Equally, members of the ‘lower income’ group also demonstrated substantial similarities and differences with the general populace of students with respect to their academic progress and social lives. Although the status of ‘fee waiver’ is a potential resource for constructing identity and experience both internally and externally, the impact of the fee waiver on the day-to-day experience of the student appears, in practice, to be negligible in terms of their academic and social lives. Students highlighted other primary identities – age, parent-hood, locality etc. – as being factors that made them different to the general populace and those in the fee waiver group. In short, the fee waiver group do not see themselves as a group in themselves. This makes any cross group comparisons on the basis of fee waiver status difficult.
This is not, however, to suggest that financial help to non-traditional students is without merit. Indeed, there is some evidence presented here to show exactly the opposite is true for those students who have made the direct decision to enter university. Financial help alone does not intervene in the process of difference and uncertainty that results from the disconnections in expectation and experience that students suffer from generally during the first year of university life. Whilst those in the fee waiver group might be more likely to suffer from social, if not academic, concerns, this is because of the composition of the group being more likely to include mature students, local students, and students with responsibilities external to the university more generally, than it is because of the fee waiver specifically.

There is some tentative evidence offered here to suggest that in the context of funding changes within HE, further initiatives in the area of widening participation - and the research that follows them - needs to proceed with caution if the solution to those changes is seen to be specifically financial. Whilst financial provision to the lowest income groups can have some impact to the financial concerns of those who choose to enter university, these provisions need to be supported by other, more general, practical initiatives that are both theoretically informed. They also need to be supplemented with more targeted measures directed toward specific ‘non-traditional’ students who engage with university in different ways according to their circumstances.
References


HEFCE. (2013a). POLAR – Participation of Local Areas Retrieved 05/02/2014, from https://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/polar/


Notes

\(^1\) TUoS is compared to other Russell Group institutions and to the UK-average along a number of the HESA (2013) Performance Indicators.

\(^2\) The following universities have a higher population of young entrants: University of Birmingham, University of Durham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, London School of Economics and Political Science (HESA, 2013).

\(^3\) National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification: 1 - Higher managerial and professional occupations; 2 - Lower managerial and professional occupations; 3 - Intermediate occupations; 4 - Small employers and own account workers; 5 - Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 6 - Semi-routine occupations; 7 - Routine occupations.

\(^4\) The Higher Education Founding Council for England (HEFCE) developed the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) measures, a classification of small areas across the UK. POLAR3 provides a comparative measure of the likelihood of young people participating in higher education, using data from academic years 2005/06 to 2010/11.