# Career decisions of further education college students: Where does higher education 'fit in'?

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## Abstract

In the context of a proliferation of post-16 options, the need for substantial individual financial investment in university education, and uncertainties of employment outcomes, this paper explores student agency and structural constraints around career planning and progression into Higher Education (HE). Analysing data collected on behalf of a National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) hub in England, this research considers the views of students and staff at further education colleges (FECs). It draws on fourteen in-depth interviews with students undertaking qualifications that facilitate university entry, and seven interviews with staff involved in delivering information, advice and guidance (IAG) in some capacity within FECs. The paper explores the similarities and differences in how IAG is perceived, regarding its timing, depth, focus and scope. Students and staff broadly agreed that IAG in their FEC was often too broad, generic and insufficiently tailored to individual needs. In the cost-benefit analysis on university progression, students weighed up individual circumstances, calculating their best option whilst negotiating the structural constraints. Self-sufficiency was a common desire and ambition, and as such, the financial risks of entering university needed to be mitigated by a clear promise of stability in the future.

## Key words

further education college; information, advice and guidance; widening participation; higher education; educational decision-making

# Introduction

In the policy context of widening participation (WP) to higher education (HE), it is well-established that disadvantaged students in England are more likely to experience structural constraints regarding their post-16 progression (Abrahams, 2018; Baker, 2019; Boliver, 2013; Katartzi and Hayward, 2019). These constraints are particularly relevant in the context of substantial university tuition fee changes, which were raised in 2012 to a maximum of £9000 per year. Accordingly, students' aspirations have become a key area of attention (Atkins, 2017; Harrison and Waller, 2018), as questions are increasingly raised by students, and especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, about the necessity and/or desirability of progression into HE. At the same time, there are competing efforts through WP and information, advice and guidance (IAG) policies, whereby staff and resources are deployed to support and even encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to university. However, there have been few studies exploring this tension, and questions remain around the compatibility of students' own decision-making for their futures and the expectations IAG staff have for them in relation to HE.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the complexity and disparity between the perspectives of students and IAG staff, focusing specifically on the context of further education colleges (FECs). Through in-depth qualitative interviews, we draw on the perspectives of fourteen FEC students from disadvantaged backgrounds and seven IAG staff in their respective colleges to compare similarities and differences in their expectations and discourses around HE. In doing so, issues around IAG, prior attainment and schooling, and cultural capital/identity are explored, the backgrounds of which are outlined next.

## *Information, advice and guidance (IAG)*

Given the sizeable variation and complexity of post-secondary provision in England, IAG is crucial to support learners in navigating the options for their futures. Although independent careers guidance is a statutory requirement for all young people in England (Holman, 2018), the move in 2010 to provide careers education at the school level, rather than Local Authority level, has been widely debated in terms of its success (Hutchinson et al., 2011; Moote and Archer, 2018). Within this context careers advice needs to compete with other aspects of school spending at a time of greater financial constraints (Andrews, 2013), often resulting in a decline in the quality and consistency of career support (Langley et al., 2014). A noted consequence has been a highly varied provision of IAG dependent on school or college type, and the resources that institution can afford. Research has suggested that funding changes, such as the dissolution of Connexions (a government-funded IAG partnership network), has impacted negatively on the provision of expert careers education in a timely and in-depth manner (Acquah et al., 2017; Haynes et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2015). Moote and Archer (2018) note that students require earlier, more long-term, impartial, personalised careers guidance, as opposed to one-off meetings or 'catch-all' events catered to a middle ground of students. They also highlight school

practices which rely on students 'self-referring' as this does not necessarily reach those who are most disadvantaged or in need of advice/support: this model relies on students first recognising that they need support and second, having the confidence to approach teachers/staff about it.

Further still, research has highlighted problematic IAG practices in schools and colleges around the 'cherry picking' of groups of students for targeted information – particularly with regard to vocational pathways – 'rather than making the information available to all' (Haynes et al., 2013: 468). Research notes that students from lower socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to study vocational qualifications at Level 3 , which suggests these students may be primed into adopting particular pathways (e.g. 14–19 vocational diploma pathway), compared to advantaged students (Banerjee et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2005). This becomes problematic when thinking about WP at the university level as vocational qualifications are known to hold less academic prestige than General Certificate of Education, Advanced level (A-level) qualifications amongst Russell Group institutions (Baker, 2019), which risks entrenching inequality through the selective provision and practice of IAG in schools (Fuller et al., 2014).

Research has noted that IAG provided by teachers, in pastoral or form tutor roles, had the tendency to base IAG on the personal experience of their own progression pathway and/or subject specialism, rather than meeting students' individual capabilities, interests or intentions (Acquah et al., 2017; Oliver and Kettley, 2010). Fuller et al. (2014) suggest that pastoral support staff are more likely than teachers to have contact with, and build relationships with, students, and to have access to careers related resources, knowledge and skills to support students. Moote and Archer (2018: 209) recommend that 'building careers education more firmly into the role of teachers may also help', but that this would also require greater formal training initiatives to improve careers support skills, an embedded whole school approach to careers, and follow-up web-based materials. Taken together, the question remains: to what extent are formal IAG provisions relevant to students' own lives and intentions? For example, Slack et al. (2014) identify that students increasingly rely upon alternative forms of IAG outside of school or college, including 'hot' sources of information from within a student's own network such as family and friends, which was seen to be more trustworthy and less biased than 'cold' knowledge such as university websites and prospectuses. Slack et al. (2014) argue that this is likely to perpetuate inequality as more advantaged students have access to a wider range of hot knowledge used to contextualise cold knowledge. However, this assumption has not been evaluated through the perspectives of students themselves, meaning questions remain over the perceived role of such social support networks.

### *Prior attainment and schooling*

In addition to IAG, the early school experiences of students are known to have an impact on the decision to enter HE. Aynsley and Crossouard's (2010) research with vocational students found that the decision not to attend university was a combination of study fatigue, and favouring entry into

employment instead. A large part of this choice was the feeling that university learning would be an extension of school, which many students had poor experiences of.

Further, the inequalities that derive from the attainment requirements needed to apply and gain entry into HE points to disadvantage occurring much earlier in the education system (Crawford et al., 2017). The process of entry into HE may exclude students who were less able to demonstrate their full academic potential in their Level 2 /3 qualifications. Abrahams (2018) notes that working-class students are less likely to be offered entry on account of lower prior attainment in GCSEs/A-Levels and Boliver's (2013) research demonstrates that even when controlling for prior attainment, working-class students are less likely to be offered a place in UK universities. In addition to attainment, subject choice and qualification type have also been known to grant (or limit) access to universities (Boliver, 2013), and BTEC students , despite having the equivalent UCAS tariff scores , may be judged as being less academically able than A-Level students in selective institutions (Baker, 2019).

Applicants specifically from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to be offered a place at selective HE institutions compared to white applicants, even when factoring the competitiveness of courses, prior attainment and choice of facilitating subjects (Boliver, 2017). Research has subsequently highlighted that subject choice, choice of institution and location, continue to be highly stratified based on the socio-economic characteristics of students (Boliver, 2013; Reay, 2017; Crawford et al., 2017). The decision (or lack of choice) to progress into HE, therefore, is likely to occur much earlier in the student journey, and often before students enter an FEC. Yet, it remains unclear the degree to which IAG provisions account for these inequalities or whether students are conscious of such factors in their approaches to career decision-making.

### *Cultural capital/identity*

Relatedly, differentiated access to cultural capital (skills, knowledge, networks, as well as economic resources) is thought to influence the educational choices that students make. The Bourdieusian notion of cultural capital is argued to reproduce advantage in society, as the existing knowledge of 'codes' and 'norms' of choosing, applying and attending university for middle-class students, is far greater than traditionally working-class students (Bourdieu, 1986). Reay et al. (2010) maintain that the level of preparation needed to attend a university with a higher prestige as a working-class student is far greater than middle-class students, who already have their socio-cultural identities reflected in the institutional habitus (i.e. their ingrained status quo). Grant (2017: 300) argues that 'where one's habitus does not include the expectation to attend university, ultimately requires adopting a more risky strategy, where the "pay-off" is unknown or not guaranteed.' Taken together, it is worth considering the degree to which recognition (or lack thereof) of such constraints impacts knowledge exchanges between IAG providers and students.

At the same time, cultural capital or identity is not a fully representative account of the complex interplay of factors that influence learners' decision-making processes (Smyth and Banks, 2012). For example, Baker (2019) notes the agency and reflexivity of FEC students in making decisions about their futures, and the shifts these decisions took over the course of their Level 3 study. Although career decisions may, on the surface, appear to be the 'right' decision, they are often a product of students negotiating their most desired choices when confronted with the reality of wider structural constraints embedded within different progression routes.

The literature suggests there are multiple constraining factors that may influence how progression into higher education is perceived by disadvantaged students, particularly in further education colleges, and how the work of information, advice and guidance staff in FECs is often more challenging as a result. These factors vary from the overt (prior attainment, schooling experiences) to the covert (cultural capital and identity), but also the hidden constraints students may not be directly aware of but are nonetheless steered by (school/FEC resources, staff training in careers provision). This paper seeks to contribute to the fields of WP research in FECs and IAG practice by presenting the under-researched voices of FEC students. It explores how they conceptualise their available progression options, their perceptions of the value and utility of HE, and how this may sit in contrast with the beliefs and perceptions of IAG staff. The intention of this paper is to identify what IAG currently looks like in FECs, to identify where, or if, higher education could 'fit-in'.

## Research methods and analysis

The study this paper is based on sought to explore and compare the perspectives of FEC students and their respective IAG staff about progression routes from further education in the academic year of 2018/2019. The key questions explored were:

**RQ1:** What are the sources of knowledge drawn upon by FEC students for IAG?

**RQ2:** Do FEC students and FEC staff differ in their perception of useful IAG?

**RQ3:** What is the perceived role of FEC students' agency in planning for their futures?

The project was commissioned by a National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) hub in England. NCOPs seek to coordinate WP activities through collaborative, impactful initiatives between schools, colleges and universities in the designated outreach area or 'hub' (OfS, 2019). Supporting students in 'well-informed' decision-making is a key aim of the NCOP model, which does not necessarily mean university access is the pathway students will end up choosing.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen students attending FECs in the NCOP area and undertaking a full-time Level 3 qualification and identified as disadvantaged under NCOP criteria. Student interviewees did reflect some of the diversity of their respective FEC in terms of age, gender and

ethnicity, but were not pre-requisitely asked by interviewers and reflected on, as the research focus was on IAG in FECs and decision-making. Student participation was gained from four FECs via the careers NCOP lead for the FEC. Gaining access was challenging due to a pressed timeframe resulting from administrative issues and a lack of buy-in from some institutions. Twelve interviewees were studying BTEC qualifications, while two were studying A-Levels. Subjects varied from A-Level Geography, Classical Civilisation, English and History to BTEC Engineering, Health and Social Care, Graphics, Performing Arts, Travel and Tourism, and Veterinary Science. Interviews took place in a private location on college campuses and lasted approximately one hour.

Discussions with students were focused on the more individualised process of making decisions about their futures by reflecting on past, present and future choices, aspirations and experiences of IAG provision. Of the fourteen students interviewed, there were a range of perspectives towards future university participation. Five students wanted to attend university, but only two of those students had immediate, actionable plans to gain entry who were also A-Level candidates. A further three students were undecided about attending university, but indicated they would consider it if they felt it was necessary for their future careers. Six of the fourteen students interviewed were clear that they did not wish to attend university. To support engagement and in-depth responses, students were interviewed using a mediating artefact, based on a model adapted from the possible selves literature (Harrison, 2018; Henderson, 2019; Erikson, 2019; Jones et al., 2021). During the interview, students listed and talked through their various aspirations, the aspects they were unsure about, and the options they had rejected for their future.

In addition, seven interviews were conducted with staff in a diverse array of roles involved in delivering IAG in some capacity within the FECs across the same NCOP area. Interviews with staff were conducted to gain a broader perspective of the potential institutional and structural challenges around supporting and advising diverse cohorts of students on their next steps. These interviews took place individually via telephone and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

A reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts, using the six-step approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020). Transcripts were first read by individual members of the research team, followed by collaborative discussions about prominent concepts for developing a coding strategy. Each transcript was systematically coded by the original interviewer, which was subsequently reviewed and revised by an additional member of the research team. Coded transcripts were read by the full research team and follow-up collaborative discussions helped to organise the findings and develop overarching themes. Themes from our analysis of student interviews included: locality, IAG from friends and family, financial future, teaching and assessment, and what university is for. Conversely, the themes for staff interviews included: sources of IAG for students, cost of university, as well as choice and risk-aversion. To support our research findings, these initial key themes and overarching discourses in the transcripts were compared across staff and

students. The findings presented next merge student and staff perspectives together to identify what IAG currently looks like for both parties and how their perspectives on this topic compare.

# Findings

The findings presented below are in relation to our three research questions: first, we discuss the sources of knowledge drawn upon by students when deciding their next steps; second, we look at students' experiences of IAG, juxtaposed with how IAG staff conceptualised these opportunities; third, a wider discussion of student agency and structural constraints is offered.

## *Sources of IAG knowledge: tensions between staff and student views*

In this section, we discuss the different sources of knowledge students used to make decisions given the limited student engagement with college-based IAG provision, and the weight or importance attached to 'alternate' sources of IAG. While nearly all interviewed students were aware of careers advice available at their colleges, most had a lukewarm view of its usefulness. They acknowledged a lack of engagement with careers advisers and associated events, despite recognising that different types of services were available. The following remarks suggest disengagement with the broader FEC environment, and IAG specifically:

> *'I've not really like spoken in depth about what I want in my future with [IAG staff]. I kind of just come to do my assignments and then go home.' (Student 5)*

> *'I just don't like speaking to anyone and everyone about my … about what I want to do in the future.' (Student 13)*

The primary reason for students' lack of engagement with institutional sources of IAG was a perceived de-personalisation. It was felt that careers advisers would be unable to provide advice specifically tailored to the student, their needs, learning preferences, circumstances, or future wants. In this way, advice felt more valued when it came from people closest to them in their lives such as their families, compared to the perceived 'colder' information provided from college:

> *'When it comes to, like, careers and my future, that's my mum [I turn to for advice].' (Student 9)*

Careers staff were viewed as not understanding students' lives or having enough personal insight to provide the sort of individualised advice students wanted. Some students noted that careers advisers did not provide valuable advice when students were generally unsure or unclear about what they wanted from their career or lives. As such, IAG was then seen as instrumental provision on potential future steps, rather than a dialogue or discovery of the future self:

> *'There are careers people in college but I'd- not in sort of like I'd go up and speak to them about things, because I'm not sure myself personally, and I think [if] I'm not sure, how is someone I've met or only spoken to for five minutes, meant to get an idea of what I want to do. Do you know what I mean?' (Student 8)*

As a result, institutional IAG was often framed in implicit contrast or direct opposition to the 'hotter' sources of knowledge that students valued, drawn from their family, friends and close social networks. This knowledge tended to be held in much higher esteem by students as it was often supported by tangible life experiences, by people who they felt are 'like' them. All students interviewed discussed receiving and valuing careers advice from family members in particular. In this way, families (particularly parents) provided explicit IAG around planning for their futures, as well as information drawn from their experiences of navigating their working lives. The personalised nature of familial advice is key:

> *'I go to my friends quite a bit, but I'd say like my mum and dad more so, because obviously they know me better than, like, I know myself!' (Student 6)*

However, this was not necessarily consistent with stakeholders' interpretations of familial knowledge. Stakeholders felt students did not receive reliable guidance from home as it was narrower in scope and potential options for the long-term, by virtue of it being confined to parental experiences. Staff members often framed parents as having limited knowledge about university, as they had either not attended or had attended decades previously. In this way, it was suggested by many that parents or wider family networks had very little first-hand experiences that students could draw upon. Parental influence was seen as a potential barrier to university attendance, with parents preferring students to start earning money and avoid debt by immediately joining the workforce or completing an apprenticeship:

> *'(...) some parents (...) are more keen for their sons and daughters to enter the job market, start earning money, start earning, start picking up those life skills straightaway, and may not fully see the value of higher education.' (Staff 1)*

However, students maintained that parents were supportive and 'just happy' when they were too, irrespective of any particular pathway. In this sense, students frequently rejected the deficit model stakeholders often imposed on their family and peers, instead citing those networks as a source of support and necessary encouragement. Rather, the need for an additional, impartial outlet to provide a sense of reassurance about the future was highlighted by two students specifically as something they needed for their personal wellbeing, for instance:

> ***Student 7**: '…like last year I was really stressed about my future and, err, I'd just say we'd need probably more support on, like, things to do with mental health, 'cause when I got quite stressed about it, my mental health went quite--, really bad. And it's just, it's more not making the choice, 'cause I'd rather want to make it by myself, but I'd also want… some weight lifted off that's saying something like, look,*

*you don't have to rush your decision, or something like that. Something like…(.)'*

***Interviewer**: 'Like a third party?'*

***Student 7**: 'Yeah… like, someone to say, like, you're not going to ruin your life if--, by making the wrong decision, or something like that.'*

In general though, in-house IAG was perceived either to be an extension of the college itself, or focused heavily towards university progression, as tutors 'just focus on the people that's going to uni' (Student 3). Teachers' roles were viewed as focusing on managing student grades and assessment success, and there was a sense from several students that they would feel 'guilty' or would feel like a 'nuisance' if they were to routinely approach teaching staff for IAG:

*'I probably won't speak to my teachers. I won't – thing is that I don't want to try and confuse – I don't want to be the person that's always going up to teachers, because, I just – I don't think they need that, because it's quite a tough job teaching, personally.' (Student 11)*

This hesitation around feeling like an additional burden placed on teaching staff was something one staff interviewee discussed as being a product of students experiencing 'knockbacks'. As such, some students were less likely to seek support and 'put themselves out there' for fear of rejection or disappointment. In this sense, this may be why most students outlined sourcing information about various university options online.

*'I already had an idea because I'd looked online. Then I'd looked through them [University prospectuses/websites] and decided that... then I started whittling down a few courses and crossing off a few.' (Student 1)*

However, stakeholders mentioned the issues with online self-guided provision being that students need support in interpreting and using these sources of 'cold knowledge':

*'We do obviously see a lot of students anecdotally pick up information from the press, from films, from TV and that's not always accurate, so we do always have a little bit of a job reigning that in.' (Staff 1)*

Moreover, some stakeholders were critical of the quality and diversity of IAG that even teaching staff could offer:

*'(...) with a lot of the subject tutors as well, you know, they may have accessed university in a very traditional route and quite often, […], it's quite dated pathways that they'll suggest, or just the one institution that they're familiar with.' (Staff 4)*

Most students interviewed valued the opportunity to hear the warmer, first-hand experiences from those who had been to university. In particular, they hoped for more advice from current or previous university students about the practical aspects of being an undergraduate student, including a holistic, honest account of student life, along with personal experiences as to what teaching and learning looks like at university level. This is particularly important as students were

often discouraged from university by the perception of being 'stuck' in classrooms which felt reminiscent of school, as they preferred vocational, practical forms of learning. Currently, this 'warmer' source of knowledge was not identified as part of staff conceptions of good IAG practice, but something students wanted in addition to their existing sources of support.

## *Is University-led IAG about institutional self-promotion?*

Beyond perceptions around the function of IAG and the sources of knowledge used by students, staff members problematised students' lack of engagement with formal sources of IAG as a product of disinterest or apathy in planning for their future. However, students interviewed noted they had attended university-related events, such as open days or careers fairs but questioned their utility. They described such events as useful for identifying the wide range of universities that exist but found fairs not to be the most useful or approachable environments for having a valuable dialogue about possible future choices or pathways. A few of the participants also reflected on university-related events as being opportunities for universities to self-market or boast, which was viewed as undesirable by students:

> *'I've been taken to like careers fairs [...] and that didn't go very well 'cause all of my class just left when they realised the teacher wasn't there. Erm, so, I haven't been to any of them since. [...] It's just a bunch of unis that came round to just "show off" what they're doing…' (Student 2)*

> *'I know people enjoy [careers fairs], when there's careers events and they think-... find them useful but I don't, I just walk around and don't really find any use out of them.' (Student 1)*

Whereas stakeholders noted that students generally tended to focus more on their current studies (i.e. completing college), or more immediate outcomes, thus postponing decisions about their future and engaging in careers related activities. A major challenge described was getting students to think long-term about their futures rather than focusing on short-term planning – a perspective not necessarily demonstrated in the student interviews.

> *'(...) [students] only want to engage with the lesson that they signed up to do. So, if you've chosen to do, I don't know, BTEC engineering for example, that's all they want to do. They don't want to deviate from that.' (Staff 2)*

Different aspects of time in IAG were discussed both by stakeholders and students, such as the timeframe of students' career plans, the timing of IAG, as well as the policy focus on school to university transition. Several stakeholders noted that IAG is provided 'too late', whereby students were making early decisions that university was not important to their future before having the opportunity to discuss this decision with IAG staff:

> *'(...) when they come to the college they're already in the mindset that they don't want to go and it's very difficult at the age of 16 to 18 to*

*then turn it around (...), particularly if you come from a local school and maybe hadn't been the most proactive in promoting HE.' (Staff 2)*

Stakeholders, in this way, argued for an 'earlier-the-better' approach to IAG, although student perspectives indicated they mostly saw the benefit and use of IAG when they already had some sense of what pathway or options were of interest. Further, staff also noted that one-off or ad-hoc IAG provision is not sufficient to give students personal, tailored support for their futures, suggesting the need for a more holistic, sustained and longitudinal programme. They also recognised, however, that their college's system, funding and their own roles were not necessarily developed for supporting such approaches.

Research has noted substantive differences in resourcing between FECs and sixth form colleges (Acquah et al., 2017; Moote and Archer, 2018; Langley et al., 2014). Sixth form colleges are known to strongly focus on university pathways with substantive support for applicants in decision-making, campus visits, academics visiting, lectures and seminars in the university style, in most of the subject areas they would consider opting for. Similar links do exist in FECs as staff noted, but these were focused on a smaller number of local universities and vocational subjects. Moreover, in the FECs IAG roles were filled by a small group of staff who expect to cover significantly larger cohorts of disadvantaged students compared to sixth form colleges. It was noted by stakeholders that the nature of careers IAG in FECs involves more alternative pathway options such as apprenticeships, with an increasing barrier in relation to the number of vacancies available locally. Organising IAG provision therefore seems somewhat less complicated in institutions where university is a desirable option for the majority of students, and where the desirability of apprenticeships might also remain low (Thompson, 2019).

## *The Agency of FEC Students: employability reconceptualised*

All interviewed students were able to discuss ideas for their futures, demonstrating that their long-term plans were something they had considered. They often discussed their detailed awareness of the challenges and opportunities they had before them. As such, students expressed scepticism over whether a university degree is the only way to get into the professional roles they were aiming for, positing university applications as their 'plan B' against other routes, such as working in their chosen industries:

*'If [my first vocational choice] fell through I'd probably end up going to uni… but just want to make sure there's actually a job there, at all times.' (Student 4)*

Many students' future planning was centred around steps to obtain financial stability. This, for some, included university; however, the importance of university attendance to provide financial stability was not felt universally by all participants, as it was not necessarily linked to employment gains:

> *'A good paying job and university aren't linked. Well they can be linked but they're not like you have to go to university to have a good paying job.' (Student 8)*

One student who was 'undecided' about attending university commented on the need to have work experience in order to obtain employment regardless of a degree. In this way, the student questioned whether university graduates could match the job market competition of people who had not gone to university and had therefore acquired more work experience in the meantime:

> *'I could probably end up the same as if someone went to university and did graphics, I could get an apprenticeship and we could both end up at the same place, so it's, like, I just don't see the point.' (Student 7)*

Similarly, another student described worrying that university would not involve work-related learning, thereby limiting their employment opportunities as employers were perceived as valuing more vocational experience, such as that gained through an apprenticeship:

> *'I have been considering doing an apprenticeship recently. I don't know, just because I'm like- I think I'm panicking because I'm like, if I go to university and then I go and try and get a job and they're like, "you need more work experience".' (Student 3)*

Conversely, college stakeholders discussed the structural barriers on student success, such as credential inflation and the resultant increased competition to find jobs in certain sectors:

> *'(...) we have a graphic design course where you would expect people to go on to university but a lot haven't this year, they don't want to, they want to try and get work. Well, that's really difficult because they're not-- they're competing for junior roles where graduates are coming out and wanting to go for junior roles.' (Staff 5)*

However, all the students interviewed who had either ruled out or were undecided about HE, displayed a strong sense of ambition and aspiration which extended beyond the dominant narrative of needing to attend university. These students evidenced a strong work ethic and viewed the prospect of climbing the work ladder as more desirable and fitting, within their overarching long-term goal to acquire a sense of self-sufficiency and stability. For these students, the decision to attend university was a process of weighing up whether the potential (unknown) pay-off would be worth the risk. In this case, whether university could relate to a vocation and therefore provide security in employment. Such strong focus on future outcomes could be understood as the internalisation of consumerist and individualised narratives on education, and this is certainly how some of the stakeholders appeared to interpret students' views on their futures.

However, as the following discussion shows, the cost–benefit analysis on university attendance takes into account various factors beyond the monetary, instead centring around stable futures and reflecting on themselves as learners:

> *'[my sister who has gone to university] learns in a different way. She can revise for like five hours straight, but I've got like a really short attention span so I can't. It's just not something I can do.' (Student 6)*

Students discussed their pedagogical preferences and whether university teaching and assessment would be suited for them. They largely perceived university teaching as built on lectures and written assessments, which students felt would not suit the way they learn best:

> *'I know that in university there's like a lot of exams and stuff… or there's a lot of work and lectures and when it comes to that… I get very stressed quite easily… so I don't think university would be the best idea.' (Student 10)*

Perhaps for this pedagogical reason, students often described university study as being stressful or pressured, more so than their current experience in college. Students often talked positively about their current teaching and learning experiences at college. In particular, learning in college was viewed as vocational and work-related, with a diversity of assessments beyond formal examinations which most students favoured, as supported in existing research (see for example Acquah et al., 2017). Others described university study as being 'stuck' in lecture halls and raised concerns around the tedium of traditional lecturing techniques, in combination with the high costs incurred for having to study in such a manner as well:

> *'I don't like sitting in a classroom the whole time like a teenager. [...] So money and the loan, the tuition fees, that's one thing. Then the other thing is about being stuck in a classroom.' (Student 3)*

As such, despite having positive experiences as a student in an FEC environment, HE was still perceived as a significant risk to take (Aynsley and Crossouard, 2010). Several students discussed the financial burden of going to university, especially in terms of the high headline cost of tuition fees. Of these students, there was an awareness that tuition fees had increased in recent years, and that the loan repayment conditions meant negotiating decades of debt liability. When considering the high cost of university tuition, many students expressed a need for value for money: the cost of university would need to be offset by being linked specifically to employability and improving the chances for a well-paid job:

> *'I'm only going to go to university if it's needed, especially now because it is so expensive… if it was free then maybe I'd say yeah… do three years go and enjoy it. But it's not free anymore, and it's going to cost me the best part of nine grand…' (Student 1)*

From the staff perspective, we identified competing narratives around the affordability of HE. Whilst acknowledging the high costs of headline tuition fees, they point to what they see as misconceptions about university finance, including confusion around repayments and loans. It was assumed that families had little concept about how the finance and loan system operates and that this was acting as a barrier to HE entry:

'We're constantly battling to explain to them that you know, repayments have nothing to do with the amount they borrow, but it's just very difficult to get people to understand... especially if they've never been to uni before and come from low-income backgrounds.' (Staff 7)

> *'So, there is… a lot are first generation. So, (...) I think, obviously, myths around student finance, you know there is that thing of, 'oh, it's really expensive to go to university.' (Staff 4)*

Fundamentally, staff echoed the policy narrative around financial support and student loans, and connected the perceived debt-aversion of being the first-in-family to attend university with little familial knowledge about how the system actually operates. However, one member of staff reflected on the impact the loss of maintenance grants had specifically on the predominantly disadvantaged learners their FEC served and the ethical issues around encouraging applications to university:

> *'I would say the one thing that we really struggle (...) is the loss of the maintenance grants, I'd say that's probably had a bigger impact than the tuition fee rise... And you know, there's not much we can do to glamorise that because it's true, and it's not fair, and it is something that students do need to make a real decision about. (...) especially when they do start to look at things like the cost of halls, versus the amount... I know of a few universities now where every single student room is en-suite, there's no option to kind of go for a more affordable option, which I just find absolutely bizarre.' (Staff 1)*

# Discussion

Drawing on research conducted on behalf of a NCOP, the key themes discussed in this paper are three-fold. First, they relate to the timing of IAG, its depth and resourcing; second, the difference in how longer-term future plans are understood by stakeholders and students themselves; and finally, how university as a potential pathway is understood by FEC students.

Students expressed concerns over the IAG available to them and its suitability, with one key issue being the lack of space to explore potential future careers in greater depth, as opposed to planning for the next institutionally prescribed step. Because of this, many FEC students regarded discussions with their families as being more appropriate, given this can provide 'warmer', orientating knowledge in a much closer relationship, tailored to them as individuals. This is juxtaposed with students' account of the 'colder' knowledge gleaned via IAG provision in the FEC that tends to discuss de-personalised, 'standard' pathways and outcomes, whilst teaching staff are perceived to be more distant and therefore 'colder' sources based on their large workloads. The conclusions Thompson (2019: 13) arrived at based on research with school students holds in our research too: going forward 'a three-way compact that includes teachers, universities, and parents and guardians much more, could lead to better informed and productive outcomes,' particularly as IAG staff had sceptical views of how credible familial support could be.

Regarding the timescales of thinking about careers, students tend to discuss short and medium-term, as well as longer-term futures. However, given the need to mitigate risk upon exiting further education, individual students are focusing on finding a more predictable and stable pathway. This includes calculating the short and medium-term costs and benefits of higher education, where the foregone earnings, tuition fee and maintenance loans needed to enter HE, are weighed up against the more immediate financial prospects of a job or apprenticeship. In this equation the promise of longer-term financial gains through a university route and a subsequent career are often outweighed, unless university can be seen as an instrumental route to a career. Therefore, the cultural experience, and long-term benefits in relation to average earnings connected to university progression, are unlikely to help students opt for university in this context, particularly if it is unsupported by meaningful personalised advice.

Staff often discussed the lack of vision and aspiration amongst students; however, our research challenges this. Students clearly weighed up their individual circumstances and options for both short, medium, and long-term, calculating their best option whilst accepting the structural constraints on their agency. The risks associated with university progression also go beyond financial concerns, given the importance of closeness to family, and the apprehension over university teaching and learning practices (see also Acquah et al., 2017; Holton and Finn, 2018; Jones et al., 2021). Overall, participation and the associated 'student experience' might not mitigate the potential financial risks associated with university attendance.

## Conclusion

The reasons for HE self-exclusion are broad, complex and multi-faceted (Foskett and Johnston, 2010; Thompson, 2019). It is not a simple case of raising aspirations, ambitions or providing information, as is often assumed and deeply embedded into WP discourse and practice (Harrison and Waller, 2018). Whilst it is indeed important to raise awareness and provide information on the benefits or opportunities HE can offer, it is equally reasonable for students to prioritise wanting a stable future over the university 'experience'. The financial risks of entering university have to be mitigated by a clear promise of stability in the future. Self-sufficiency was a common desire and ambition emphasised by all students we interviewed. The notion of stability is key when considering the higher drop-out rates and lower employability outcomes disadvantaged students experience – particularly traditionally working-class and Black and Minority Ethnic students.

In light of these disparities in retention and graduate outcomes, it is important that IAG in FEC settings and NCOP activities are mindful of this. Although HE is advantageous in terms of its wider transformative social potential and graduates' average future earnings, the extent to which university study offers stability in an increasingly competitive graduate entry-level job market is unknown and

therefore carries greater risks for students who already experience greater levels of structural inequality.

As for future practice, providing students with timely, personalised, and independent IAG which is able to consider diverse alternative pathways in addition to university, is desirable. Those with responsibility for IAG should seek to balance the possibilities available to students whilst being mindful of the diverse pressures and wants of students, and their familial context, in order to build a 'warmer' relationship between staff and students. Further, greater understanding into how IAG could be holistically embedded into FECs at the course-level, may be more impactful than the self-referring model that currently dominates practice.

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