

Inequalities in Higher Education and Students' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Academic Performance

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Abstract—This qualitative study aims to answer the following research questions: i) What are the factors that students perceive as relevant to a) promoting and b) preventing good grades? ii) How does socio-economic status (SES) feature in those beliefs? We conducted in-depth interviews with 19 first- and second-year undergraduates of varying SES at a research-intensive university in the UK. The interviews yielded eight factors that students perceived as promoting and six perceived as preventing good grades. The findings suggested one significant difference between the beliefs of low and high SES students in that low SES students perceive themselves to be at a greater disadvantage to their peers while high SES students do not have such beliefs. This could have knock-on effects on their performance.

Keywords—Social class, education, academic performance, students' beliefs.

I. INTRODUCTION

UK policymakers have long believed that the best way of reducing inequalities in society is to widen access to Higher Education (HE) so that children from working class backgrounds become as likely to participate in HE as their peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds. 33% of UK adults now participate in HE, compared to 6% in 1960, yet social inequality persists [1]. Using longitudinal data, Glennerster reports that between 1991-1992 and 1998-1999 university attendance among children of professional parents rose from 55 to 72%, and among children of unskilled parents from 6 to 13% [2]. These figures suggest that SES remains a barrier inviting further research.

While several studies have explored reasons for not enrolling in HE (e.g. [3]), and choices of HE institution among students from lower SES backgrounds (e.g. [4]), relatively little is known about the experiences of those who do attend university. One exception is an increasing body of international research on individual, social and organisational factors that influence student retention (e.g. [5]-[8]). There is growing evidence that SES influences students' education outcomes and university achievement [9]-[12], but very few researchers have speculated on the mechanisms through which this happens, especially psycho-social mechanisms such as the beliefs about studying that we explore in this paper.

This paper identifies factors students perceive as promoting and preventing good grades at university. The paper is

structured as follows. First, we provide a brief literature review on factors contributing to different academic outcomes among low and high SES students, followed by methods, results and a discussion of the findings from our qualitative interviews. We then finish with an overall discussion and implications for interventions and further research.

II. WHAT DRIVES INEQUALITIES IN HE: RESEARCH CONTEXT

An important aspect of widening participation in HE is about what happens and what outcomes are achieved while at university [13]. It has been shown that low SES students attending university are more likely to drop out [14]-[16] and less likely to get a higher degree class [17]. Using surveys and qualitative interviews with students as well as analysis of institutional data and literature reviews, Thomas found that these outcomes may be in part related to low-income students having less developed academic skills but also their weak sense of belonging at university as well as anxiety about fulfilling their future ambitions [18, p.12]. Crozier and Reay's mixed-methods study shows that low SES students are more likely to live at home and be combining study with part-time employment [19]. Moore et al.'s review of the widening participation literature argues that these experiences may pose significant challenges for students' engagement at university [20].

Relatively few studies focus on the role of psycho-social factors in educational participation [21] or in the experiences of working-class and other 'non-traditional' students in terms of maturity and ethnicity within universities [22]-[24]. It should be noted that these dimensions of non-traditionality are interrelated and often overlap, although by no means it should be assumed that for example all ethnic minority students come from the working class background. This intersectionality of characteristics, however, adds to the complexity of the issue under discussion here, namely the experiences of working-class students in HE. Some interview-based researches from Australia and the US suggest that working class students experience a tension between two opposing aspects of identity: Working class background and student/academic dispositions [25]-[27]. These authors identify low confidence in their abilities, poor self-esteem and institutional factors (e.g. low level of support from the teaching staff) as difficulties faced by

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these students. Although there is limited evidence about students' experiences at the university in the UK, interview-based research from the US suggests that SES affects students' levels of integration and the extent to which they feel they 'fit in' [28], [29].

Crozier and Reay's study conducted in the UK revealed the importance of identities in creating a sense of belonging [19]. The researchers argue that students' learner identities are influenced by experiences at school, their current university experience and their social circumstances. The same study reveals a significant gap between middle-class and working-class students in their sense of entitlement about going to university and self-confidence about their learner identity. Middle-class students were found to possess self-assuredness about themselves as successful learners which is lacked by working-class peers with a more fragile learner identity. Their study also found that students from the working-class background have different motivations and more instrumental and restricted engagements with the social dimensions of being a student compared to their middle-class peers [19].

Psycho-social factors influencing students' academic performance are also sometimes analysed in the context of stereotype threat effects (for reviews, see e.g. [30], [31]. According to Steele, the stereotype threat is 'a situational threat--a threat in the air--that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists [32, p.614]. In the context of academic performance, Spencer and Castano argue that stereotype threat takes place 'when members of a stigmatized group perform poorly on a task because they fear confirming negative stereotypes that are associated with their ingroup' [33, p.1]. Some authors argue that negative stereotypes associated with low SES people partly explain the achievement gap between high and low SES students [33]. A study conducted in France found that low-SES students performed significantly worse on a test if it was presented as a measure of intelligence, but they performed as well as their high SES peers if the test was presented as a memory test [34]. Social class is a widely discussed topic in the UK and so it is possible that the results from France would be replicated in the UK, although to our knowledge no similar studies seem to have been conducted in this country to-date.

There is a growing body of research which shows that psycho-social factors and particularly students' beliefs affect their actual academic performance. One strand of evidence in this area comes from growth mindset research which has predominantly been conducted in the US. A lot of studies have found that students achieve better results if they believe that their academic abilities can be improved (a belief called growth mindset) than if they believe that their academic abilities are fixed (fixed mindset) [35]. Claro et al. conducted a nationally representative survey of the 10th grade students in Chile and found that at every socio-economic level, those who hold more of a growth mindset type of beliefs consistently perform better than those who do not [36]. The study results also showed that the most economically disadvantaged students were twice as likely to have a fixed mindset compared to their well-off peers. Although these results do not explain why low-income students

were more likely to believe in a fixed mindset, the findings do suggest that socio-economic disadvantage may lead to worse academic performance partly by leading low SES students to believe that they cannot develop/influence their academic abilities.

There is a separate strand of research which shows that confidence in one's academic abilities (i.e. self-efficacy) has a major effect on academic performance. Bandura described self-efficacy as 'the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments' [37, p. 3]. Academic self-efficacy is defined by Chemers et al. as 'students' confidence in mastering academic subjects' [38, p. 56]. Some studies suggest that there is a link between self-efficacy and persistence, tenacity, and achievement in education [39]-[41]. In research on mathematics problem solving, students with high self-efficacy were found to persist longer [42] and to use more efficient problem-solving strategies [43] than their low-efficacy peers. Chemers et al. found that students with higher academic self-efficacy also had higher academic performance indicators [38]. The authors therefore concluded that if a student is confident in performing well in college, they are more likely to perform better [38]. Galyon et al. conducted a study on 165 undergraduate students and found that academic self-efficacy was more strongly related to exam performance than to class participation [44]. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols examined differences in academic self-efficacy levels between first generation (i.e., students without a college graduate parent) and non-first generation college students (i.e., students who have a college graduate parent), and found that non-first generation college students had higher levels of academic self-efficacy and performed better academically than first generation college students [45]. This suggests that students from more educated backgrounds may enter college better prepared than their peers coming from less educated backgrounds, and, as a result, have higher levels of self-efficacy, allowing them to achieve better academic results than their peers [45].

Additionally, although not directly related to academic performance, Khan found a significant relationship between academic self-efficacy and stress coping skills, whereby students with higher academic self-efficacy tended to adopt more active coping skills such as time management, planning and other problem-focused solutions, while those with lower levels of self-efficacy tended to turn more towards emotional or avoidant coping strategies such as substance use [46]. Although there was no direct significant relationship between stress coping strategies and academic performance, and no causal link between the association between coping skills and self-efficacy, the findings may suggest that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to deal the stress of university through actively seeking solutions and for example improving their studying skills like planning, while low self-efficacy students adopt a more passive approach.

Since the above cited body of research clearly shows that students' beliefs about themselves and their academic abilities affect their academic performance, this paper contributes further to this area by examining an understudied aspect of

students' beliefs about factors influencing academic performance at university, and how those beliefs may be affected by differences in their socio-economic background. We used semi-structured in-depth interview method to answer the following research questions: 1) what are the factors that students perceive as relevant to a) promoting and b) preventing academic success (operationalised as grades); 2) how does SES feature in those beliefs.

III. METHODS

A. Participants

Interviewees were recruited from a list of students provided by the Student Registry Office at the University of Essex. The list included information (email address, sex, year of study, department, parental occupation) on 312 students, out of whom 251 were contacted and invited to take part in this study. The University of Essex was chosen as a suitable setting for this study because its intake is unusually mixed in terms of socio-economic background. In the most recent cohort, of the c.3300 undergraduate students enrolled in the campus where the study was conducted, c.2200 were British domiciled, 26% of whom came from deprived areas and 35% from families with less than £25K yearly income.

We conducted interviews with 9 second-year students and 10 first years (19 in all) from a range of faculties and departments (see Table 1). 7 were male and 12 female. 9 came from lower and 10 from higher socio-economic background, as defined by their parents' occupation held in the university's student records. 5 out of 9 low SES students came from an ethnic minority background and were UK-born. Participants were reimbursed for their time with £10 in cash.

TABLE I
PARTICIPANTS BY SES AND GENDER

| | Male | Female | TOTAL |
|----------|------|--------|-------|
| High SES | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| Low SES | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| TOTAL | 7 | 12 | 19 |

B. Procedure

The interview protocol and recruitment procedure were approved by the University of Essex Ethics Committee. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with participants' permission. The interview protocol included general, non-directive questions about possible influences on the university grades. For example, students were asked who is likely (and not as likely) to get good marks and why. Follow-up questions then asked students to elaborate. In order to identify factors that promote or prevent academic success, we asked students what they try to do to achieve good grades and then what makes it difficult for them to achieve them. We recruited new participants until we reached 'saturation' [47].

IV. RESULTS

This study set out to explore differences between high and low SES students in terms of their beliefs about factors influencing their academic performance at university. The

findings indicated that most of the beliefs were actually shared by students from both SES groups except in one key area: Low SES students seem to believe that their social background is a considerable barrier to their academic success. High SES students have not expressed similar beliefs about their social background affecting their university achievement. A more detailed analysis of the beliefs is presented below.

A. Beliefs about Factors Promoting Good Academic Performance

Table II provides an overview of eight factors that students interviewed for this project reported as determining their academic performance. Some of them can be regarded as those that students can influence, e.g. study time, attendance, and planning ahead and time management, while others they have no control over, e.g. innate ability, luck, feeling happy and well integrated.

1. Study Time

All students spoke about how they can actively influence their results through studying. When asked what factors influence good results at university, 9 out of 10 high SES and 8 out of 9 lower SES students named studying efforts among others. When asked how much time they spend studying outside the classroom, the answers reveal a range of hours (from 1 hour per week to 6 hours per day or 30 hours per week), despite the fact that all students reported aiming for good grades and working hard. Some (n=14) report regular studying patterns whereby they study every day or a few times a week just to stay on top of reading and coursework. This is outside the assignments and exams period. These students report studying every day or every weekend for 10-30 hours a week, which involves organising and reading lecture notes and reviewing exam questions from previous years. Others (n=5 including 3 high SES and 2 low SES) report studying 1-5 hours a week, which some still consider more than what others do. While those who study more hours emphasize regular reading before and/or after lectures every day, those who only do 1-5 hours a week speak only about the compulsory coursework and no background reading.

2. Planning Ahead and Time Management

Some students (n=11 including 4 high SES and 7 low SES) emphasize the value of planning their work so that they have time to do the reading and write assignments. This is especially emphasized by 2nd year students who often confess that in their 1st year they would only work on their assignments and exams in the last few days before the deadline but are now committed to changing this because while it was possible to do things last minute in the 1st year and still get a good grade, this is no longer possible in the 2nd year where the amount of reading required and the expected quality of work are much higher. This is the change introduced by the student below:

'And last term I'd be like I'd not know about a deadline or something until two days before someone would tell me. So I'd always feel stressed but this term I've like got every exam and every deadline like on paper so I look at that and like I done an essay last night which is due in four

weeks cause in four weeks I've got three essays that are due at the same time and if I didn't check I wouldn't know that. ' (female, low SES)

TABLE II
FACTORS PROMOTING GOOD ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

| Factor/Belief | No of interviewees that mention the factor | An example quote |
|--|--|---|
| Study time | 17 (9 high + 8 low) | 'On a weekend I try and do work. I try and go over my lectures so like if I wake up really early in the morning, I'll do about 2 hours and then before I go to bed or if I'm really bored and I've got nothing to do I will do two hours at night. So mostly on a weekend I try and do work otherwise I'll just go over lectures, flick through, make a little bit of notes and stuff like that. So I'll say roughly about ten hours a week. Not much.(female, low SES) |
| Planning ahead and time management | 11 (4 high + 7 low) | 'And just making sure you do the work and that, and plan everything out so you know what you're doing with your days rather than just finding out last minute and having to like do an essay overnight.' (female, high SES) |
| Lecture and class attendance | 9 (4 high + 5 low SES) | [It's important to attend] 'cause well from a practical point of view you can catch what the lecturer is focusing on so you might get what he wants you to say... [I mean in the] exam coursework. You can understand what he cares more. That's a practical thing but apart from that if you're really interested in what you're studying why you're not going to lectures I mean it's just, few lecturers just read slides and people say why should I go he's just reading power points so bit pointless, I prefer to spend two hours in the library than do this.' (female, high SES) |
| Being interested in the field of study | 8 (5 high + 3 low) | 'I think it also depends what course and what you're doing at university something that you really enjoy. Some people I know, some people are doing accounting in my degree that don't really wanna do accounting but their dad was an accountant and there's quite a lot of money in accountancy. And I think after 3 years of doing something you're not gonna wanna do, you're just gonna lose interest. And as soon as you lose interest you get bored, you don't work as hard and results fall as a result.' (male, high SES) |
| Innate ability | 3 (high SES) | 'so I know a few people on business course that don't do an hour's worth of work in a day but still have great results where I know a lot of people that have struggled all their life but work really really hard and deserve the results they get.' (male, high SES) |
| Coming from a well-off background | 6 (5 high + 1 low) | 'Whether you know if someone like has my financial position but then can ask their mum and dad for four five hundred pounds a term and just get it then why are they gonna work like that.' (male, high SES) |
| Feeling happy and well integrated into university life | 3 (1 high + 2 low) | 'I also think to a degree if you're happy. If you feel happy in like university you're more likely to do well because when you, I know I've done well when I haven't been very happy and it's a lot harder then, you're sort of like ok so like you just feel more positive, so if you're generally happy here I think that helps.'(female, high SES) |
| Luck | 1 (low SES) | 'Like I've had a teacher that has taught me in A-Level; she had three D's in her A-level and she's got a PhD. It's what you do with your degree and she said to me, you know what that's what happens in a module. I've been in that position where you know I have ninety per cent I can tell you and if that ten per cent comes in the exam I'm finished, I don't know what I'm doing.' (female, low SES) |

Some students confessed that they had changed their attitude to planning ahead and time management after they had personally tried preparing for exams and assignments last minute and failed to achieve expected results due to the amount of work required in a short period of time available.

'Keeping on top of the work instead of falling behind' or 'planning ahead' are the phrases used by several students, who emphasize the importance of regular studying.

'I'm always planning ahead. So if I know that there is coursework due in in a month I would probably start earlier and try and do my research without, basically set myself up for the best opportunities. Like I don't like to leave things last minute and stuff so I like to be well prepared and well organised. Have my like goals and targets set out and know what I'm doing for the essay or coursework or whatever. And just start it early so I'm not rushing it. I have lots of time to go over it and check and stuff.' (male, low SES)

Some students talk about printing out a timetable with all deadlines and hanging it on the wall so that they are always aware of the upcoming deadlines. Some tend to block out time for studying in their diaries every day:

'I have a diary at home and in it I've timetabled four hours a day apart from Sunday to doing work, anything. Even if I haven't got any deadlines coming up soon. Even if it's just choosing a module and doing a bit of revision ready for the summer you can never start too early because

when it comes to summer and before the exams and I'm going over my notes and I'm thinking oh I remember that, tick that off the list, you know, instead of sitting there the night before in a flat not knowing what to do. So that's what I timetable four hours a day to just doing any work. Anything. And even if I've got a reading week I will say to myself ok when that lecture like I had a reading week for one of my modules the other day one till three the lecture was supposed to be so I said to myself one till three I'm either gonna do work at home or do work on campus. Doesn't matter where I do it as long as I do something.' (female, high SES)

The student quoted above is actually re-doing her year 2 of the course because she got very bad results at the end of it last year. She blames this on her not learning to study in the first year which was much easier than the subsequent year:

'in my first year I did incredibly well but I was also you know in still fresher mode so I was going out a lot and stuff and I'd still do well and then I came into my second year and I found that you can't actually do that in second year it's very very different and so obviously you know it showed when it came to my results and stuff and that I didn't do well enough to pass the year. So I thought ok I can either resist a few things go into my third year with barely scraping a third or I can re-do it and buckle down and concentrate.' (female, high SES)

3. Lecture and Class Attendance

Although all interviewed students claim that they try to attend classes, only half of them (n=9 including 4 high and 5 low SES) believe that it is important or even worth attending lectures. Some students feel that class teachers are more approachable than lecturers and so they are more able to ask questions and consequently benefit more from attending classes. Some students do not see any point in attending lectures because they can listen again to them and can access the slides online. This is especially the case with lectures where the lecturer just tends to read from the slides and not explain or add anything new. In those cases students feel that it is a better value if they just go over the lecture slides in their own time in the comfort of their home:

'Lectures I don't really attend myself because I go to the library and write the notes because I just think in a two hour lecture, I can usually get the notes done in about forty minutes in the library. But then I think the classes are important. I think you should go to them because you're discussing it yourself. There's not someone just like reading words off a Power Point so I think the class is more useful than the lectures.' (female, high SES)

However, few students argue that attending is still beneficial even in those cases when the lecturer does not go beyond what is included in the slides because when sitting in a lecture one is more engaged than when listening to it again on his/her own and so is likely to learn more:

'It depends what learning style you have. I'm someone that... if someone sits there and explains it to me I find it much easier when I'm going back over it to like write up and stuff, but I think sometimes like you can't, what you can get from a lecture you can't get from a text book. So even if they put their notes up on say Moodle and they've got a graph there and you're like it's not in my text book, it doesn't make any sense whatsoever and obviously there's listen again, but I've tried listen again and it's just. Because you can't physically see what the lecturer is doing at that moment in time it's just like ok. And then you'll skip it and then you'll get bored. But yeah I think lecture attendance is very important.' (female, low SES)

Some interviewees find it useful to attend lectures because they provide them with a good overview of the material that they will have to read in detail on their own afterwards. Attending lectures is especially beneficial at the beginning of a new and unfamiliar course:

'As much as like you can read by yourself when you get home I think it's important to like soak up what the lecturer's saying. Just sit there and get the foundation of it cause I don't know I think it's different when someone's lecturing you, talking in front of you than reading a book because. I feel like I'm more likely to stay awake in a lecture rather than sitting at home where there's music, where's there's food and just like read it on the internet or read it from a book.' (female, low SES)

Similarly, others share an insight which they themselves have recently discovered that if one attends lectures then it is easier to understand and revise the material for exams, which

then becomes a motivating factor for them to go.

4. Being Interested in the Field of Study

All students agreed that when it comes to something they find hard to study, the way forward is to put in more work and so eventually 'it will go in'. They do also, agree, however, that it is difficult to find motivation to work hard on something that is difficult to grasp and not interesting and so this can result in less effort being put in and consequently in bad marks. 8 students (5 high and 3 low SES) mentioned the enjoyment factor as something that may affect academic performance, including the student quoted below:

'If they don't enjoy that they would not really focus on it as much. Like for one of my modules last year it was a finance module I wasn't really interested in it that much. But it wasn't an option for me so I had to force myself to study it more. But it was something I tended to like avoid a lot because only purely because I didn't enjoy it as much. So when it came to the exam I did it really like last minute. So I think that was one of my like, in the exam it was like one of my lowest marks.' (female, low SES)

5. Innate Ability

Several (n=3 including 3 high SES) interviewed students mentioned varied innate abilities as a factor influencing their academic performance. Some conclude that it all depends on how well one knows himself or herself, i.e. how much studying time one needs to achieve good results, as discussed by a female student cited below:

'So I wouldn't say someone who studies a lot it's all about the individual. My big sister works her socks off because she has to. I don't because I don't have to. Things come easily to me. If I sit in a lecture I absorb everything like a sponge and I could go home and I could repeat everything but V has to take her time she has to revise for an exam at least a month before. And she knows that. I think it's all about the individual we need to actually look at ourselves and think right just because this person can do an assignment the night before doesn't mean I can. So it's all about just like self-realisation'. (female, high SES)

While innate ability as such was only discussed by high SES students in the interviews, low SES students referred to it too but usually in the context of parental background and how it influences their academic abilities, which is discussed below.

6. Coming from an Educated and Financially Comfortable Family Background

One topic that was discussed by several interviewees (1 low and 5 high SES) was the importance of parental background to one's academic success at university. In this context, the students referred to both parents' education and their financial situation as factors which may indirectly help or inhibit their academic abilities and performance.

Some students believe that growing up in a highly educated family socialises children into the education process and prepares them more for the university experience later in life. One student even pointed out that one's innate abilities depend on the educational background of their parents. Parents'

education is believed to be related to the students' ability to process academic information and the ability to read and understand the material that is covered at university:

'I would like to think that everyone is equally likely to get good grades but some people have like a cultural capital kind of thing like they come from a better background so therefore like the way lectures are set out, the way text books are set out, the way exams are set out they understand it better because they are written in a certain way and they have more intelligence I'm gonna say to better understand it compared to someone who they don't come from such a good background. So they're probably not as articulate probably don't understand as much as they do. I mean of course if you put in the work, invest the time then there should be no reason for you to not achieve the same grades as someone who came from a better background than you but I feel like there are certain things that can hinder someone's progress and grades and things like where you come from or how you've been brought up are definitely factors that fit into that.' (female, low SES).

The same student also argues that having nobody in the family who has gone to university may make some students less confident in their innate academic abilities and more anxious when starting university. As the student quoted above points out, parental educational background also matters when it comes to information about university life. Students who do not have university educated parents may feel lost and overwhelmed ('daunting', female, low SES) at first when they start university because they do not know what to expect:

'if you have educated parents that have good jobs and went to university they obviously know what it's like and they know the level of work that you have to do and they've been through it so like if you're stuck on something say if my mum was a lawyer and I was stuck on a law module she could help me but none of my parents went to university so I've never had that guidance, I've never had that help, I've just had to do it myself. But I think people that do have parents that are educated as such can like have an advantage.' (female, low SES).

As a result of not having university educated parents, some lower SES students seem to be less confident in their innate abilities to study which are emphasized by many as an important natural ingredient of success at university. Interestingly, even those who come from an educated background, become aware of the importance of education tradition in the family for their own academic success, something they used to take for granted, when faced with the experience of other students who come from a less privileged background.

The family financial situation is another family-background-related issue that features in the interviews extensively. Students' financial background is reported as having a significant effect on their academic results. If parents can afford to pay for students' additional costs not covered by the student loan then the student does not need to worry about getting a job and earning that money. Those who have to find a job and then divide their time between working and studying find it stressful and this can be reflected in their grades. Parents' financial

situation was also discussed in the context of schools and the fact that better off parents send their children to private schools, which are generally believed to be better than public schools (n=4 high SES and 1 low SES), which in turn prepares them better for university. This is discussed by the interviewee below:

'Like one of my housemates we were talking about in first couple of weeks and she's from a council estate in Cornwall and we were talking about money and she's on a maximum loan based on her house income and she said she went to a state school and she had to walk miles to get to the state school and stuff and then when I was telling her about my experiences it just made me realise how lucky I was that I went to a private school and had a car and you know just how experiences were very different. And you find that when you go to somewhere that has such a diverse student base that I was very lucky to go to private school and lucky enough to go to Uni.' (male, high SES)

As with the parental educational background, their family financial situation was discussed by low SES students in the context of how their social class background puts them in a disadvantaged position compared to their high SES peers. This disadvantage is also emphasized by high SES students who, although have not experienced it personally, have become very aware of it by coming into contact with other less privileged students.

7. Feeling Happy and Well Integrated into University Life

It is believed that psychological wellbeing can be an important factor in how motivated students feel to study. This factor was mentioned by 3 students (1 high SES and 2 lower SES). Overall, it is believed that feeling happy helps to study and achieve good results. So when someone does not feel happy being at university, this is reflected in the effort they put in and in the results. The students discussed the feeling of happiness in relation to belonging at university, which in turn is related to their social relationships, the degree to which they miss home and their attitude towards the course that they are studying. This is discussed below by a Black student who refers to the 'perfect balance between the social life and the academic' and at the university, which creates a sense of community on campus:

'I feel like you're part of a big family (...) Or like they try at least they try to integrate people into this kind of like family life so it's like even if you don't necessarily have friends or you don't interact with someone there's always people about that you could like interact with if necessary. I like that as well and there's obviously like other things like the sports societies and other groups and societies. (male, low SES)

Another Asian student stresses the fact that there are many cultural festivals on campus which make him feel that cultural diversity is respected here:

'Cause where I come from it's not very diverse. It's like loads of British people. I'm Asian for me to see like there's, cause when I grow up I want my children to be able to grow up with various children from different backgrounds. So they kind of have that respect for each

other and I think that's, cause some people don't really know about countries. So for me what I see in campus I'm happy with what I see. ... (female, low SES)

8. Luck

One student mentioned that one's academic results are also to a certain degree dependent on luck. It is hardly possible to read everything and know everything on the subject and therefore one can be more or less lucky in terms of what exam questions one gets and whether they studied for them or not. This factor only came up in the interview with a lower SES student:

'Because you know when you sit in an exam, the whole module... you might be really really bad at like some part of your module but you might be amazing in the, say

twenty per cent you might be really bad and eighty per cent you might be really amazing. If that twenty per cent comes in the exam that doesn't reflect your intelligence that's what I think' (female, low SES).

B. Beliefs about Factors Preventing Good Academic Performance

Table III presents a summary of the results on 6 factors that were mentioned by students as preventing good academic performance. Some factors are related to time management (social life, difficulties with planning ahead and time management, and job); others are more to do with psychological factors (feeling homesick/isolated, thinking about dropping out, and seeing friends/other people not studying).

TABLE III
FACTORS PREVENTING GOOD ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

| Factor/Belief | No of interviewees that mention the factor | An example quote |
|--|--|---|
| Feeling homesick/isolated | 13 (7 high + 6 low) | 'Although a lot of students who don't admit it... there are some times when I've sat down in my room, I've sat down and missed the family and it's sometimes easier to think about those things than to do work sometimes. So I think that can at least affect it in some way.' (male, high SES) |
| Thinking about dropping out | 9 (4 high + 5 low) | 'I'd say probably mainly they find it hard adjusting from home life. So moving far away. And then they start to question is it worth it. Then they make that judgment and then that affects the decision. Those that think it's worth it stay and those who don't leave'. (male, high SES) |
| Difficulties with planning ahead and time management | 8 (5 high + 3 low) | 'Just make sure that I'm not procrastinating and just make sure I'm doing the work really.' (female, high SES) |
| Social life | 6 (3 high + 3 low) | 'some people like they struggle with freedom. There were people that I made friends within first year that didn't make it to the end of first year and they had to re-do the year because they just didn't get their head down and get on with it... They just got taken with like the social element of it and like the friends they've made in their sports clubs... it's like I'm just gonna hang with my friends in the sports club and not go to my lectures.' (female, low SES) |
| Seeing friends/other people not studying | 3 (2 high + 1 low) | 'Usually [I study] during weekend. Because I just I'm too tired when I get back and like my flat mates get back from their studies as well and they're quite loud and there's distractions and then I'd have to like make myself food or go and do laundry or someone would come into my room and chat so I don't really get a lot of time to do work.' (female, high SES) |
| Job | 3 (1 high + 2 low) | 'In an ideal situation you can dedicate a hundred per cent of your attention to your study but that's not the case. You have to live. I mean you have to find even... obviously student life is a poor one so you have to make money. The student loan isn't enough for most people. You have to find time to get a job or whatever then you've got to find time to fit in work around studies.' (male, high SES) |

1. Feeling Homesick/Isolated

Not feeling happy while at university was mentioned as an important factor which can have a negative effect on students' academic performance. One of the reasons for not being happy at university is being away from home and feeling homesick which can be an important factor in students' ability to work hard. This factor was mentioned by 13 students (7 high and 6 low SES) and seems to affect both SES groups. If they struggle to settle in then this may affect their grades, as pointed out below:

'Although a lot of students who don't admit it there are some times when I've sat down in my room I've sat down and missed the family and it's sometimes easier to think about those things than to do work sometimes. So I think that can at least affect it in some way'. (male, high SES)

2. Thinking about Dropping Out

Not being happy at university may also lead students to think about dropping out. There are various reasons for which students start to think about leaving university, one of which is feeling homesick, as suggested by the interviewee quoted

below:

'I'd say probably mainly they find it hard adjusting from home life. So moving far away. And then they start to question is it worth it. Then they make that judgment and then that affects the decision. Those that think it's worth it stay and those who don't leave.' (male, high SES)

This reason was mentioned by 9 interviewees (4 high and 5 low SES). Other reasons for which students start to consider dropping out are academic challenges (5 high and 4 low SES), lack of social life (3 high and 1 low), lack of interest in the course (3 high and 2 low SES), financial considerations (2 high SES, no low SES), and personal problems (1 high SES). All of these factors influence students' sense of belonging at university and if it is low then they start thinking about dropping out, which seems to affect students from both SES groups.

3. Difficulties with Planning Ahead and Time Management

Students refer to several issues when they discuss difficulties with planning ahead and time management in the context of having a negative effect on their academic performance. They talk about procrastination (n=1 high SES), resisting temptations

to go out (2 high SES), and time management (2 high and 3 low SES), specifically in relation to having several simultaneous deadlines and finding time to prepare for all courses in the context of a broader university and social life. Students report that their difficulties with time management while at university are in part related to them needing to adjust to the independent life away from home, which many of them find hard. There are no parents in the students' halls to check on their progress or to wake them up for an early morning class, as discussed by the student below:

'The fact that you don't have your parents here cause back at home if I don't go to classes my mum would be like wake up what you doing you need to go; but here it's like no one's forcing you. It's like your own will.' (female, low SES)

So, one of the things that students need to learn while being away from home is time management. Managing time becomes especially difficult when they have to share their time between studying and working. This is when good advance planning becomes especially important.

4. Social Life

One of the factors that may prevent students from putting the necessary effort into studying and preparing for the exams is temptation to socialize and go out, which they have to learn to resist in order to find time to study (n=6 including 3 high and 3 low SES).

Students also talk about managing their time in terms of balancing social life, university life and home life. Some have partners at other universities and families in yet another part of the country and so large distances mean that they find it difficult to see them as frequently as they want. One male high SES student talks extensively about this challenge to balance all those different spheres of life:

'The work load but I mean that's expected you don't just get a first at university for like understanding a concept. Probably trying to get the balance of social life, home life and university life. Cause obviously I've got my family at home, I have a girlfriend who studies at another university so it's trying to fit in times to see everyone and make sure home, relationships are ok whilst also focusing on your studies.' (male, high SES)

Intense social life appears to be seen as a barrier to academic success by both SES groups, as it leaves minimum time for studying.

5. Seeing Friends/Other People not Studying

Some students (n=3, 2 high and 1 low SES) report that they find it quite disturbing living with other students who tend to socialise in their free time rather than study. Seeing others having a good time has a negative effect on the students' motivation to study, as discussed by the student below and so in order to focus on studying they often go to the library:

'just make sure I'm doing the work really and like if my flat's too loud then go to the library or a lab and do it.' (female, high SES)

Therefore some prefer to study in the library because they

feel more motivated among other working students as opposed to home. This issue seems to be common to both SES groups.

6. Job

Some students (2 low and 1 high SES) also mention having a part-time job as a factor which negatively affects academic performance because it takes away time that could be spent on studying. However, it is a frequent reality that the student loan does not cover all costs and especially if they want to spend a year abroad, students need to have an additional source of income, especially if their parents cannot afford to pay these costs for them:

'It's not the same for everyone because a few of my friends their loan doesn't cover their rent. Like it covers the rent after the rent they have like no money. Near to no money and I think their parents probably their incomes more they less loan but a lot of the time like they don't get money off their parents (...) Most of the time they just either go into overdraft or just eat like Tesco basics everything. So it must be really hard for them.' (female, low SES)

Although the need to get a job while at university is clearly most pressing among those from a less comfortable financial background, there are also some high-SES students who can ask their parents for money but refuse to do so and are determined to earn it on their own instead. For them this is a way in which they prove their maturity and independence, as discussed by the student below:

'I don't think that's right that they should keep supporting me financially when I am old enough to go out and get a job and it's not great. Nobody wants to be out there you know. I work behind a bar about 20 minutes away and the shifts there are all, I could be working until 3'o clock in the morning and it's not great but at the end of the day it's what you've gotta do.' (male, high SES)

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the 1960s there has been much research examining the reasons for persisting inequalities in HE (e.g. [48], [49]). There is growing evidence that family background can influence students' education choices and outcomes, although the mechanisms for this are unclear. Prior studies (e.g. [2], [9]) tend to look at objective factors such as parents' income and education levels, and how these enable or hinder students' educational performance and choices. Very little research has been conducted on subjective or psycho-social factors. This article contributes to the debate on inequalities in HE by examining students' beliefs about what influences their academic performance (grades) at university, and how these beliefs are affected by their socio-economic background.

We conducted open-ended interviews with high and low SES students to explore their beliefs about what influences grades at university. Although we set out to conduct this study expecting significant differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds in their beliefs about factors influencing academic performance, based on previous findings mainly from the US-based studies [44]–[45], this study produces little

evidence that this is the case. The study did uncover a number of psycho-social factors that seem to play an important role in how students perceive their performance at university. However, in the majority of cases there were no significant differences between the perceptions of low and high SES students.

The interview data analysis suggested eight factors that promoted good grades according to students and six factors that they perceived as preventing good grades. The former group included studying efforts, planning and time management, class and lecture attendance, inner ability, enjoyment, parental educational and financial background, psychological wellbeing and luck, while the latter group consisted of feeling homesick and isolated, lack of belonging, difficulties with time management and planning ahead, temptation to socialize, seeing others not studying, and part-time work.

The qualitative data suggest no significant differences between the beliefs of low and high SES students whereby every one of the identified beliefs was mentioned by both types of students. However, low SES students do stand out in one respect, i.e. the extent to which they perceive themselves as being at a disadvantage compared to their peers coming from a middle-class background. In other words, low SES students believed that their social class has a negative effect on their university performance. This awareness of class disadvantage seems to echo the main thesis of the stereotype threat theory based on which low SES students are expected to perform academically worse because of the widely held stereotype about lower academic abilities of the social group with which they identify. This is a very important finding because such beliefs could affect the effort the students put in and as a result have an effect on their academic performance, especially given that an expectation of or belief in one's academic success has already been found to have a highly significant positive relationship with actual grades (e.g. [50]). Lent et al. found that 'self-efficacy added significant unique variance beyond measures of objective ability and achievement in predicting subsequent academic performance and persistence' [51, p.293].

These results support findings from previous studies which show that low SES students have lower confidence in their abilities and more fragile learner identities [25], [27]. Although low and high SES students interviewed for this study refer to the same categories of factors that promote or prevent good academic performance at university, the lower SES students seem to explicitly relate those factors to their social class which immediately puts them at a disadvantage in almost every respect compared to their high SES peers. Their social background influences not only the degree to which students are able to take in cognitively challenging information while at university but also their sense of belonging to the academic environment, the level of information and support that they receive from their family, and all the practical disadvantages related to low-level financial resources available to them as students. However, qualitative findings can only be suggestive of how the factors promoting and preventing good academic performance differ between high and low SES groups. In order to measure prevalence of those beliefs among students from

both SES groups, a structured survey would need to be conducted.

Previous survey research with students [e.g. 18] has shown that both academic and psychosocial factors play a role in predicting actual academic performance. These include for example study skills but also a number of psychosocial factors such as students' university integration, satisfaction with university, financial difficulty, career orientation, and social support. Therefore, building up on previous research, our findings suggest a need for interventions that help students improve their academic performance through altering their beliefs about studying. An intervention previously applied in primary, secondary and college settings, mostly in the US, teaching students involved a 'growth mindset' [52], i.e. a belief that our intelligence can be enhanced through training. It resulted in better academic results for treated compared with non-treated students [53]-[55]. A similar intervention will be implemented for a later cohort of undergraduate students at the University of Essex. It is designed to improve the sense of agency among both low and high SES students by increasing the importance they attach to their own study efforts. The intervention aims to teach students that their innate ability, and subsequently performance, is largely determined by the factors within their control such as study time, lecture and class attendance, and time management. It is reasonable to assume that such training would benefit all students but it should be especially helpful to low SES students in strengthening their beliefs in the importance of studying skills which they can develop as opposed to focusing on the disadvantage of their social background which they cannot change. If this intervention can be shown to have a positive impact on academic achievement, the results may help move forward the debate on how to close the inequalities gap in HE in the UK. In addition, as suggested by the interviews in this study, there are a number of practical measures that universities can put in place in order to help low SES students overcome their sense of class disadvantage. These include for example providing adequate student support and opportunities to engage, teaching them study skills, providing information about all areas of student and graduate life, and providing financial support and career advice. In addition, research suggests ways in which teachers can enhance the students' self-efficacy and self-concept through the course tasks they provide [56]. Only through becoming better equipped to target interventions and support services, can universities meet the needs of increasingly diverse student population that accompanies the growth in HE. As Power et al. stated 'the stress should not only be on admitting a wider range of students, but also on giving them the support and help needed to ensure a reasonable chance of success' [57, p.3]. This includes mediating psychosocial factors that affect academic performance of low SES students.

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