



## Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences

<p><b>Proposed Title</b> How do students assess debt? A socio-cognitive investigation</p>
<p><b>School</b> Social Sciences, Department of Psychology</p>
<p><b>Proposed Supervisory Team</b> Dr Silvio Aldrovandi Dr Emma Bridger Dr Pelham Carter</p>
<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>Debt is increasingly becoming an integral part of student life. Together with tuition fees and their recent three-fold increase, other participation and housing costs contribute to the rise in expenditure necessary to complete higher education (e.g., Finch et al., 2006). Many surveys have revealed the influence of financial strains on university students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and career choice after university (e.g., Bunce et al., 2016; Callender &amp; Jackson, 2008; Rothstein &amp; Rouse, 2011). Despite the wealth of research exploring how considerations about debt can impact on students' decision-making and well-being, little systematic effort has been made in order to understand <i>how</i> students appraise debt. Much academic work has assumed that students assess their current (or prospective) financial situation in isolation—that is, considering only their level of debt (or anticipated debt; e.g., Avery &amp; Johnson, 2012; Wilkins et al., 2013). This assumption was recently challenged by findings that support a relative, social norms comparison approach to student perception of debt (Aldrovandi et al., 2015). As students live in a rich social context, they tend to compare their current (or anticipated) debt to that of other students.</p> <p>In the present project, the PhD student will embark into the social and cognitive factors that moderate students' perception of indebtedness in an effort to examine how cognitive biases and abilities, social norms comparisons and socio-economic status can interact to determine students' concern about, and decision-making related to debt. We expect the present project to be quantitative in nature, although it will most likely rely upon different paradigms. More specifically, we anticipate that different methodologies will include not only questionnaire- and laboratory-based studies, but also intervention studies to assess the applicability of the principles observed through prior testing. Given its nature, we thus expect the project to demonstrate research impact at different levels, including (1) theoretical and academic, such as the systematic testing of social and cognitive moderators of students' perception of debt, (2) economic and societal, by informing policy development, practice and provision, and (3) public engagement.</p>
<p><b>Research Environment</b></p> <p>Birmingham City University has recently invested much into research in psychology, for example by moving the Department of Psychology into a new building that hosts new research facilities and equipped laboratories. Research in psychology benefits from state of the art equipment such as eye-tracking, electroencephalogram (EEG), transcranial direct current stimulation (tCDS) and BioPac equipment. The Department has also grown much and it now houses 45 academic staff and 25 PhD students—the latter community is ever</p>

expanding. The Psychology research centre is divided into six research groups that meet regularly to discuss ideas and foster collaborations; moreover, regular internal and external seminars are hosted within Psychology. PhD students are considered as an essential element of the research community in psychology.

### **Applicant Requirements**

#### Essential:

BSc Psychology (Hons) Degree (2:1)  
Computer proficiency (Microsoft office and SPSS)  
Good communication skills  
Good writing ability  
PG Cert or willingness to gain  
Undergraduate level quantitative statistical analysis  
Effective oral and written communication skills  
Ability to work as a member of a team with shared goals  
Interpersonal skills: ability to relate to others with tact and diplomacy

#### Desirable:

First Class BSc Psychology (Hons) degree  
MSc in Health Psychology, Psychological Research Methods, Public Health (or similar)  
Programming experience with Experimental Psychological Software (e.g., E-Prime, Gorilla, and MATLAB)  
Experience with online questionnaire design (e.g., Qualtrics)  
Experience conducting psychological experiments  
Postgraduate/advanced level quantitative statistical analysis

### **Contact: Name, e-mail and telephone number**

Silvio Aldrovandi

[Silvio.Aldrovandi@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Silvio.Aldrovandi@bcu.ac.uk)

0121 3316547