**PRE-PRINT VERSION OF: Moyle, L. and Coomber, R. & Barratt, M. (2018) Student transitions into drug supply: exploring the university as a ‘risk environment’, *Journal of Youth Studies*,**

**Student Transitions into Drug Supply: Exploring the University as a ‘Risk Environment’, *Journal of Youth Studies***

**Abstract**

Drug use, like much criminality, is often explored in relation to the journey into adulthood. Though young people are understood to commonly ‘grow out’ of crime, protracted transitions from adolescence into adulthood have brought about a new developmental phase where many young people are freer to engage in drug-related leisure and other forms of subterranean play in a period of extended adolescence. In this article, we look to this phase with focus upon those engaged in full time higher education and explore the extent to which entry into university and ‘studenthood’ enables particular changes in levels of involvement in recreational drug use and supply. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews undertaken with mainly ‘traditional’ undergraduate university students in South West England, this article seeks to explore the ways in which the structural circumstances of the university environment can produce favourable conditions for ‘turning points’, where university students transition into regular drug use and ‘social supply’. It is argued that the university can be understood as a specific ‘risk environment’ where certain cultural and environmental attributes including distance from guardians, the interconnected nature of the student populace, and financial insecurity can ultimately provide facilitative conditions for transitions into drug supply.

**Keywords:** Drug supply; drug dealing; life course; social supply; transitions; turning point; higher education

**Introduction**

Analysis of the relationship between crime, place and space has formed an important yet comparatively underdeveloped aspect of the criminological research agenda since the early twentieth century (Bottoms, 2007). Though places of crime have become a central concern for crime prevention scholars who have analysed factors such as crime concentration, patterns and target selection in particular micro-spaces, far less attention has been paid to the sociological features of this relationship first pioneered by the Chicago tradition. Context is important, and while action is volitional, an increasing number of studies now acknowledge the broader constraining or facilitative structures on human action (e.g. Fleetwood, 2016). Yet in criminology, less is known about how specific micro-contexts materially impact or transform ‘local’ interactions. In focusing on journeys into crime or the shift from the ‘conventional’ to the ‘criminal’, scholars have drawn upon the concept of ‘drift’ (Sykes and Matza, 1957) to explain how youth could effectively move in and out of delinquency, experiencing episodic release from ‘moral restraint’ (p.64) and embracing ‘subterranean values’ synonymous with spontaneity, enjoyment and excitement. This theoretical framework has since been harnessed to deconstruct the often-fluid movements from drug use into so-called ‘social supply’ (see Murphy et al., 2004) – the practice of sharing or distributing drugs to friends or acquaintances for little or no profit (see Coomber and Moyle, 2014). Employing this theoretical vehicle has afforded fruitful discussion of micro decision-making processes, but has tended to do so around the ‘axiom that delinquency is willed behaviour’ and ‘subject to a sharp diminution with the onset of adulthood’ (Downes and Rock, 2003, 148). In this paper, in understanding the journey from drug use into social supply, we (re)emphasise the importance of the particular setting or background as a distinct structural or cultural ‘environment’ that frames and situates human behaviour (Duff, 2007). Presenting the university as a specific ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes, 2002), we explicate the ways in which the experience of becoming and *being* a student can be understood as a meaningful stage in the life course, and one that can work to accelerate trajectories from drug experimentation, to more involved drug use, into social supply. We postulate that while drug using students exhibit evidence of ‘drifting’ into social supply by virtue of managing their own drug use (see Murphy et al., 1990), it is the interaction with important structural conditions provided by the university context that can enable meaningful moments or ‘transitions’ in the life-course for movement into drug supply. With an estimated 2.28 million students enrolled at UK Higher Education Institutions in 2015/16 (Universities UK, 2017), these findings not only have implications for identifying an important enabling environment for drug related (and other) transitions, they also throw up questions concerning the suitability of current drug supply sentencing frameworks, which effectively class the activity of many of these students as ‘drug dealing’ – a position increasingly at odds with a burgeoning literature and enforcement trajectory.

**Crime, transitions and the life course**

In seeking to understand patterns of continuity and change in offending behaviour, developmental and life course criminology (DLC) identify the ways in which changes to the individual and their life circumstances can affect onset and desistence from criminality (France and Homel, 2008). Gaining prominence in the 1980’s, both developmental and life course criminology emerged as a response to a largely atheoretical criminal career paradigm, attempting to provide conceptual grounding through observing individual changes in delinquency over time (Farrington, 2003). Significantly, explanations for such patterns have drawn heavily on Hirschi’s (1969) control theory and concepts of attachment, involvement and social bonds, hypothesising a reduction in deviance as resulting from age-graded social control. Here, differing structures such as education and class, as well as moves into marriage and parenting are suggested to constrain the propensity to offend, effectively locking individuals into conformity (Forrest and Hay, 2011). Utilising life course conceptualisations and the etiological principles of control theory (Warr, 1998), DLC perspectives allow a focus on the effects of life events and life *transitions* on offending behaviour (Farrington, 2003) whilst considering appropriate risk factors and controls on such offending. Transitions can thus be seen as discrete changes in status, with embedded consequences in relation to offending behaviours, prevalence and desistance from crime. While transitions refer to changes in ‘stages or roles’, the concept of ‘turning points’ elicits something perceived as more long lasting, acting as ‘hooks’ or catalysts for long term behaviour change (Laub and Sampson, 2003, 279). Therefore, the transition to employment may be a turning point if it makes the individual desist from offending, but if it does not, it is merely a transition.

**Journeys into adulthood, ‘studenthood’ and drug pathways**

In focussing on transitions in relation to drug use and supply, research shows the onset of age normatively has a broad association with desistance and moderation of drug use (Forrest and Hay, 2011). However, despite this, an emerging trend can be identified whereby ‘protracted transitions’ and ‘delayed adult lifestyle markers’ (Aldridge et al., 2011, 186) can be conducive to the continuation of drug use into adulthood. As Shiner (2009) notes, in the 1950’s and 60’s ‘youth’ was strongly associated with the teenage years, but this period is now considered for many to extend into the mid-twenties. With the length of engagement in full time education substantially lengthened, and entry into further and higher education increasing, ‘studenthood’ has been related as unique liminal period (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010) in which attachment to adult institutions are weakened and reciprocal relationships with friends and acquaintances become fortified (see Warr, 1993). Given that young peoples’ drug consumption is strongly associated with the level of drug use among their peers (see Järvinen and Østergaard, 2011), entry into the university context presents a landscape in which many students (particularly those ‘traditional’ students aged 18-19 moving from home for the first time) gain access to new and diverse friendship circles, are provided with exposure to new and accepted behavioural mores, whilst at the same time experiencing a relative release from moralistic value systems and parental supervision (Aldridge et al., 2011; Blum et al., 1972). In her study exploring drug journeys as they occur through the lifecourse, Williams (2013) acknowledges the importance of release from guardianship, exploring how physical proximity to parents and shame and fears about upsetting significant others played a role in decisions about drug taking. Lack of informal social control, both from parents and employment, can therefore weaken attachments (Hirschi, 1969) and provide students with the time and freedom to engage in ‘subterranean play’ (Young, 1971) - the pursuit of hedonism, spontaneity and the search for new experiences which can occur when man ‘steps out of the workday world’ (p.152). Selwyn (2008) offers an important in-depth analysis of the ways in which students become in involved in this ‘play’ as perpetrators of minor crimes including nuisance, binge drinking, graffiti, shoplifting and using illegal drugs. Student rationales for involvement in these acts included conforming to the conceived stereotypes of the ‘irresponsible student’, easy availability of drugs and alcohol, the freedom of the student lifestyle, and in some cases, responding to financial demands. The protracted transition into adulthood appears, therefore, to create further space for hedonistic pursuits such as drug taking (Shiner, 2009), and the university environment, it may be argued, can operate as a structural example par excellence of a space in which this ‘play’ might be more easily enacted.

**Drug use contexts and ‘risk environments’**

The notion of ‘context’ is used in the drugs field to refer to a set of broad structural factors such as economic, social and political forces that affect rates and patterns of drug use, and there now exists a comprehensive stock of research literature which analyses how drug use differs from one social context to another, along with and the distinct meanings and values associated with these behaviours (Duff, 2007). The concept of ‘context’ or ‘setting’ is best associated with Zinberg’s (1984) highly influential text ‘*Drug, Set and Setting’* where it is argued that experiences of drug effects are mediated by the combination of the pharmacological qualities of a drug, individual psychology (set), and social context (setting) - the influence of the physical and social setting within which use occurs' (p3). Recent studies have sought to develop this position further by positing that our understanding of context or setting should also include the social and cultural milieu in which the specific incident or situation takes place (Moore, 1993), with a recognition of the embodied practices of groups and individuals in distinct local spaces (Duff, 2007). In a study of drug use at music festivals, Dilkes Frayne (2016) provides a valuable example of the ways spatial, material, temporal and affective dynamics of drug use settings can be captured by empirical research. Here, acknowledgement of socio-spatial relations elucidates how the micro-site of the festival and campsite environment ‘mediate drug use, drug knowledge, use norms, informal harm reduction practices’ and ‘access to and exchange of drugs’ (p3).

The festival, in many ways, could be understood as a unique ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes, 2002) for specific kinds of drug use, or as Rhodes asserts, a situation or place in which ‘specific harms or risks are produced *and* reduced’ (p.88). While Rhodes (2002) first coined the risk environment framework in order to understand the ways in which settings and interrelationships might increase drug related harms for injecting drug users, the model can be applied more broadly through focus on the following dimensions or ‘ideal types’ of ‘physical, social, economic, and policy’ environments (p.88-89). By way of specific illustration, one recent study has usefully and effectively applied this concept to the university setting with focus on student use of alcohol. In their study exploring student drinking behaviours, Barton and colleagues (2013) contended that the university can (and should) be seen as a specific ‘risk environment’ for alcohol related harms in a number of ways. Direct structural factors such as specific student accommodation type were found to increase/mitigate drinking levels, with university halls of residence and large shared houses carrying most risk. At a socio-cultural level, students also felt that the university context provided a ‘heavier drinking culture’ compared to non-university contexts, and active, but even tangential, participation in ‘societies and clubs’ was found to be especially risky for levels of harmful consumption. More recently, Wilkinson and Ivsins (2017) have provided further complimentary findings in this area, suggesting that university residence buildings (physical risk environment), the university ‘party’ culture (social risk environment) and university policies can be understood as principal contributors to risky drinking behaviours.

**Student drug use and supply**

Accompanying relatively high levels of alcohol use, data suggests that nationally and internationally, students are also more likely to display higher illicit drug use than the general population (Birch et al. 2001; Johnston et al., 2012). According to Bennett (2014), drug involvement amongst non-students peaks between the ages of 18-20 then begins to decline. In contrast, drug use prevalence amongst university students remains stable or ‘continues to increase for a few more years until around age 22, where it too starts to decline’ (1). In a recent study exploring the characteristics and correlates of drug use in seven universities in Wales, Holloway and Bennett (2017) reported cannabis, ecstasy, nitrous oxide and powder cocaine, respectively, as the most widely used illicit drugs across all sites, noting significant variation in prevalence recorded in different institutions. Though little is known about illegal drug taking among students in further and higher education in the UK (Bennett, 2014), there exists a residual curiosity surrounding student drug use, and recently there has been a surge of media interest in so-called ‘study drugs’ such as Adderall and Modafil (e.g. Whitehouse, 2016), with reports suggesting students in the US and UK are experimenting with these substances to improve concentration and enhance their academic performance. The emerging research base (e.g. Petersen et al., 2017) therefore suggests that in addition to embodying an environment that encourages ‘subterranean play’ (Young, 1971) where students use drugs for pleasure, the university environment might also facilitate drug use by generating academic stress (Bennett and Holloway, 2017).

Alongside the emergent literature base, which analyses patterns of illicit drug use in student populations, a small number of qualitative studies have also delved into the worlds of students involved in the supply of drugs, with insightful results. One early study undertaken by Blum and Associates (1972) focused on college ‘dorms’ as a setting for drug supply activity, highlighting the propensity for drug users to undertake ‘social dealing’ - violating supply laws by sharing drugs with friends. In contrast to common-sense understandings of professional, profit motivated drug dealing, Blum notes the complexity of motivation and supply entry, conceiving drug supply not only as an ’evolving adjustment to drug using needs’ but as an aid to sociability, and a means for dealers to enjoy experiences which they would not have without drugs (p.110). More recently, Mohamed and Fritzvold (2010) described a college dealing scene that could be understood as more instrumental in nature, with Southern Californian college students describing motivations for dealing as tied up with underwriting the costs of both personal drug use and other pleasurable consumption. Elsewhere, in their ethnography of a suburban high school in Atlanta, Jacques and Wright (2015) note similar themes, with students highlighting that dealing ‘was a way to save money’, to ‘offset’ use and ‘to eat free pills’ (p11). Impression management was also believed to be of great value; involvement in drug dealing was said to offer ‘a place among peers’, with drug sales and sharing transactions boosting social capital and sending out important messages regarding status - namely, that student dealers were ‘cool’, ‘generous’ and ‘socially desirable’ (p.6). Moving from a North American to UK context, despite media interest charting the ‘rise and rise of student drug dealers’ (see Daly, 2014), there is a notable absence of academic research which investigates the worlds of student drug suppliers or that explores the university as a context for drug use.

**Current study**

This study aims to fill this research gap by offering some initial observations of the nature of drug supply in the university context, with a specific focus on how the university itself can act as an enabling ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes, 2002) in which certain drug using students transition from drug use into social supply behaviours. We acknowledge that the student population and the university context is now more diverse than ever before (Guilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011) and that it is a minority of students that engage in both drug use and supply as well as risky drinking behaviour. Nonetheless, as already stated, student populations, in general, do engage in higher levels of drug and alcohol use than non-student populations, and that such use is relatively more normalised in that context than in others (Bennett, 2014; Webb et al., 1998). Given this to be broadly the case and that, as Coomber et al., (2015) have argued, relatively normalised drug use is also productive of, and conducive to, drift into social supply, this research, like that of Barton et al., (2013), sought to explore the extent to which the university risk environment impacts on those that make such transitions. It is also the case that alternative youth milieu, beyond the university context, provide varying opportunities for transitions to take place, but the point of this paper is to better understand how this unique setting impacts on students and why.

**Methods**

The data utilised in this research project is drawn from fieldwork undertaken with undergraduate students studying at a university in the South-west of England in 2013. The fieldwork was primarily concerned with exploring the extent to which the university context had impacted on respondents’ drug use and their propensity to become involved in drug sharing and other social supply practices. 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students that fitted the inclusion criteria defined as any student who ‘*had experience of receiving illicit drugs from friends or acquaintances, or had themselves supplied drugs to friends or acquaintances’*. The university in which the research was conducted is one of the largest in the UK, with around 30,000 students enrolled at this institution. Though there is an absence of academic research which measures prevalence of drug use in UK universities, a recent annual survey by online student magazine ‘*The Tab’* may provide a rough indication of the levels of drug use within the student population, placing this university in the ‘top 10 of universities that take the most drugs’ (Jenkin, 2017). The primary sample population of students were recruited through email advertisements and short lecture presentations where the research was outlined and students were invited to participate through email contact. The resulting sample population could be considered as ‘traditional’ (e.g. 18-year-old students leaving home for the first time) and ‘non-local’ (n=26). Of the four students who were not classed as ‘local’, two students originated from the university city and a further two lived a commutable distance from the institution. Two of the four local students identified themselves as ‘mature students’. Ethical approval was gained from the University Ethics Board and normative anonymising and confidentiality measures were employed to protect respondents from harm and identification. As is common with this type of research (see Fry et al.2006), respondents were offered a £10 reciprocity payment for their contribution to the project. Following the transcription process, data was uploaded into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software programme (NVivo 9), where codes were generated and resulting themes and typologies created.

**Findings**

**The university as a site of wider drug transition – use and supply.**

The respondents’ age ranged from 18-37 and the sample was comprised of 21 men and 9 women. Though two respondents self-identified as ‘mature students’ (aged 37 and 35), the remainder of the sample were aged between 18 and 23 years old. Respondents were recruited from a range of subject areas (nursing, sociology, geography, computer science) and stages (undergraduates ranging from first to fourth year). 13 respondents identified as ‘social suppliers’ from the outset of interviews, however, the remaining 17 respondents who had ‘accessed drugs from social suppliers’ all admitted experience of sharing drugs with friends at university – an act that constitutes supply according to the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971). First experiences of drug use were most likely to be reported at the age of 15 (range 11-18) and were almost exclusively described as using cannabis with friends or siblings. Importantly, the university environment represented a site in which increased access to drugs appeared to be conducive to transitions in drug use, with all respondents reporting drugs to be more prevalent and culturally accepted. A small number of individuals, who provided evidence of relatively extensive recreational drug use careers before university (including use of MDMA, cocaine and ketamine), showed no real transition in regard to their drug consumption, with their drug use remaining constant or decreasing. However, supporting Bennett’s (2014) study on student drug use, the majority of the sample reported ‘studenthood’ as representing an important stage of the life-course, both in terms of the range of substances available at this time and their increased drug taking. Drug transition careers for the sample were typically characterised by early drug encounters at school and college involving relatively low levels of cannabis use and a few instances of one off experimentation with cocaine or ecstasy, to a transition into occasional weekend polydrug use of substances including ecstasy, ketamine, mephedrone, LSD (to a lesser extent) and/or higher frequency use of cannabis once at university (e.g. daily as opposed to weekly use). Initiation into the use of these substances did not necessarily lead to turning points outside of the university environment and a number of respondents claimed that ‘club drug use’ (e.g. ecstasy and mephedrone) was reserved for campus life and was not something they felt comfortable with at home. For the 13 respondents who identified as social suppliers, first social supply experiences were most likely to have been a ‘one off’ act of cannabis sharing undertaken at school or college, but ‘real’ involvement in social supply - which went beyond the sharing of cannabis - was in all cases (n=13) reported as occurring in the context of the university. As explored below, the most common forms of social supply consisted of buying cannabis in bulk and selling excess amounts to friends, and/or purchasing ‘standard’ 3.5g bags of powders like cocaine and MDMA on behalf of a group and retaining a quantity of the substance as payment.

**Transitioning from guardianship and the use of drugs**

Opportunity theorists (Cohen and Felson, 1979), might see the university environment as especially conducive to drug use, with the interaction of routine activity theory’s (RAT) three elements: time, location and absence of effective guardians presenting opportunities for drug taking. Indeed, supporting the findings of Bennett (2014) – whose research suggests that students living away from their parents were almost four times more likely to report drug use in the last 12 months than those living with parents - our sample similarly emphasised the importance of independence and the increased amount of opportunities available to engage in drug taking. Though two mature students who remained living at home and contended that the university was ‘*superfluous*’ to their ‘*drug habit’* (Simon, 37, cannabis user) did not experience any transition relating to use or social supply, the sample was far outweighed by ‘traditional’ students (Guilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011) who commonly described studenthood as having a tangible impact on their drug use. Dylan was one such student and below he explains how drug use became part of his wider university experience:

Well, it’s more widely available and you’re surrounded by more people who have been involved in it in the past. Yeah, it’s kind of like a learning curve, isn’t it, I suppose, so we’re just trying out different things and it’s just ... I don’t know, it seems wrong calling it opportunities but (laughs), that’s kind of the way I see it, it’s just the opportunities have been there since I’ve come to university. And also, I’m more sort of free and independent, I live by myself, so I’m sort of capable of making those decisions.

Dylan (20), MDMA and cannabis user/supplier

Consistent with the findings of Williams (2013), respondents generally attributed their transition into more involved drug taking as related to their change of living circumstances, specifically, independent living and physical distance from parents or guardians. Felson and Clarke (1998) note that opportunities are concentrated in time and space and ‘dramatic differences are found from one address to another’ (p v). These claims are not inconsistent with the findings of this research where it was reported that independence effectively loosened the (age related) social controls previously imparted on students, influencing drug repertoires and rates of consumption as ‘*there’s no one telling you not to do it’* (Matt, cocaine and MDMA user/supplier). As Aldridge et al. (2011) relate, moves in and out of particular social networks or key life relationships may be seen as providing important access to different types of drugs and therefore may have a ‘causal effect’ on drug taking (p.193). A number of cannabis users reported the significance of now being able to smoke at home – with student halls and shared accommodation providing the novel freedom – previously unavailable to most of those living with parents - to use cannabis throughout the day. Adding to this, as one student suggested, *‘it’s always there and ‘it’s kind of hard to get away from it, someone’s always got it’* (Joe, 21, cannabis user). Supportive of Selwyn’s (2008) finding that minor offences and anti-social behaviour were often understood as an ‘expected’ part of the everyday student experience, respondents also suggested that drug experimentation was an accepted part of ‘studenthood’, interwoven into the fabric of university life. Students noted how new social situations such as student house parties, gigs and club nights could present both the environment and opportunities for trying new drugs such as ketamine, mephedrone and MDMA, which they had not encountered before attending university. In addition, our respondents also highlighted the like-mindedness of their peers – a finding well documented in previous research (e.g. Blum et al., 1972) – and the resulting absence of taboo within what was seen as a relatively normalised (see Parker et al., 1998) arena of use where, in the words of Ben (19, cocaine user/supplier), ‘*everyone is doing it’*. One student describes the degree to which drug taking has become part of everyday university life:

We’re so casual in our group that drugs have become… You don’t even, like we’ll be on the street walking down the middle of town and we’ll just be chatting about them loud and you don’t even know you’re talking about them, so that’s how casual it is.

Emily (19) cocaine and ecstasy user

While Emily notes how the university environment removed some of the stigma associated with drug use, all drug user groups will show diversity, and as we might expect, both the university environment and student identity is one of pushes and pulls along a continuum of conformity/non-conformity. As such, there were a small number of respondents who showed little sign of transition into heavier drug use and/or social supply and this was most likely explained through reference to their continued strong connection to the local, home drug scene. One respondent, for example, described how home drug use was ‘*easy to fall back into’* (Anna, 21 cannabis and MDMA user), whereas study commitments, a part-time job and predominantly non-drug using friends prevented regular drug use in the university environment. Others reported treating university as a place to ‘*straighten out’ (Callum, 19, cannabis user)* or calm their drug use down following a period of increased use in ‘gap years’. For these respondents, the drug using university milieu did not present them with something new and unconstrained and thus as a risk environment the impact was less meaningful.

**Access, networks and cultures of reciprocity in the student populace.**

Despite initial ‘flirtations’ with social supply at college, respondents’ narratives indicated that the university was by far the most prevalent micro-site for transition into regular social supply. With a higher proportion of drug takers than the general population (Newbury-Birch et al., 2001), and a steady demand for substances (Mohamed and Frizvold, 2010), student social suppliers described the university as containing a ‘captive population’ of drug takers. Allrespondents reported a marked ease of access in relation to obtaining illicit drugs and without exception, confirmed that they had shared drugs with friends – a behaviour that legally is deemed as supply and can be prosecuted as such (Section 5 Misuse of Drugs Act 1985). The frequency of this behaviour was most popularly referred to as occurring ‘*most of the time’* and ‘*all of the time’*. The reason for heightened drug availability was associated with increases in drug repertoires, rates of use and involvement in the drug scene which naturally increased the size of drug using networks and opportunities for access. Much like the young college students studied by Jacques and Wright (2015), the university environment provided a context where respondents became exposed to interactions with peers that they ‘might not naturally intermingle with’, and at this stage of the life-course, their social networks might therefore be considered as ‘far broader and stronger’ than those that follow (p. 27). Students commonly explained that the new geographical landscape the university was situated in often presented ‘supply problems’ since many non-local students had no existing connections, ‘*so everyone is looking for dealer*’ (Louis, 21, cannabis user/supplier). Once friendships and acquaintanceships began to develop, talk quickly turned to drug use, and as Dan describes, those with access to drugs often became involved in supply to assist less well connected friends:

The first time, probably wouldn’t have been until the second year of university, so about 19 probably and that was because I started taking it more and knew more people that I could get it from. People knew I could get it and would say ‘*can you get me some of this’* and I’d say ‘*sure*’. People asked, and it was friends, it wasn’t strangers or anything, so I was more than happy to help. And we were at university so...

Dan (23), cannabis and cocaine user/supplier

With the university often distancing students from previous drug supply avenues and providing a space for the initiation of new friendships, this data suggests that there is an increasing reliance on these friends or acquaintances for drug access. Acknowledging financial hardship and debt associated with studying, almost half of the students we interviewed (n=13) generally remarked of the value of taking on a social supply role in terms of the practice providing a certain amount of back up in times of drug shortage, when access could not be obtained, or when financial capital was low. In this sense, similarly to cultures of alcohol use, student drug using etiquette appeared to command a certain amount of indebtedness, effectively ensuring that individuals could expect a reciprocal drug offer:

Sometimes people don't have money you know so sometimes I'll have a gram of something and my friend or he's got some beers…You know, as a student it's very much a bit of trading especially for different types of drugs as well. So you've got a bit of that, have some weed and we'll swap.

Louis (21), cannabis user/supplier

Thematically, this data is consistent with the work of Dorn and South (1990) and their conceptualisation of ‘mutual societies’, described as friendship networks of user-dealers who support each other and sell or exchange drugs amongst themselves in a reciprocal fashion (p.177). Notions of membership, subculture, responsibility and obligation are particularly relevant here and they interlink and express themselves in complex ways. Foster and Spencer (2013) have highlighted drug and alcohol use as ‘intricately woven into friendship’ (p. 223), presenting opportunities for intimacy that are otherwise difficult to attain in neoliberal societies. Such themes were prominent in students’ narratives and many emphasised the significance of sharing or supplying drugs with existing friends or acquaintances. Social supply could therefore create important ‘shared experiences’ (Coomber et al., 2015; Blum et al. 1972) and also seemed to act as a kind of ‘social cement’ (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007) for new friendships. ‘Studenthood’ has been described as a liminal and transitional experience (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010) in which students are under pressure to adjust and establish themselves in a new social order (Tognoli, 2008). In this unique context, our findings suggest that involvement in drug use, sharing and supply functioned as an important resource, both as an identity and status building exercise (see Scanlon et al., 2007; Jacques and Wright, 2015) and a way of building meaningful relationships.

**Drift into social supply: economies of scale, ‘free drugs’ and ‘cheap nights’.**

Traditional conceptualisations of drug dealing are often framed as a ‘career’ in which rational decisions, motivated by the pursuit of profit or power, push individuals into commercial supply (Jacques et al., 2014). While this is sometimes the case, research shows that moves into drug supply can in fact be much more nuanced. Sykes and Matza (1957) for instance, argued that most so-called delinquents could be understood as largely law abiding, but due to the situation of youth they were free to ‘drift’ in and out of delinquency through employing ‘techniques of neutralisation’ to enable release from moral restraint. The notion of ‘drift’ can usefully deconstruct the ways in which conventional individuals become susceptible to the draw or appeal of offending (Matza, 1964), and in the drugs field, the framework has been utilised to understand how recreational drug users can drift into drug supply (Murphy et al., 1990; Werse and Müller, 2016; Taylor and Potter, 2013). Findings here show clear parallels with the work of Murphy and colleagues (1990; 2004) who draw upon the concept of ‘drift’ to identify the ways that drug users can move into drug supply by virtue of solving the ‘problems peculiar to the world of illicit drug use’ (p. 323). Mirroring these findings, our data also indicates that acting as a ‘go-between’ or ‘broker’ (purchasing drugs on behalf of the group) provided a key mode of entry, or way of ‘drifting’ into social supply for students. Supporting Murphy et al. (1990), social suppliers reported that once they became known as someone who potentially had access to drugs, they swiftly *became* the point of access to drugs. This process is also in keeping with Werse and Müller’s (2016) concept of ‘demand pull increase’ (p.104) where involvement in distribution events perpetuated supply as respondents became known as a viable source for acquiring drugs. Attempting to get the ‘best deal possible’ through exploiting ‘economies of scale’ (Coomber et al., 2015) and purchasing ‘*more for less’* (Khalid, 19, cannabis user/supplier) also appeared to be conducive to drift into supply, particularly for cannabis users:

Do I buy off people or do I... or am I little bit clever about the situation, do I get this do I make money myself, make it for free and then everyone... like I'm not pushing hard drugs, I'm selling small bags of weed it's not even good weed.

Charlie (21) cannabis user/supplier

In his research on student criminality Selwyn (2008) notes how ‘student poverty’ could push students toward more ‘innovative methods in making money’ (p.10), including theft, resales of stolen products and drug supply. Data here supports this finding, and through ‘sorting’ mates out by taking on social supply, many student cannabis suppliers suggested that they could continue to smoke without a sense of guilt regarding the accumulated costs spent on the drug. With requests from friends to ‘get in on the deal’, it also made sense - not just for the supplier, but for everyone (economically) - for social suppliers to purchase a larger quantity to fulfil the group’s supply requirements. Student cannabis users therefore often drifted into supply as a consequence of ‘buying in bulk’ (e.g. an ounce or 28g) with the intention of cutting costs or funding their own use, rather than choosing to buy for supply purposes. The idea of drifting into supply by virtue of strategies involved in trying to access a criminalised substance (Murphy et al., 1990) was also prevalent for students who used cocaine, MDMA and ketamine, where it was commonly noted that commercial dealers would not sell individual dealers and only sell in ‘larger quantities’ (i.e. 3.5g or more). It was therefore only ‘logical’ to buy on behalf of friends who also wanted to access that drug, as it was deemed too expensive and risky to keep the substance for themselves. Much like the suburban college dealers studied by Jacques and Wright (2015), taking on the risk of sourcing and collecting drugs for friends in order to get drugs for ‘free’ was a strong motivation for involvement in supply and was also viewed as a valuable way of financing a night out as a student:

I kind of didn’t realise early on that if you’re getting some pills for a pound and selling them for a pound fifty, which people are more than happy to pay, then you can get your stuff for free…It was just enough to have free nights because obviously nobody’s got too much money when they’re in their second and third year…

Josh (21), MDMA and cannabis user/supplier

The central point here is that while notions of drift have wider relevance for understanding moves from drug use into social supply, for our respondents, the particular situation of studenthood - and more specifically identifying as a ‘skint student’ in an environment built around subterranean play (Young, 1971) - further necessitated money saving purchasing strategies that would make personal drug use possible.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we draw on Rhodes’ (2002) framework to suggest that the university can be understood as a meaningful risk environment both in terms of increased and varied drug repertoires and the propensity to become involved in drug sharing and social supply behaviours. Supporting Wilkinson and Ivsins (2017) study of the university as a risk environment influencing alcohol use, data suggests that the university’s social, physical and economic environment also have the potential to shape and influence drug related transitions. The vast majority of students reported significant changes to patterns of drug use, both in terms of the quantities and the range of different substances used. Prior to their entry into higher education, university respondents were most likely to describe occasional use of cannabis, and in some cases, some ‘one-off’ encounters with powders and pills. However, the university environment and the experience of studenthood was frequently described as enabling increased drug experimentation, and use of drugs such as MDMA, ketamine and cocaine became noticeably more frequent and normalised in this context (Coomber et al., 2015). Rhodes’ (2002) risk environment framework can help overcome reliance on individualism and unpack how different levels of environmental influence can work to produce and reduce harm. Our findings indicate that the unique context of the university, which for many ‘traditional students’ includes physical and psychological distance from parents and guardians, provided a social and physical environment that facilitated independence and enabled opportunities for entry into increased drug use. With studenthood presenting a stage of the life course characterised by liminality, ambiguity and paradox (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2009), drug taking also generated a sense of belonging (Williams, 2013) and functioned to strengthen friendships in a context that is characterised by ‘identity discontinuity’ (Scanlon et al., 2007). The university’s ‘social environment’, described as a cultural milieu that is conducive to experimentation and ‘play’ (Young, 1971; Selwyn, 2008), also worked to normalise drug use. With one survey suggesting that the university under study is characterised by relatively high levels of drug use (Jenkins, 2017), student awareness of the cultural acceptance of certain forms of drug taking in this setting may also facilitate open-mindedness and acceptance of these behaviours.

As experimentation and frequency of drug use increased, respondents also commonly described transitioning into drug sharing and other social supply behaviours. All respondents reported sharing drugs in the university context and almost half of the sample were involved in regular social supply activity. Students reported an escalation in their social supply practices in two important ways. Firstly, cannabis users, who often reported isolated experiences of ‘brokering’ or sharing behaviours before attending university, often transitioned into buying ‘bulk’ quantities that would keep both them and their friends with enough supplies for regular use. Secondly, the university environment also seemed to provide facilitative conditions for transitioning into the social supply of Class A club drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy and MDMA. Much like drug use, students described involvement in reciprocal drug supply as functioning to strengthen friendships and group membership (Williams, 2013). Supporting the findings of Murphy et al. (1990; 2004), students also often highlighted the importance of the economic environment and reported drifting into social supply through adopting strategies to make drug use more affordable, or through maximising ‘economies of scale’ (Coomber et al., 2015). While these micro-processes, bound up with facilitating drug use, are an important for drug users across many different milieus, data suggests that these practices are further accelerated by the unique wider physical, social and economic characteristics of the university space. In many cases, the physical proximity from previous established supply routes and the interconnectivity of the student population (Jacques and Wright, 2015) encouraged student intermingling and communication focussed on securing supply. These factors appeared to increase students’ propensity to take supply on, or become known as a drug source by others, who would then request access.

**Conclusion**

There has been a gap in the UK literature base that focuses both on student drug use (Holloway and Bennett, 2017) and drug supply networks. While various studies have highlighted an increased prevalence for more frequent drug use in university settings (Newbury-Birch et al., 2001; Bennett, 2014), there is little qualitative research that provides meaningful insight into drug supply networks inside UK universities. This research has aimed to fill this gap and to undertake initial exploratory work in the university context, analysing the transition in which drug users can move from drug use into the more serious offence of supply. While our sample size is small and it is recognised that universities are unique in terms of their location, students’ demographic, and cultures of drug use (Holloway and Bennett, 2017), this research suggests that higher education settings such as the university can provide the right structural conditions for otherwise non-criminal populations to shift from drug use into drug supply. Drawing on the DLC tradition, with particular focus on notions of transitions, findings here demonstrate how particular moments in the life course (i.e. attending university) can present the freedom, opportunities, relationships and cultural environment that can enable offending. While this research does not advocate that all students will drift into supply and in fact shows the university can be understood by students as a turning point where they limit their drug taking, with all respondents engaging in sharing behaviours, it does provide further support for the increasing normalisation of social supply behaviours in drug using populations (Coomber et al., 2015). Furthermore, if the university acts as a micro-site which is enabling of a transition or a ‘turning point’ into social supply, this provides further indication that a large section of society could be considered increasingly vulnerable to being caught up as ‘drug suppliers’ in legislation arguably not designed for them in the first place (see Police Foundation, 2000).

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