Going to university?

A qualitative case study into the factors influencing A-level subject choices in a comprehensive sixth form centre.

by

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Dedication

To Simon and Edwin who were present at the start of the journey but did not live long enough to see the work completed.

and to

Abigail and Talitha who, whilst not born when the work started, may benefit from the work when in turn their time comes to take decisions and make choices.

Abstract

This thesis explores the assumption that university selection is a purely rational, economically-driven, and utilitarian decision. At the same time, it explores the importance of emotional, familial, and social factors in candidates' choices.

The choice of A-levels can be very stressful for candidates because such choices have the potential to have an impact on future employability and career outcomes. This research into the influences of university selection explored the responses, experiences, and challenges of a small sample of students and staff at a single sixth-form centre.

The expansion of tertiary education through widening participation policies has been accompanied by a plethora of resources, such as websites, platforms and dedicated services offering information, statistics and data that can help prospective students make their choices. Yet evidence produced in this thesis indicates these resources do not have a significant role to play when students make their choices. Rather it highlights the important role played by parents who, directly or indirectly, exert an influence on their children, even when their own social and economic capital and experiences of the process is limited. In consequence, such choices may appear to be idiosyncratic, but are nonetheless, equally rational, and valid responses for dealing with the stressful process of making UCAS applications during A-level preparation time.

The findings highlight the importance of parents as trusted and significant influences on students' university selection. The findings also illuminate three main areas of policy concern and further study. First, they cast doubt on the suitability of A-levels as the best means for university selection. Second, they question the appropriateness of predicted grades as the most reliable indicator of academic potential. Third, they point to a need to reconsider the current UCAS timings and the attendant negative impact on student welfare.

"The unexamined life is not worth living"

Socrates

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Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

This research is based on my experiences as a sixth form tutor in a rural comprehensive and centres on the influences which shape student subject choices and university applications. Although the research focuses on sixth form students the initial subject choices at GCSE have the potential to restrict later choices at A-level. A-levels are a standalone qualification, but they are also used as selection criteria for further study and university admission. The annual UCAS preparation was, and is, for many students, a very stressful process. Stressful, not only in terms of its timing in the cycle of the school year as they prepared for public examination, but also because decisions and choices made would have long term implications for their futures.

A-levels since their introduction in 1951, have undergone change in both the content and the way they are assessed. The coalition[1] reforms (2010-2014) were designed to make A-levels more rigorous by narrowing the range of subjects available to be taught and studied along with more prescriptive assessment criteria. In addition, the former qualification system of modularity was replaced with a terminal examination. Such measures it was claimed would make them a better preparation for university study. The expansion of university education under the previous Labour government had also seen the introduction of student fees, initially a token fee, but later to become a major income source for universities following the abolition of the universities block grant. The shift in the cost centre to the student means that students are now actively recruited as fee-paying consumers. In consequence, the traditional relationships between students, schools and universities have undergone change in response to the new circumstances. Along with the introduction of market forces to education, not only have universities expanded, but there has also been an increase in the range of degree providers. In addition, competition from overseas universities has increased. These changes in educational opportunities have been accompanied by an emphasis on standards and value for money, measures which have been introduced to make them competitive in the global marketplace. By embracing the neo-liberal philosophy, students now take responsibility for their own

[1] Michael Gove Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition government

future development, especially in terms of future careers. A result of these changes, education has become conflated with employment (Stahl, 2015).

The complexity of making choices amidst so many competing claims is difficult, and made more so by the implications for future employment and happiness, what factors are most influential when taking decisions? It is this fundamental question which underpins this research.

1.1 Context

Throughout post Second World War developments in English educational policy and provision, three important themes that date back to earlier periods have remained constant. Firstly, the most significant aspect of English education has been its organisation along lines of class and the role that education should play in maintaining status, power, and privilege (Tawney, 1964). Educational policies through the latter part of the twentieth and throughout the twenty-first centuries have continue to concentrate on school provision and the way schools process their roles without reference to the wider socio-economic implications of social class (Reay, 2006). The importance of the role played by class, as outlined by Savage (Savage, 2015), and substantiated in the research undertaken by the Sutton Foundation (Sutton Trust, 2011, Wyness, 2017) reiterates the importance class plays in the provision of education and student outcomes. Proposals to expand grammar school provision (under the Conservative government of Theresa May's premiership (2016)) along with the creation of new selective free schools, were advocated as rewarding merit. It was also claimed that the creation of new grammar schools was in response to popular public opinion. There was little evidence to suggest that issues of class advantage would have been addressed[2]. Subsequently, the Commons Education Committee Report 2017 recorded that the committee was not convinced and regarded the proposed changes as "an unnecessary distraction from the need to ensure all young people are equipped with the skills to compete in the modern workplace" (Carmichael, 2017). The later House of Commons research

[2] Selection for admission to grammar schools favoured the already advantaged as indicated by the statistics showing the numbers of students accessing free school meals and those in need of additional academic support services.

briefing paper (Long, 2022) examined the contentious issue of grammar schools gathering evidence from both supporters and opponents. Notwithstanding the claims for/against academic success associated with grammar schools, the available evidence points to the importance of cultural capital embedded within social class.

Secondly, the cost of funding any programme of mass or universal education from taxation has been constantly restrained by opposition from the representatives of the powerful and wealthy in government. The introduction of neoliberal policies to reduce state involvement and the promotion of the commodification of education through enterprise academies (Edwards and Parsons, 2020) are closely aligned with attitudes to class and power. Neoliberal philosophy has been veiled within the creation of a belief that meritorious effort will be rewarded and ultimately lead to social mobility, whilst in reality concealing a widening of class based inequalities (Maisuria, 2017).

Thirdly, educational policy and provision have sought to equip children with the literacy and numeracy skills for their role as a citizen and to prepare young people for their economic role in society as wage earners. The importance of the role education plays in allocating social position and employment opportunities continues to be an important part of post-social welfare consensus. Perceptions underpinning government policy, as evidenced by parliamentary representatives such as those of Quintin Hogg (1965), along with Callaghan's Ruskin speech of 1972 with its emphasis on the need to train children for their future employment rolls, are indicative of the importance attached to education for social development. Yet despite these aspirations for social advancement based on educational outcomes, educational policy and provision continued to reiterate the strong hold that class has on English education. The important role played by class in education was evident in the leading role played by Sir Keith Joseph (1980) on education policy in the Thatcher government[3], in that he wanted to re-write the legacy left by the Forster Act, and thereby re-instate, and consolidate traditional class divides, not only in education, but also within society.

[3] Margaret Thatcher's close confidant and secretary of state for education

Notwithstanding the significant and profound changes associated with the transition to a system of universal secondary education, and later mass higher education through programmes of widening participation, these developments have been accompanied by the narrative that the education system is open to all, fair and based on merit. This underpinning belief that educational opportunity is fair and open provides an aspirational rationale for students when deciding to continue into higher education. Yet a closer analysis of university admissions reveals that social class advantage has been consolidated through privileged access to the more prestigious centres of learning within a time-honoured hierarchy of institutions. The strong correlation between students from private and public schools attending the elite Russell Group of universities has been extensively researched (Boliver, 2017). Even after graduation, with better degree results, the state student is less likely to join one of the elite professions and if they are admitted to one of the high earning professions, their salaries are often considerably lower (Sutton Trust, 2011). Today the class divide is maintained by aspirant middle-class professionals who seek to consolidate their standing and that of their child's future either through the purchasing of private schooling, or by using their business and/or family contacts to monopolise and secure the best available state provision (Ball, 2003b, Ball et al., 2012b). Thus, the impact of the perpetual curse on English education, namely class, continues to exert its influence. Arguably the academic theories of the French sociological anthropologist Bourdieu, although not without his critics, offers a telling insight into not only why the system of privilege replicates itself (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, Swartz, 1998, Robbins, 2000) through his concepts of habitus and capitals, whilst also explaining the continued acceptance of class replication through his work on misrecognition.

Young people as individuals make sense of their identity and self by reference to the social and cultural values of their communities. Children acquire knowledge through social interactions, including culturally referenced social stories and scripts. These social competences are fostered within enriched environments found in the home, especially those where encouragement is given, and achievement praised. Likewise, school values and a shared understanding of how knowledge is transmitted are important aspects in the relationship between student, family, teacher, and school, each contributing to a child's development. The sum of these

contributing agents leads to the formation of mental sets which govern learning and influence the way we perceive and anticipate outcomes. These perceptions are constantly being revised as new information, relevance, and motivation enable greater personal understanding. Such developments will, to varying degrees, and in uniquely individual ways, influence, and guide choice throughout this process, both directly and/or indirectly.

Choice is regarded as an essential aspect of contemporary living. The idea of individual agency has often been overstated in that constraints imposed by societal structures both restrict and ultimately control choice. Students in the sixth form are used to taking decisions over a range of issues, yet the most significant, because of the far-reaching implications and consequences, is the decision to go to university, but it is one decision for which they have had little experience. It is a one-shot opportunity for which there is no practice. Following the initial decision to go into higher education the complex, confusing and stressful process of choosing and applying to university begins. These deliberations and choices are accompanied by the excitement of aspiration, yet also they are tinged with the realisation of responsibility for their choices, and should the results be less than satisfactory, then there is only the self to blame (Schwartz, 2016). To compound the student's stress, the time-consuming application process comes at a time when students are under tremendous pressure to secure the required entrance grades in their A-levels examinations. Throughout the entire process of choosing a university and course is the assumption that a rational choice will be made. These assumptions are grounded in the belief that an individual's reasoning and understanding are lodged within the context of aggregated societal behaviours and expectations of what is the best option available. In other words, a student would apply for a course with a particular standing at a given university because the information and evidence would seem to indicate this would be a good choice. Nevertheless, personal preferences and influences will also be part of the process and the result of such deliberations may appear to reject the rational. Yet, what may appear to be a counter-intuitive decision is often logically based on an individual's subjective understanding of the social parameters which limit and/or restrict opportunities open to them. By virtue of the complexity associated with the choices available and which when combined with a lack of experience when taking decisions, is there not a risk

that emotions will override reasoning, a case of the ‘emotional tail wagging the rational body’ (Jonathan Haidt, psychologist cited in Kahneman, 2012 : 104)? Are emotions, rather than logical analysis guiding student choices? Intuitive answers by avoiding cognitive effort and detailed knowledge make it easier to fit everything into a coherent pattern which in turn can then gain greater credence in the construction of personally substantiating narratives. In a context of uncertainty, the search for a tidy and coherent outcome, grounded in experience, suggests the familiar is more comfortable, and that consistency, rather than comprehensiveness is a dominant driver in the decision and choice making processes.

Greater value is often placed on reason and discourse, rather than emotions when taking decisions. Emotional responses which are subjective, are often regarded as merely responding to events which have failed to evaluate the circumstances and possible consequences in a rational and logical fashion (Haidt, 2001, Fine, 2006). By undertaking research into individual circumstances, the rationale of sociological determinism can be challenged. The acceptance of a sociological determinist approach assumes a somewhat restrictive acceptance of social life, and in so doing fails to make allowances for personal responsibility which diminishes the realities and influences of lived experiences. Emotions are not disconnected from judgements about issues which are of great personal concern, for often such judgements are instinctive reactions before they are thought about cogently and subsequently expressed. Decisions are not always taken following deliberations based on a careful and thorough examination of all the pluses and minuses, but often owe much more to consideration of earlier experiences and feelings. Reflection is sensitive to context; the practical judgement of wisdom cannot be reduced to a single indicator such as utility. Thus, within the logic of instrumental rationality, where greater credence is given to means over ends, this would suggest that value judgements are not worthy because they are beyond reason. Therefore, does this mean that reason has become rationality, merely an indicative method of securing the best outcomes where absolute entrenched and implied knowledge are more important and relevant than positional based abstract knowledge? The concept of phronesis, where the wisdom of action-based skills and understandings honed through practical experiences over time, are equally valid, if not always recognised, when taking decisions. This is not to argue that economic

considerations are not important, but rather to suggest that they are not the sole determinant of choice when applying to university.

The emphasis of current approaches to the question of university admissions seem to concentrate on the means of correcting perceived short comings in the process of applying to and attending university. This poses the question - are students in possession of all the important and necessary information and competences to make an informed and/or appropriate choice? The Sutton Trust (Wyness, 2016, Wyness, 2017) has identified that information, advice, and guidance for students were often limited, or absent, in centres outside the private school sector. These findings very much replicate earlier findings (Pugsley, 1998, Pugsley, 2004) in that by concentrating on the means to secure a university place they do so at the expense of the development of the whole student. The situation has been complicated by the ever-increasing plethora of institutions and courses available. With so many opportunities now available, information and advice are essential to help young people make appropriate decisions. With each institution providing their own details and information, how should a student assess competing claims? Currently, most sixth-form students are well-versed in the use of, and have access to, computers which provide countless opportunities to view information sources along with a wealth of advice and data to help student make decisions and prepare for university. It is perhaps no coincidence that the number of such sites have grown exponentially over recent years. With access to such vast amounts of often competing information and advice who then is best placed to offer students guidance, individual help, support, and reassurance to make these all-important decisions? School sixth form centres in supporting and offering carefully structured guidance and encouragement, provide an opportunity for students to reflect on a more objective approach to choice. This approach, which is based on a thorough scrutiny, checking, and cross-referencing of all the relevant materials will help to inform choice and will, to some extent, provide a counter to the role played by intuition and impulses. Ultimately though, any individual’s choice, will be based on personal judgements within the context of recognised limitations and constraints imposed by the environment. For some students, being in such a stressful situation may lead to a paralysis in the thought and selection processes of decision making. Invariably when making choices and taking decisions there is an accompanying

escalation of expectation as each option is explored and matched with the individual's search criteria; but for every choice made there is an opportunity cost associated with each rejected alternative option.

The decision to invest time and money on further education in a system which is also undergoing changes, whilst simultaneously maintaining and replicating the advantage of class status, is daunting. With young people, having little experience on which to frame their decisions, other than a subjective assessment of future prospect, what factors and influences are most important? To what extent are deeper and less frequently discussed societal values shaping the lives of young people as they accept and prepare for the future? School staff and parents are available to help and guide the student, yet much of this support and emphasis would appear to concentrate on the process of securing further qualifications and future employment, without necessarily considering what education might mean for the individual (Apple, 1993, Apple, 2001, Collini, 2012, Collini, 2018, Warren, 2019, Weale, 2019a). In accepting this conflation that education equates with employment, have we lost sight of the real purpose of education which is to open minds and develop greater levels of knowledge and depths of understanding, and not merely for career advancement (Hedges, 2010).

1.2 Conceptual Framework

In this study reference is made to Bourdieu observations and analysis because they provide a socio-cultural background for educational studies. The role played by various capitals, especially cultural, and how they become established and embodied as habitus helps to explain the continuation of societal norms. His work provides a valuable starting point for this research by offering a valuable explanation for how societal framing and referencing become internalised through his ideas on doxa and misrecognition which leads to an acceptance of the status quo. These explanations are particularly significant when looking into the momentous changes taking place in higher education where many more students from non-traditional backgrounds can attend university. Yet, notwithstanding the increase participation of students from diverse social backgrounds a class based hierarchy still operates with privately educated students being disproportionally represented in the more elite Russell |Group of universities (Boliver, 2007, Boliver, 2011, Boliver, 2013, Boliver et

al., 2015, Boliver, 2015b, Boliver, 2015a, Boliver, 2017, Bathmaker et al., 2013, Reay, 2006, Reay, 2013, Reay, 2017). In acceptance of this outcome as being 'inevitable' – *-not for the likes of us'* – confirms, to some extent, Bourdieu's theories on misrecognition and doxa, and whilst valid as general observations within a societal context, this deterministic approach removes agency from the individual. Individuals have capacity (within limitations) to exercise personal preferences and choices. Therefore, in seeking to explain how individual choices are made, the influential ideas and theories of Kahneman are referenced to illustrate how a variety of different factors are operational when making choices. The psychology of choice and the thought processes involved in making choices are not always straightforward, often individuals will make choices which are expedient and not always based on sound logical analysis of events or possible best outcomes.

What factors and influences are most important when deciding to go to university?

The question has been asked by other researchers including Sheffield University's in-depth study into student choice when they applied the theory of behavioural economics to making decisions (Diamond, 2012a). Their research utilised the ideas of fast and slow thinking based on the work of the psychologist Kahneman (Kahneman, 2012), and the Cabinet Office Institute for Governments document - MINDSPACE (Dolan, 2010) to examine the factors which informed students' choice of university. By understanding the factors which influenced behaviour the implementation of future policies could be improved. Once behavioural patterns had been identified policies could, with a little 'nudging', be implemented more effectively. Diamond et al used the components of the MINDSPACE acronym to try and understand the factors and influences informing student choice. The acronym is a compilation of the main influences on behaviour[4].

[4]

Messenger	we are heavily influenced by who communicates information
Incentives	our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts such as strongly avoiding losses
Norms	we are strongly influenced by what others do
Defaults	"go with the flow" of pre-set options
Salience	our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us
Priming	our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues
Affect	our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions
Commitments	we seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts
Ego	we act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves

Executive Summary Dolan: 08

The aim of this research is to examine the simplified utilitarian theory that student choice is made to maximise economic utility. This is not to argue that future employment prospects are not of concern, but rather to suggest that it is not the only consideration to be factored into the process. Rather than the reductionist explanation, it is a combination of individualistic and personal factors which are contextualised and embedded within the cultural, psychological, and social background that influence decision making and choice. This single case study looks at personal aspects influencing choice, but in so doing acknowledges that the degree of personal agency is restricted by several external forces including the socio-political realities of class, gender, and ethnicity whose contributions are not always recognised nor acknowledged.

Data will be generated through a series of online questionnaires and in-depth conversations in a rural comprehensive school over two terms. The data will identify the key factors and people who influence choice. For some students, personal and seemingly idiosyncratic factors are equally, if not more influential in the decision-making process. Often these decisions and choices indicate a much more nuanced and embedded rationale which reflect wider societal and familial pressures. The questionnaire generated data will be collected in the autumn term. The responses will then be used to guide the conversations with respondents at the centre during the spring term. The timing of these interviews was scheduled to take place both during and immediately after the completion of the UCAS application process. The choice of one, rather than several centres, was a realistic response to the pressure of time to generate, collect, collate, and analyse the generated data.

A consequence of industrial development has been the marked differentiation of labour and the associated social functions and stratifications within society. Education has accompanied such changes. The role of education has had the somewhat contradictory aims, on the one hand preserving the societal hierarchy, and at the same time introducing and incorporating change within social institutions and their functions. This contradiction was, perhaps first highlighted by Durkheim's reflections on education in France (L'évolution pédagogique en France) (Russo, 2006) in that 'knowledge' is embedded within the time bounded philosophical and

epistemological rationale of any given period and operating within the social structures of that period. In this sense, Durkheim's exposition is that schools are a model of both social relations and of the individual within society. One in which the relationship between teacher, knowledge and pupil are important aspects within the process of education. Durkheim's reflections on his analysis led him to postulate that modern society would no longer be held together through religion or kinship. This transition from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to one based on association (*Gesellschaft*), attaches importance to the idea of individualism, especially for the new identities associated with the newly emerging trades and professions. This second conjecture is pertinent to this research, in that whilst individualism is an important driver for student choice, does community still have a contribution to make to both the individual and wider society?

It was during the latter part of the twentieth century, when the Keynesian welfare model (Marquand, 1988) faltered when many of the underlying assumptions about the role of the state were scrutinised through the lens of monetarist policies as a response to the globalisation of trade and industrial development(Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, Harvey, 2007). The implementation of neoliberal monetarist policies which accompanied, and in part were driven by, developments in computer assisted technology and international business practices, became dominant factors in response to globalised competition. Such developments required changes to be made to the traditional role played by education. One of the main changes was in the way that the higher education model was forced to adapt new strategies to attract a wider and more diverse student body to increase the national store of knowledge and competence to compete in a much more aggressive global marketplace. These changes saw a change from an elite provision to a system of mass, rather than universal provision, within the sphere of higher education (Eriksen, 1995, Gilchrist, 2003, Archer et al., 2003, Trow, 2007). Scott (Smith, 1993) argues that these same external factors are also simultaneously drivers of organizational change (such as the fall of "collegiality" and the rise of "managerialism") within the education model in the U.K. at this time. Scott continues by explaining that, as with most systems transitioning from an elite system to a mass system, there has been a substantial increase in the number of eligible participants within higher education in the U.K. with many coming from non-

traditional backgrounds in higher education. (In 1960, there were fewer than 250,000 students attending post-secondary institutions in the U.K.; today, there are over two million).

Not only has the application of scientific discoveries through technological developments produced changes within society, but they have also produced profound changes between countries. The competition for wealth generation and international status within a global context has had a profound impact on the role played by education within society. The belief that a more highly educated workforce creates wealth which adds to the international standing of the country, and ultimately attracting more international investment, means that education has become 'weaponised'. In consequence of government policy, the focus on these developments and the resultant 'arms race' (Palfreyman and Tapper, 2009) has seen a widening of applications to university and participation in higher education. Thus, using Durkheim's reflections and observations about the role of education in modern society and what it means for the individual is particularly relevant in a time of rapid university expansion. Student numbers enrolled in higher education have increased dramatically over recent years. Universities are now actively encouraging and recruiting students for their courses, partly in response to the changing expectations placed on their role and function, and partly in response to central government's changes in its funding arrangements for higher education. At the same time, the 'professionalisation' of employment means that increasingly future workplaces will contain, or require, degree bearing graduates to access and secure employment, not only in the traditional professions, but increasingly in currently non-graduate occupations. This drive towards Higher Participation System (HPS) (Marginson, 2016) suggests that tertiary qualifications will soon be a pre-requisite for employment in the near future.

In response to this increasing demand for graduates in the workforce, a plethora of new institutions, courses, and awards have been developed. For members of society who, for one reason or another, may not have traditionally engaged with post-compulsory schooling, this wealth of competing claims and opportunities can seem overwhelmingly complicated. With so many providers, there is no guarantee

that such provision and qualifications are of high value. Universities have been encouraged to develop strategies to improve educational quality and output by holding them accountable through a variety of published league tables. Resort to statistical justifications, which in essence are simply quantitative descriptions of formal, but not substantial associations, can be misleading (Sayer cited in: Marginson, 2016).

Essentially mass education is a consumerist product in which knowledge acquisition has been personalised and in consequence has changed the expectations of the role and function of tertiary education. When looking at the structural changes associated with massification of higher educational provision in the UK, Scott (Scott, Chapter 3 in Palfreyman and Tapper, 2009) believes that universities have traditionally concentrated on internal, rather than external influences. Universities in the UK, even post Robbins (Robbins, 1963) adhered to traditional expectations of the role, place and status of a university. The Russell Group with their emphasis on research are regarded as the pinnacle of provision. By contrast, the modern post 1992 universities are viewed as teaching institutions and are judged by different criteria such as value for money and being fit for purpose, especially when competing for research grants (Cartwright, 2005). Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the traditional pattern of the collegiate university model has not changed. For in response to the changing background of a broader student body, several new initiatives, including outreach programmes, scholarships, and loans, along with the development of non-traditional degree programmes and formats have been introduced to increase the appeal to potential students in a very competitive global market. These innovatory developments, especially at the newly created institutions, are adding a new dimension to the concept of higher education. All these efforts have culminated in the United Kingdom becoming the largest producer of post-secondary graduates in Europe, 1.8 million students graduated from a U.K. university in 2009. Such figures are indicative of the successful commercialisation of commodified education, for the would-be student, this merely adds to the already complex mix of factors for consideration which can affect the possibility of success when attempting to make a successful application to university.

Accompanying this expansion in higher education has been an increase in competition, not only between universities in the UK, but also with international institutions to attract fee-paying students. In this context, the UK's success in attracting large numbers of overseas students[5] has increased the competition for places at the more prestigious centres. It is against this rapidly expanding sector of higher education that any potential student is faced with a much more complex array of possible choices than was formerly the case. Increased access to higher education does not mean that all students will necessarily experience high quality levels of teaching and learning, nor that their degree credentials will have equal standing. To address some of the concerns associated with university expansion, the government has, through agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC), sought to make universities more accountable to their consumers by 'ensuring high standards'. Yet this emphasis on policies which utilise the free market benchmarks of value for money, and whether universities and courses are 'fit for purpose' merely concentrates on the means without due regards to ends. This situation is not helped by the lack of a definitive philosophical underpinning which embraces all the competing claims as to the role and purpose of higher and university education (Barnett, 2004). The importance of the economic rationale for higher education and the way that such policies have been implemented and affected universities has attracted criticism (Collini, 2011, Collini, 2012, Holmwood, 2011, McGettigan, 2013).The social factors both within universities and the wider societal context have given rise for calls to redefine the role and purpose of higher education (McArthur, 2011). Similarly concerns about outcomes in terms of 'qualification, socialisation and subjectification' (Biesta, 2009) would seem to make the metric of 'value for money' a little problematic. Yet, notwithstanding such observations, the reports from AQA and HEFC agencies do provide some evidence for students to make comparisons between providers. The use of these quantitative descriptions of "formal associations" (Sayer, 2000 : 22) merely add to the complexities facing students when making their decisions. Perhaps more significantly, these formulaic and mechanistic approaches neither acknowledge, nor consider that operating

[5] Many UK universities have successfully established off-shoot universities, especially in Asia.

within higher education there is a hierarchy of institutions which includes elite establishments, post-1992 institutions, plus ‘other’ providers.

Private sector schools and colleges, along with former grammar schools, continue to send substantial numbers of their sixth form students to elite and established universities, the picture for many potential students from comprehensive schools is somewhat different. Both comprehensive schools and the parents of children at comprehensive schools may have little experience of higher education, either in terms of what university education entails, or how best to assess the choices available. In addition, in many cases such potential students maybe the first members of their family to have the opportunity to study at this level. This research is important because it critiques firstly the commonly accepted model that maximising economic utility is the underpinning rationale used to explain student decision and choice. This academic and scholarly model reflects a particular theoretical perspective which does not always sit quite so readily with Individuals who often lead lives which are not always coherent, often muddled and even chaotic as they operate within a variety of competing and extenuating circumstances. Secondly, within education there is an emphasis on Individuality and creativity, attitudes which have been established and prized from the primary school (Wilkinson, 1954, Moses, 2021). Yet perhaps not surprisingly because knowledge is a social construct and learning takes place within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978, Vygotsky, 2012, Downes, 2009), there is often a consensus of views and conformity about educational subjects and institutions. Potential university students appear to have uncritical expectations of privileged subjects, prestigious establishments and the routeway to professional careers. Within the knowledge-based global economy this would appear to be a rational assumption for students to make; however, not only are universities creating opportunities for individuals to gain credentials which will allow them to take advantage of the changing opportunities within the rapidly expanding and developing international labour markets, but universities in turn are also trying to attract potential students by generating courses and research across many subject disciplines. The extent to which the debate as to whether universities should concentrate on research or teaching may not initially be an important factor for students, but the introduction of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) may provide more objective comparison

criteria for would-be students (Blackmore, 2016). Yet the perception remains that research, especially associated with the Russell Group of universities, are more prestigious qualifications and thus the perception of institutional status remains an important consideration when choosing a university (Jenkins, 2018). The role played by and the general perception of universities (Benjamin, 1993) continues to undergo change (Collini, 2018, Collini, 2020). Perhaps the most significant change has been the shift which has seen students becoming consumers, whilst universities have become service providers. This development and the socio-economic impact of these developments have been well documented since the introduction of neoliberal policies in to educational provision (Foskett, 2011, Molesworth et al., 2011, Brown, 2011, Nixon et al., 2011, Jones-Devitt, 2011, Haywood et al., 2011, Nordensvard, 2011, Williams, 2011, Gibbs, 2011, McCaig, 2011). It would, however be a mistake to assume that student choice and access to those universities with the higher correlation between courses and access to the higher status positions in society were based on fair and open access (Boliver, 2007, Boliver, 2015b, Boliver, 2013, Boliver, 2011, Boliver, 2015a, Jerrim et al., 2015, Hersch, 2019, Milburn, 2019). Some students do manage to overcome the barriers of disadvantage (Thiele et al., 2017), yet the attraction of institutional status has the potential to be an important influence on student choice in spite of evidence to the contrary. Interestingly, the association of class and wealth with the more traditional and prestigious universities has been reinforced for if education has become increasingly conflated with employment prospects (Stahl, 2015), humanities, which are not linked to high salaried employment, will become the preserve of the rich thus consolidating their cultural capital within a society of widening inequalities (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010, Malik, 2022)

Thirdly, as students of the sixth form and potential university students, they have lived under a continuous routine imposed by others. Socrates' observation that a life lived without examining is a life not worth living may be questionable, but can an appreciation of a fulfilled life only come through a careful and thorough scrutiny of the lived life? By gathering and synthesising the views expressed in conversations with students at one centre, a more realistic understanding of the reasoning and impact of the processes associated with going to university will enable a closer examination of the expectations and the realities associated with going to university

and the role higher education plays in the lives of young people. In consequence of this greater understanding, both students and universities could achieve greater levels of course satisfaction and in consequence reduce dropout rates.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

In Chapter two – literature, the major developments in English education and the way that schools have been structured, especially the changes to sixth form, and the changing pattern of A-levels provides a background to the increased numbers of sixth forms and the growth of students achieving the grades required for university admission. While schools were being reformed, universities were undergoing significant changes to their role and organisation as they expanded to facilitate widening access policies and to accommodate increased numbers of students. The importance of the role played by class within neoliberal narrative of widening participation are examined by reference to the work of educational sociologists who's accounts add to our understanding by offering explanations for differential opportunities and outcomes when applying to and attending university. Such works provide a generic background to set the case study research in context and add to our understanding of key factors which contribute to and influence choice and ultimately the outcome of university experience. Reference to the works of Bourdieu, who provides, through his work on habitus, fields, and misrecognition, explanations for the continuation of the patterns of middle-class domination and ease with which they handle the process of applying to university. The research in looking for influences for student choices examines the influential work of Kahneman into the psychology of decision making, which along with the Cabinet Office think tank report MINDSPACE provided a measurable baseline, namely the theories of behavioural economics, against which Diamond and her team at Sheffield university (2012) were able to construct a more in-depth analysis for student application choice.

Chapter three explains the choice for the use of the case study methodology along with the rationale for the data generation methods selected and used. Chapter four justifies the choice of data generating strategies. In chapter five, the findings are reported and examined. The chapter starts by setting the scene for the research, before recording the thoughts, ideas, and philosophy of several leading players in

centre's provision to help sixth form students in their preparation. Chapter six examines the student's own experiences through three on-line questionnaires which form the basis for the subsequent in-depth interview/conversations. The seventh chapter delves into the generated data from the previous two chapters to ascertain the significance played by the rival sources of information and importance attached to key and influential persons who influence choice. The final chapter concludes by affirming the value of the case study whilst acknowledging it limitations for making generalisations; nonetheless, recommendations for improvements to the system are offered. Because education and research are ongoing processes, an outline of areas for further study are suggested as ways to develop a more comprehensive picture of the influential factors and persons influencing student choices.

Chapter Two: Literature

In this chapter the historical context for the research is established by highlighting some of the key developments in education and the growth of universities in England. The linking of higher education and employment through widening participation opportunities has raised aspirations amongst many students who traditionally might not have thought about going to university. Accompanying the narrative that widening participation is both meritocratic and fair, is the anticipation of improved employment prospects and social mobility. On closer examination the linking of education with employment and improved standards of living are not automatic, there being any number of other contributory factors to success, but nonetheless future employment prospects remain a strong motivation for students going to university.

The importance of going to university for students, universities and society has resulted in a plethora of information to attract and guide future students through the process. A process which has been streamlined through the application of digital technologies, but is the focus on communication at the expense of understanding individual student concerns? This research sets out to challenge both the deterministic and rational explanations for going to university and to highlight the personal considerations which influence choice.

2.1 Contemporary Scene

"Education is heavily imbued with aspiration, deeply contested with regard to content and organisation and spectacularly under-resourced for those who have least,"

(Walker and Unterhalter, 2007)

The key background underpinning the research revolves around the idea of widening participation embedded within a principle of meritocracy. A belief which seems to encapsulate the idea that with talent and ambition anyone can succeed. Educational provision based on fairness and justice, will provide the opportunity to raise aspiration and achieve social mobility. Adherence to this belief has become a shibboleth (Mandler, 2020 : 4). It could be argued therefore that the prime function

of education has become to aid social mobility. The last Labour government's White Paper (Goverment, 2009 : CM7533), which, with its emphasis on opportunity, seems to have redefined the ideas of social justice by equating education with employment which leads to social mobility. Social mobility defined narrowly as an improvement in material wellbeing, rather than a more profound and in-depth reorganisation of social class.

Widening participation has seen the expansion of educational provision making educational opportunities much more freely available and open to everyone. Yet when educational outcomes are examined, despite all the changes to educational provision and opportunities, the importance of the limiting factors associated with class, race, ethnicity, and gender continue to be significant. If anything, education is not mediating social mobility, in that with each additional provision, the already privileged mobilise their capitals to take advantage of the latest developments (Reay, 2008, Bathmaker et al., 2013, Reay, 2013, Reay, 2017, Reay, 2021). Various reports from the Sutton Trust highlight the importance of family background and wealth in securing access to more prestigious universities and occupations. Each reform to educational provision seems to have failed to reduce the gap in attainment and life chances, at best such developments can be regarded as a counterbalance to inequality (Elliot-Major, 2018, Elliot-Major, 2020). Even when the national levels of attainment have risen, the gap and inequalities remain as a consistent pattern. Poverty, in all its aspects, personal and social, has been identified as a serious constraint on closing the gap. Yet, in ascribing the continuation of the gap to a paucity of aspiration[6] in times of greater inequality is at best a mistaken, if not actually a mendacious observation.

The narratives of widening participation, meritocracy, social mobility, and aspiration have entered the lexicon of sixth forms where they are commonly accepted at face value. Yet in realty such narratives fail to either, acknowledge, or consider, the range of factors which can have an impact on anyone person's ability to access educational opportunities. There are many personal decisions and choices to be

[6] Aspiration was a key element in Tony Blair's administration to correct inequality in outcomes.

made when preparing to go to university. In trying to understand what factors, and influences are most important at this crucial stage in a student's life a fuller picture of the stresses on students may ease the burden on students, with the possibility of improved provision for future students.

England, as in many other developed countries, saw education as the way forward to secure long-term prosperity. Through widening university admissions, a well-qualified workforce and citizenry would emerge from the ranks of those who had traditionally not experienced higher education. In many ways the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which expanded university provision by enabling polytechnics to become self-contained universities to award their own degrees, marks a significant development in the process of empowering more people to access further and higher education. Along with the development of widening participation, there was an intensive programme of university expansion in the form of new high status student accommodation accompanied by a range of state-of-the-art sporting facilities, in addition to teaching blocks and laboratories. Such major building programmes were constructed within the context of a commercial investment to attract more students and thus secure the financial future of the university. This development in the programme of widening participation at university is just part of a series of ongoing changes which have become the subject of much academic research and discussion, including the impact on students with reference to class, gender, and ethnicity. The identifying of students as being from 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Holton, 2018) helps to anchor these differing social and cultural capitals within the wider context of Bourdieu's concept of habitus which informs and sets the working parameters as they approach the question of going to university, or not.

Whilst the stated aim of widening participation may have become accepted, research undertaken into university admissions (Greenbank, 2006) led the researchers to conclude, that university policies responded more to demand, rather than engaging with the call to widen participation. In fact, rather than widening participation, the older and more traditional universities continued as normal by selecting their undergraduates based on ever higher grades for the more popular courses; however, it seemed as though they were less rigid when they needed to fill

places on less popular courses. By contrast, the newer universities tended to recruit their students from non-traditional backgrounds within a more restricted geographical area. These new universities which had been polytechnics traditionally catered for students within the neighbourhood, so rather than widening participation it was more the case that the recruitment was based on the market within which they operated (Smith, 1993, Gilchrist, 2003, Read, 2003). The complexities associated with admissions for students have been exacerbated by central government policies which encourage competition between universities within a hierarchy based on status.

The Sutton Trust found that admissions policies discriminate against lower socio-economic groups and Greenbank's findings substantiate the claims made by the Sutton Trust. In separate analysis of the admissions system great store is placed on predicted grades and there is evidence (Wyness, 2017, Murphy and Wyness, 2020, Holt-White et al., 2020) to suggest that because non-traditional students are likely to be under predicted, their choices are curtailed because the university tariffs (A-level grade requirements) are higher than their predicted grades. They are also of the opinion that these same students lack access to the right information and which with limited advice and guidance means they are less well prepared when selecting a university. In consequence, these students opt for courses of lower standing. The use of predicted grades rather than actual results is both unfair and counterproductive if the greater potential is being denied the opportunity to be realised.

Many reasons have been put forward to explain why, despite the expansion of student numbers attending university, certain groups remain statistically underrepresented. Research findings from Reay (Reay, 1998, Reay et al., 2010) suggests that increasing the numbers attending elite universities is complex. The expansion of university provision has seen an increase in the numbers from non-traditional backgrounds applying, but the statistics reveal that much of the increase has been from more middle class families (Winterton and Irwin, 2012 citing research by Elias and Purcell from Essex University). Amongst possible factors for the rates of under representation are a lack of information, knowledge and understanding of

higher education, which is often seen as ‘elitist’, plus the financial implications and concerns about debt. All of which is set within the context of a student’s cultural and social capital that is often linked to family and educational environment referenced within a geographical location. Research by Holdsworth (Holdsworth, 2009) challenges the assumption of student mobilities when going to university, in that student mobility is rather more associated with elite establishments. This sense of mobility maybe a contributory factor to under representation at the more prestigious institutions in that a potential student from a family with little or no experience of higher education, tends to remain local. The significance of what Woodward (Woodward, 2021) identifies as location capital which attaches importance to perceptions about fitting in with the social mores, rather than looking for social advancement, means that such an approach both influences the type of university and course applied for and in consequence impose limitations on where such a student might apply. Further research into locational factors has been born out to some extent by Mangan’s (Mangan et al., 2010) quantitative study who suggest that up to an 18% greater application rate to higher status universities may be possible if the students’ sixth form area was in close proximity to an elite institution.[7]

The fact that for many students who are applying to university, they may be the first generation within their family to consider, and/or to have the opportunity of studying at university. The social-familial implications and consequences accompanying the decision may well be more important considerations than a mere lack of procedural knowledge about the application process and what to expect at university. In many ways these social-familial concerns are indicative of the importance of class and the associated inequalities in terms of their expectations and possible access to the more prestigious universities. Winterton’s (Winterton and Irwin, 2012) longitudinal study based on ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) data, albeit for young women, nevertheless illustrates the importance of developing expectations and attitudes to higher education within the complexities of the interplay between processes, background and circumstances in shaping attitudes towards applying and going to university. The analysis and conclusions from their research highlighted a correlation between family educational history, parents’ expectations,

[7] Interesting to speculate whether this might be because it is local and therefore accepted as being there, or whether the ethos and the role of the higher status university within the wider local community is a valued and aspirational exemplar.

and school influences, including those of friendship groups and peers. Researchers Bradley and Miller (Bradley and Miller, 2010) using a Q-sort with fifty-three year twelve pupils (former coal-mining area) who were eligible to go university on the theme of 'going to university identified five categories namely:

"positive", "put off", "perplexed", "pragmatic" and "other plans".

which reflected their attitudes to university. The findings from such research provides a valuable insight into raising educational aspirations, especially in those areas which are classified as economically disadvantaged; but could it not be argued that the idea of going to university is seen as not relevant because it is beyond their social, cultural, and locational habitus?

The marketisation of education has created the 'student consumer'; which has empowered the student with regard to choice[8]. Pugsley (Pugsley, 1998) using ESRC funded data looked at how families demonstrated different levels of market based competences. However to assume that this generic description of the 'student consumer' fits all students would be wrong, for as Tomlinson's (Tomlinson, 2017) qualitative study suggests the consumer approach does not capture the range of perceptions the student may have about the role of higher education. Universities have become entrepreneurial to compete with other providers; therefore, students will act as consumers to evaluate competing claims before deciding. The application of the Competition and Marketing Authority requirements (CMA) from 2015 to university provisions may have formalised student university relations regarding information, terms, and conditions, plus complaints procedures, but in so doing has changed the relationship between student and university. In many ways, this can be seen as giving the student choice, yet it is reinforcing and embedding within educational provision the neoliberal philosophy of the supremacy of the marketplace. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 which introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework(TEF), placed the student at the centre of higher education and thus consolidated the principle of the rights of the consumer (Raaper, 2019). Thus, perhaps it was inevitable, that with this transition to student

[8] The concept of choice, much favoured and used within contemporary society ought to be qualified by noting that the agency to act is restricted by societal constraints, such as wealth, calls, status etc. which when in combination, such that choice can often be severely limited.

as customer, ‘the student experience’ has ‘acquired the aura of a sacred utterance’ (Sabri 2011 cited in Raaper, 2019). The findings of student experiences are published in the National Student Survey (NSS) and which then are available to help inform potential consumers. But, perhaps the most significant aspect of the ‘student as consumer’ is the transition of the student from that of a recipient of education, to that of private investor looking for a dividend. Which when examined in connection with changes in employment development means that a degree is now a pre-requisite for employment in many occupations, rather than being simply a useful adjunct to an employment application. The status and standing of the university attended can be significant, (Wakeling and Savage, 2015) found strong evidence to show the importance of Russell Group universities in terms of securing better financial returns once employed.

The concept of social mobility accompanying widening participation, especially within the wider context of a meritocratic society, has been challenged by leading educational researchers (Marshall et al., 1997, Themelis, 2008, Stuart, 2012, Bathmaker et al., 2013, Reay, 2013, Hoskins and Barker, 2014, Elliot-Major, 2018, Exley, 2019, Elliot-Major, 2020, Reay, 2021) and in the writings of a leading social historian from Oxford (Todd, 2021). The discussions and concerns raised by such research to challenge the concept of social mobility have been widely reported in the media (Shepherd, 2009a, Shepherd, 2009b, Coslett, 2016, Okolosie, 2016, Walker, 2017). With the questioning of the validity of the claim that social mobility is embedded in wider participation, other researchers have looked at the ideas of meritocracy and drawn conclusions which indicate that meritocracy is at best a paradox (Castilla and Benard, 2010) or false (Mark, 2019). If then social mobility and the idea of a meritocratic society have been found to be wanting, does this mean then the ideas of justice as defined by Rawls (Rawls, 2009) and Fraser (Avendaño, 2009) are not really addressed by widening participation? The case made for a failure of social justice to be realised is made in the writings of several researchers (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007, Dorling, 2010, Dorling, 2014, Smith, 2012, Gerrard, 2013, Unterhalter et al., 2014).

The whole question of social justice associated with university admissions has been, not only the subject of much academic research, but also received many column inches of media coverage; but rather than looking at the issue just in terms of a utilitarian perspective, Kotzee (Kotzee and Martin, 2013) frame the question of access by asking who should go to university, from an ethical viewpoint concerned with developing knowledge and understanding, rather than simply career preparation. Such an approach questions the underlying philosophy of widening participation and the rationale underpinning the purpose of current school and university provision. Education and learning are more than just a preparation for corporate employment. Apart from looking to explain why there is under representation should we reframe the question and seek the views of those who do not go to university? Focus group research findings (Hutchings and Archer, 2001) amongst young working-class suggests they have not rejected education *per se*, but rather they had identified the options open to them as second-rate.

Whilst much has been written about the processes, results, and impact on groups of students by different classifications, little attention has been paid to the student's personal experiences. This study into individual and personal perceptions and experiences when applying to university, will provide an insight into the factors influencing decision making at an important stage in the educational journey and which are not normally considered when viewed from the position of the objective structural model. Such accounts may have wider implications for future success and welfare of students and provision. There seems to be little recorded research in this area apart from Smith's (Smith and Zhang, 2009) research, although looking into the American system where the transfer from school to college is more vertically integrated than the system in England, nonetheless has some relevance in that they too have identified a neglected aspect of the transition process, namely the perceptions of the factors and influences taken into account by students when making decisions about the next stage in their educational journey. They too recognize that the transition for first generation students is more problematic than the experiences of those students with family members who have had experience of higher education. They also acknowledge the importance of the academic credentials of the school and its curriculum before listing individual persons who, to varying degrees offered help. Parental encouragement and support as a form of social capital was identified as important. The quantitative survey, based on fifty

plus questions, allowed various statistical tests to be applied to the findings. Interestingly, in their discussion and analysis they suggest that the degree of helpfulness may have been inflated for when referenced against GPA (Grade Point Average) scores, which they used as their comparator reference, the results revealed little additional value had been added.

Widening participation based on aspiration grounded in meritocratic principles and a belief in social justice and social mobility is a complex concept which cannot be addressed entirely in a single case study. Wyness, may have identified a lack of the right information, along with limited advice and guidance resulting in many students being generally less well prepared than their contemporaries in fee-paying establishments and whilst many of these issues will have a bearing on student choice, the focus of this research to examine the factors and influences which are most important to the individual student when making a personal choice.

2.2 English Education

Nothing which takes place in the present does so without reference to the past. This connection is more than the buildings and tangible artifacts although they do serve to reinforce the more influential collective social and cultural narratives which accompanied past events. The extent to which these attendant attitudes are imbibed and absorbed, almost by a process of osmosis is difficult to ascertain, yet the acceptance of the socio-cultural narrative, either consciously or unconsciously, serves to influence expectations, attitudes, and approaches to new events. In tracing some of the key aspects in the development of educational provision, some of these embedded attitudes can be identified and help to explain the influences on student choice and thus address the research question.

> '…the hereditary curse upon English education is its organization upon lines of social class' R.H. Tawney's (1931:142) (quoted in Mckenzie, 2014)

Figures show that approximately seven percent of all school age children attend independent schools. The secondary private establishments secure some fifty

percent of the top traditional university places (Sutton Trust, 2011). This mismatch between the type of school attended and the subsequent university experienced is:

> "..one of the great threads which runs through the history of education is the conflict between education as a liberating and egalitarian influence and education as a way of justifying elitism and privilege.' (Walford, 1990:19)

This conflict identified by Walford is still relevant today.

Moore (Moore, 2004) discussed how in the immediate post Second World War years there consensus about social welfare based on Keynesian economics and implemented through the ideas contained in the Beveridge Report. Key to understanding this consensus was the expectation that society would become more just, fair, and egalitarian. The removal of the 'five wants' identified in the Beveridge Report envisaged education as a solution to restructuring the country. Programmes of school building and teacher recruitment and training along with an expansion in higher education.

During the late sixties and early seventies, the political unity holding the welfare consensus together started to flounder when the failing national economy saw a period of fiscal retrenchment. The 'Oil Crisis' of the early seventies compounded the economic problems and education was no longer regarded as the solution to rebuilding a post war society, but rather as the problem to re-establishing the country's fortunes. Callaghan's Ruskin Speech[9] is regarded as initiating 'The Great Debate' about the nature and purpose of public education to provide the opportunity for young people to 'take their place in the world of work'. Subsequent reforms to educational provision were designed to improve the standards and qualifications of young people and thus rise to the challenges of competing in a global world.

The post-Callaghan government of the conservative party led by Thatcher, with its faithfulness to Neoliberal philosophy challenged and changed many of the provisions associated with the welfare state. Adherence to the Neoliberal philosophy required the restructuring of educational provision. Competition through market forces would address issues associated with value for money and the introduction of

[9] College Oxford on 18 October 1976,

inspection and accountability would raise standards. The breakdown of the welfare consensus provided the opportunity for their reforms which they argued would create the skilled workforce necessary by rooting aspiration and outcome within personal development. The commodification of education as a personal, rather than a collective good transformed the relationship between schools and learning outcomes in the first instance and later when similar policies were applied to universities. Education became subservient to the demands of wealth creation and in consequence education became increasingly seen as instrumental to securing future careers (Sennett, 1998, Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, Beder, 2006, Harvey, 2007, Sennett, 2006, Sennett, 2008, Collini, 2012). The rhetoric accompanying neoliberal policy laid great emphasis on the need to widen participation in higher education and thereby increase opportunities for social mobility. The claims for greater social justice during the period covered under the forty years of neoliberal policies initially introduced by Thatcher and continued by New Labour under Blair and Brown, do not seem to be borne out by research (Ball et al., 2000, Ball, 2003b, Reay et al., 2005, Ball, 2006, Ball et al., 2012b, Bathmaker et al., 2013, Reay, 2013, Reay, 2017). At best they are an 'unstable amalgam of economic rationality and social justice' (Stevenson et al., 2010:105) which is either rather naïve, or plainly disingenuous.

The introduction of market forces to education resulted in the commodification of education and the rise of the academy and other establishments which fell outside the remit of the LEA. The reduced role for the LEA, along with the narrative of individualism has empowered the rising numbers of professional managerial class to become even more discerning and articulate consumers of education for their children (Ball, 2003b, Ball, 2006, Ball, 2007, Bathmaker et al., 2008). Parents as consumers deploy their capital to optimise the best advantage for their children by securing what they believe to be the best possible education be this in the private sector, or by monopolising places in the best non-fee-paying schools. The aim underpinning school choice is to secure good examination results, leading to a choice university place that ultimately results in a professional career. Securing a 'good' university place has taken on a new significance for both potential student and their family, as well as the school and its sixth-form. Successful A-level results at a good school sixth form will lead to a good university (Sutton Trust, 2011).

The sixth form, once the preserve of public-school elite, was regarded as a preparation for admission to university and the professions. After the Second World War the Welfare State was introduced to redress some of the social ills which had preceded the outbreak of war. Educational expenditure on state funded provision was increased to address the 'want of ignorance'. The funding from central government was to ensure a national system of provision, but it was the democratically elected local authorities who, through their appointed officials at the LEA, were responsible for local policy decisions and provision. Under the 1944 Butler Act a system of tripartite secondary education[10] was introduced and resulted in additional grammar schools being built. Each new grammar school came with sixth-form provision which replicated the traditions of the existing grammar schools as academic institutions to train and prepare young people for a middle-class role within society. The type of sixth-form developed by Dr. Arnold at Rugby School has become synonymous with 'good' academic standards and is regarded as a major factor in building pupils of 'character'. A school with a sixth-form and an ability to prepare and secure university places for its students, adds social kudos and status to the school, and as such a sixth form is regarded as an important asset to a school. The A-level examination was introduced in 1951 as an indicative standard of academic achievement for students in the post-compulsory sixth-form. Soon after the introduction of the A-level it was used as a pre-requisite for admission to universities undergraduate courses as an indication of potential academic ability.

In addition, to the increase in the number of Grammar schools, the introduction of comprehensive schools following Circular 10/65 saw additional numbers of students staying on in newly established comprehensive sixth-forms. Associated with the increase in sixth-form numbers, was the expectation by the LEAs, schools, teachers, parents, and students that state funded sixth-forms would prepare their students for university. This focus and emphasis on A-levels and securing a place

[10] Tripartite secondary education was to have included technical schools as well as grammar and secondary modern; very few technical schools were actually built, whether this was down to costs, or a reflection on education which seemed more intent on producing middle managers in the grammar schools and factory workers in the secondary modern may be disputed. What is not in dispute, is that there has throughout the history of English education been a reluctance to accept technical subjects as being worthy of comparison with the more traditional academic subjects. Degree equivalent awards through CAT and CNAA before degrees officially recognised in the nineteen nineties.

at university was often at the expense of alternative avenues for students such as apprenticeships and FE courses. Both the Wolf Report[11] and the Augar Report[12] stressed the importance of fully funded vocational provision within a fully integrated education policy[13]. Yet such provision was not widely implemented and for the same reason that so few of the proposed 1944 Act's call for technical schools were constructed, namely initial and subsequent ongoing costs associated with plant, equipment, and materials. Schools continue to concentrate on the traditional A-level route in preparation for university admission, not just because of the financial costs associated with the vocational courses, but their standing is currently measured by A-level results and university admission success (especially to the more prestigious universities),

The numbers going to university increased (2.49 million in 2009/10 reaching 2.75 million in 20/21) (Clark, 2022), university expansion[14] has occurred in response to the demand for more places. Changing economic structures and trading arrangements, within an increasingly competitive global marketplace led to the introduction, following the Robbin's Report (1963)[15], of additional universities to increase the nation's global competitiveness. Further reforms during the latter part of the twentieth century saw the development of New Universities[16] (many of which had been former polytechnical colleges or colleges of education). It was envisaged that the recently qualified graduates would be employed in the newly emergent financial and high-tech industries associated with neoliberal and global economics (Eriksen, 1995, Trow, 2007). Increasingly, the conflation of university and employment (Stahl, 2015) means that going to university has become almost a prerequisite for a future employment. Many of the newer degree awarding universities offer more demand led courses in response to changes in perceptions

[11] Review of Vocational Education (March 2011)
[12] Review of Post-18 Education and Funding (CP 117 May 2019)
[13] The Post-16 Skills Plan (SAINSBURY, D. 2016. Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education. London.) (updated 2018) with 34 recommendations to address the 20,000 plus courses and one hundred and sixteen providers promises to add further complications to centre provision and student choices.
[14] In addition to the seven ancient universities and six Victorian Red Brick universities a further thirteen intuitions were granted charters between 1900 and 1962
[15] The Robbins Report (1963) – Higher Education Cmnd 2154 – which led to an additional eighteen institutions, the so-called Plate Glass or Campus universities
[16] 1992 Further and Higher Education Act

about their role and function as a university within the context of the marketplace. The introduction of these new courses and subjects can be viewed as income generation sources following the radical realignment of university funding from the state to the student. These changes which meant that students paid fees up-front for their education, albeit with a government backed student loan, has resulted in students becoming consumers of university products.

The recent development of academies and Free schools has also increased the demand for sixth-form provision. Whether these developments in provision dating back to the 1988 Education Reform Act and escalated under the coalition and Conservative governments (2010 to present) are economically and/or educationally sound, is a moot point, but in a highly competitive marketplace the perception is that a school with a sixth-form is seen, by many, to be an attractive attribute. The requirement of schools to report the destinations of their students[17] can also be seen as an additional motivation to have sixth-form provision. Such developments are in accordance with the market economy's claim that competition will raise standards. Competition between schools to attract sixth-form students can have a detrimental effect on provision, especially in less successful establishments where fewer enrolled students will lead to a reduced curriculum, thus reducing its appeal potential students still further.

In addition to A-levels, some school centres offer BTEC (first offered in 1984). Level three National BTECs focus on the practical aspects and hands-on learning approaches to education. Under the UCAS points system these qualifications entitle students to apply to universities, in the main, it is the post 1992 which award places on point scores. The introduction of the BTEC has seen an increase in the number of applied courses at university as they widen the opportunities for young people who traditionally would not have considered university study to continue with their education. The increase take up of such courses may be attributable to the lack of any alternative (unemployment 16-24 year olds at 17% with many others

[17] DfE requirement since 2014 and updated 2018 in Destinations data Good practice guide for schools October 2018

underemployed, engaged as part-time workers or on zero-hour contracts) may be of some significance (Dorling, 2016).

Traditionally universities from their inception catered for men and only reluctantly granted access to women to study at university and be awarded a degree, the first being the university of London in 1878. The current situation has changed with eight-point five percent more female applications being received at the age of eighteen and twenty-six percent more likely to gain a place at a higher tariff university (Ratcliffe, 2013, Dorling, 2015, Press Association, 2017). The admission of more women is an indication of changing values attached to gendered education and societal expectations of the role expected to be played by women in the workplace.

Notwithstanding the historical development of the sixth-form, and changing reforms to university admissions, for many students the 16-19 experience takes place in environments which are different from the lower school experience. Entry into the sixth-form is usually based on the expectation that A-level/BTEC experience is a preparation for higher education and a future career (Kirton, 2018a), rather than a direct preparation for the work place which might have been the case in previous years. These changes in student expectations are reflected in the changing role played by sixth-form centres, for in addition to introducing deeper and more academically stimulating study in a smaller number of subjects, they are studied in environments which promote individual responsibility for learning. Sixth-forms also prepare and help students with post-school career and academic pathways. These ongoing developments in educational provision and support for their students in securing a successful university and career pathway choice are part of the accountability criteria by which centres are judged.

Too often state sixth-forms have concentrated, for a variety of reasons, on academic subjects, by contrast practical and vocational subjects have been less well catered for or ignored all together. The extent to which successive governments and have sought to keep to the ‘gold standard’ of the A-level (albeit in revised

formats depending on changes in political educational philosophy) at the expense of a more fully integrated provision for 14–18-year-olds, is debateable. Yet, many more young people now look to go into tertiary education than ever before in the anticipation of securing future employment. Are schools with a sixth-form intake of fewer than two hundred and fifty students really viable concerns (Fletcher et al., 2000, Wilby, 2016), both financially and academically (Igoe, 2015), are they able to offer a comprehensive range of subjects along with the necessary guidance and support for future academic/employment choices in line with the expectations placed upon schools by students, parents and university admissions tutors? Amalgamation and cooperation with other competing sixth-form centres may, along with partnerships with local FE colleges[18], be a temporary/partial solution to the problems of curriculum coverage it only begs the question: are sixth-forms an outmoded concept? Is the Arnoldian sixth-form concept anachronistic? Does the retention of the school sixth-form owe more to entrenched vested interests, status, and prestige, rather than a considered reappraisal of the changing societal needs and requirements which are needed to assist young people make the transition into adult life? The introduction of dedicated sixth-form colleges (16-19) (currently 93 active) catering for large numbers of students, exemplify many of the key attributes of the neoliberal market economic rationale, namely economies of scale and the provision of dedicated support staff (pastoral and careers), with a greater range of subjects and qualifications available to the students, unfortunately they have suffered even greater financial constraints than school sixth forms[19]. These dedicated sixth-form colleges are also better placed to influence and implement integrated programmes of study which could include vocational and practical subjects within the context of a wider 14-19 provision. This research will highlight the problems faced by the centre in providing, not just a challenging and varied curriculum to cater for the different requirements of its student cohort but will also show how the careful deployment of support staff can make the transition into higher education less stressful.

[18] Anglia Sixth Form Colleges – eleven colleges in Norfolk and Suffolk with 32,000 students and 8,000 apprenticeships are working together to secure links between education and work and are involved in a Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)
[19] Sixth-form colleges are not VAT exempted.

2.3 A-levels

When choosing subjects at A-level, students select just three from the larger range of GCSE subjects studied in the lower school. The choice of these three A-level subjects can also have implications for university (White, 2007). The choice of A-level subjects has always been personal and important, and for some students the choice of subjects has been particularly problematic. With the increased expectations associated with higher education are students getting the most useful and helpful information and advice. If Hall (Hall, 2021) is correct to suggest that one in five students made A-level choices which not only restricted their degree, but also future career choice, do sixth form students have sufficient information and understanding of the important factors to make an informed decision (Murray, 2012)?

A-levels have traditionally been regarded as the 'gold standard' for educational attainment, not only within England and Wales since their introduction in 1951, but also internationally[20]. Since their introduction there have been several revisions to their structure and content, partly to reflect pedagogic practice and partly in accordance with changing political perspectives about the role and function of education. The latest revisions were made during the coalition government in 2016 which promised a return to 'academic rigor' and which would better prepare students for university. Key to these changes was the greater role universities' staff would play in enhancing subject content in line with current research and developments, along with the integration of advanced skills-bases to develop learning and research skills. The removal of the modularity approach of the previous AS and A2 to be replaced with a single end of course examination would, it was postulated, help prepare students for taking final examinations at university. These changes required centres to evaluate and prepare new schemes of work to meet the challenges, especially in terms of preparing students for the final examinations which would contain a synoptic element based on reasoned analysis. This development was a significant change from the more structured and predictable question formats under the previous examination structures.

[20] Each of the examination Awarding Bodies (AQA, OCR, Edexcel) are open to students overseas. Edexcel introduced their own International Advance Level IAL (2013)

Education is regarded as an important element of central government planning. A better educated workforce will have the prospects of better paid employment and increased opportunities for social mobility. Thus, a key element underpinning the rationale for the 2016 changes to A-levels was the return to traditional A-level standards and values. By securing the top A-level grades students will gain access to good universities, especially the top research universities, such as the elite Russell Group which are highly regarded by potential employers. Success in securing both good A-level results and a place at an elite university would enable society to continue to compete successfully in international league tables. In achieving good grades and securing a degree, personal aspirations would be fulfilled, and social mobility obtained, yet despite the increased investment in education, social mobility is a narrative for which empirical research seems to offer little support. From the detailed studies undertaken by Goldthorpe, who concluded it was changing industrial economic circumstances which facilitated intergenerational social mobility, rather than educational policies and student achievements. The repetition of the narrative that education and social mobility permeates successive post war administrations. The Social Mobility Commission, which was set up by the last Labour administration, to monitor and advise on measures to correct inequalities failed to make any discernible effect on social mobility[21]. The Commission's report into the State of the Nation 2018 – 2019 highlighted inequalities and disparities between various sectors and different geographical regions, especially former industrial areas of the north and midlands and rural areas, where educational achievement was low and social mobility was very much restricted with smaller numbers of students attending universities and acquiring higher status jobs. From such official reports it would seem as though attempts to redress social inequality by widening participation leading ultimately to social mobility need to be re-evaluated and redressed (Todd, 2017). The introduction of OFFA (Office for Fair Access) and its annual reports indicated that despite university expansion and widening participation such developments were failing to ensure able students from non-traditional backgrounds had ready access to the higher status university. Sixth-form students, in committing to A-levels, find themselves in competing for the 'golden ticket' (Benn, 2018) to secure their future and a successful career, in a system with in-built inequalities based on class, family

[21] Alan Milburn (chair) resigned in 2017 over the lack of progress

background and geographical location, rather than a system which is open, fair and based on merit.

Changing expectations have added to the pressures on A-level students, and sixth-form centres. Academic research provides a theoretical framework to explain the continuation of social disadvantage in educational outcomes have identified social class as a major contributory factor (Ball, 2003a, Ball, 2003b, Ball, 2006, Ball et al., 2012a, Reay et al., 2005, David et al., 2009, Bathmaker et al., 2013)[22]. More recently as part of school reforms, increased accountability measures of a school's effectiveness include the impact and role the school plays in influencing student attitudes and progress. Studies undertaken by Donnelly (Donnelly, 2015a, Donnelly, 2015b) who revisited Bernstein's earlier studies into framing and the extent to which schools set and reinforce class norms (Bernstein, 1971, Bernstein, 1973, Bernstein, 1975, Atkinson and Atkinson, 1985) reiterated the importance of social class operating within schools. Schools are not neutral; they reflect societal values and standards as well as imparting academic knowledge and understanding.

Students when making decisions are influenced not just by the course itself, but more importantly by information about employment opportunities and potential salaries. This information can be very important consideration influencing a final decision and choice of subject and university (Davies et al., 2017). Research into school subjects, in particular the status of the subject, concluded the more traditional A-level subjects would be most useful in securing a university place (Bleazby, 2015). These findings are in line with advice given by the Russell Group of universities to avoid the newer 'trendier' media and communication subjects.[23] Dilnot (Dilnot, 2016) found that variations in A-level choices by social background,

[22] Herrmann's recent article (HERRMANN, J. 2020. Britain's best universities are dominated by private schools. Could I help level the playing field? *The Guardian Education* [Online]. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/10/britains-best-universities-are-dominated-by-private-schools-could-i-help-level-the-playing-field.highlights the CSJ (2020) report 'The Third Degree' where St Pauls School London has twelve teachers who are trained as university advisers, a service not affordable for students in the state sector.

[23] Part of the 2016 reforms also included a culling of some of the A-level subjects which were regarded by some as 'softer' options, including Archaeology, Classical Civilisation and human biology. In addition, most of the vocational subjects were withdrawn, thus reducing the availability of choice.

especially in those subjects identified as facilitating subjects, to be statistically significant when making applications to university. The current government's emphasis and encouragement to study science and technology subjects through its STEM policy does not seem to be quite so enthusiastically shared by students and HE institutions (Banerjee, 2017). By contrast to much of the academic theorising, the in-depth case study of Pugsley (Pugsley, 2004) offers a more human scale by looking at the practical impact made by school provision on student progression to university in a small number of schools.

It is now seventy years since the introduction of the A-level during which time there have been many advances in all aspects of knowledge. Periodically the relevance of A-levels has been called into question (Hazell, 2021, Smith, 2021). In particular, the narrow focus, especially when comparisons are made with other European and North American countries where students of sixth form age follow much broader curriculum. A second area for concern centres on the use of A-levels as admissions criteria for university with one in four grade awards being awarded an A. Not even the introduction of the starred A (A*) has made the predictive function of the A-level easier. In response to what some observers have identified as 'grade inflation' some subjects at the Russell Group require a successful outcome from a specialist University admissions test (e.g. BMAT).

Sixth form provision has increased since the 1950's catering for a greater number of students who have the qualifications to enter specialist subject teaching at A-level. Associated with the changes to A-level subject content have been to the acquisition of academic and analytical skills. Studying at this level brings its own pressures, but for the sixth formers going to university there is the additional stress of selecting a university and a course of study. These decisions are correlated with employment and are firmly rooted in the premise that the individual should take the initiative and be responsible for one's own learning. This adds an extra stressful burden to students who are not used to making such important decisions. Information and support from a variety of sources and influences will be reflected in a student's considered choice. Information presented by the school and data supplied by universities will help in the process, as will other influences which will come from

their familial background and the geographical location of their home, school, and community. Choice is regarded as the product of careful deliberation, yet the extent to which social and emotional factors are considered, whether recognised or acknowledged, and which will nonetheless inform, and influence a student's choice, are often overlooked.

2.4 Universities

> "The university graduate has been schooled for selective service among the rich of the world." (Illich, 1972)

Since their establishment in medieval England, universities have played, and continue to play, a significant and multi-faceted role within society. Universities have been associated with the creation and dissemination of knowledge, they have also traditionally provided the pre-requisites for future holders of high office (both spiritual and temporal). The link between university and access to power and future employment was established in the very early days. Admission to the early universities was restricted to students drawn from a small group of societally well-connected and established families. In consequence, these establishments became self-perpetuating elite institutions which both symbolised and conveyed privilege and status.

The piecemeal development of universities during the Victorian period, which had seen a small-scale increase in the number provincial and Red Brick universities was reassessed by the Robbin's Report (1963) which identified a need for an expansion of university provision to meet the post-war challenges. The report was partly in response to meet individual needs for personal development and partly society's need to engage with increasingly more competitive markets in a global realignment of international politics, influences and power balances (Robbins, 1963, para.16: 5 and para. 25: 6). Central to the Robbins Report were the development of skills (including professional and vocational) and the advancement of learning within a cultural setting which engaged with citizenship. Anthony Crossland's (1965) observation that 'higher education should aspire to be relevant, vibrant, deserving of public support… not simply prestigious, selective and reassuringly expensive' (McGettigan, 2013:11), may now, with contemporary developments in higher

education, be viewed through a different lens. It is against this background of widening opportunities that this research into the factors and influences on student choice is based.

Full-time university numbers more than doubled in 1970/71 (457,000) since the introduction of the new seventeen Post-Robbin's universities. In 1992 Polytechnics gained degree awarding status as autonomous universities. Total student numbers in full-time higher education rose to one point two million. This transition from an elite to mass university education, especially with the expectation that half of all eighteen-year-old students would be in full time education by 2010, meant that a radical change to funding arrangements would be required to finance the expansion. The Dearing Report suggested that students should contribute £1,000 towards their fees. A figure which was soon raised to £3,000 in 2004 by the Blair government only to be raised again to £9,000 in 2010 by the Lib-Con coalition government. The significance of such increases, along with the removal of central government's block grants to university for teaching and research, in all a but a few restricted disciplines (STEM), meant that there has been a shift from public financing for higher education to one of personal student debt. A move away from education as a 'public good' to that of a 'private benefit' (Holmwood, 2011). The prospect and implication of a student loan debt represented a major shift in educational provision and became a major consideration to be factored into the decision to go to university.[24]

The change in funding to one where students became fee-paying consumers has implications for both the universities, who are actively recruiting prospective students, and for the students who have become customers of an educational product. The accompanying narrative of capital investment in personal development, emphasises personal aspirations and expectation which will enable young people to embrace the enterprise culture and thus increase their chances of social mobility and wealth accumulation. The acquisition of a university degree, along with a range of graduate level 'transferable skills', is increasingly seen as a

[24] For the non-traditional would be undergraduate the fee represented a major outlay, by comparison students from fee-paying schools would, in most cases, be paying less for their university education than they paid in school fees.

pre-requisite for employment and social mobility. Graduates are seen as being better placed to respond to market opportunities within rapidly changing and developing employment opportunities (Glover et al., 2002). Thus, the idea of "Going to University" may be that young people are carefully weighing up the costs and the possible benefits and the probabilities of a particular course being rewarding. Are such students exercising Rational Action Theory (Boudon et al., 1974), or are these students in essence "Strategic Students" (Kneale in Maunder and Harrop, 2003) who have merely identified the university route as the only way to achieve employment and for whom the qualification is more important than intrinsic study at an advance level? These deterministic and materialistic explanations have been reassessed in light of the findings of the Behavioural Approaches to choice which suggest that there can be a wide spectrum of influences and factors affecting the taking decisions and the making of choices (Diamond, 2012b).

Central governments have been actively engaged in promoting alternative providers with degree awarding powers, partly to meet the demand of employers, but also to introduce competition into the hitherto carefully regulated tertiary education sector, thus the number of institutions and awards has increased dramatically. Fielden and Middlehurst's report suggest there were some seven hundred and thirty-two alternative providers (Fielden, 2017). This move towards private providers has been, and continues to be, the subject of intense debate with opposition from those who argue for public rather than private universities (Holmwood, 2011). To complicate matters further, there are demands for university courses and/or degree awards from occupations which are seeking to raise their status by an insistence on all-graduate entrance to their profession[25]. Partly in response to the status attached to a degree, or being part of an all-graduate profession, there has been the development of private institutions (from 2012) often owned and operated by large commercial companies for in-house training, which is some cases are empowered to award their own degrees. The privatisation of higher education has been

[25] All graduate police force – to professionalise the service in response to changing requirements of the job – 2015.

encouraged by central governments[26]. This too has become another consideration for potential students to factor into their deliberations.

With such rapidly changing developments in higher education making an informed choice becomes that much more complex. Information and advice which are both relevant and individually pertinent are essential if mistakes are to be avoided. Fee-paying schools, such as St. Pauls School in London has eleven in-house higher education specialists (CSJ, 2020 : 3) to advise and support applicants for not only the most suitable courses, but more often than not at the most prestigious universities. The earlier a school considers thinking about future careers and university courses the greater the correlation between application and degree satisfaction (Hall, 2021).

Currently, all applications to UK universities are made through UCAS. Offers are made by universities before the final examinations are taken. This process is undergoing change. Following the transfer of the cost base for higher education funding from the state to the individual student, universities are looking to recruit, rather than select, students for their courses. The resultant commodification of education, through supply side economics, has resulted in market competition between universities. Expenditure on recruitment (Dorling, 2015) has risen as each university proclaims its 'uniqueness' by offering a range of similar material facilities and sporting activities. Ratings of student satisfaction are often quoted along with future employment rates. The Conservative government introduced the TEF matrix to provide additional information for students. The issue of fees has been addressed to some extent by universities offering grants, bursaries, and other financial packages to help prospective students defer some of the course fees and/or living costs. Understanding the implications of the finer details associated with the

[26] Currently there are six private universities - Universities Minister, David Willets told the Daily Telegraph in July 2013, private universities create a 'genuinely open system that encourages real student choice, and exciting institutional competition should only be seen as a race to the top.' WHEATON, A. 2013. David Willetts's support for private higher education doesn't go far enough. *The Telegraph*.

financial arrangements for attending university are not straight forward, especially for students from families with little or no experience of higher education.

Opening tertiary education to market forces through programmes of wider participation and the new arrangements for funding following the removal of the universities block grant has resulted in a re-interpretation of the part played by universities within society. Universities have changed from being regarded as a public good to that of a commercial purveyor of commodities and where students have become fee-paying consumers of a service. This transition has altered the relationship between student and university. With universities actively recruiting potential students and chasing ratings to raise revenue, is there not a danger in that the marketisation of the more tangible aspects of university life are to the detriment of student education and development? In the drive to attract potential students, universities are offering a range of inducements, including enhanced facilities and a range of cost off-setting bursaries, to secure student numbers and income (Fazackerley, 2016). The failure to attract sufficient numbers of students may have far-reaching consequences for the future viability of an institution (Fazackerley, 2017b). Universities have responded by offering a range of new degrees, including degrees with an extra foundation year. Also, there has been an increase in the number of unconditional offers made to sixth-form students. The implications of these determined and active recruitment drives are contributing to the number of considerations affecting students and their relationship to A-levels and university applications (Busby, 2018, Robert, 2018). Likewise, can the increase in the number of first-class degrees awarded be seen as purely a marketing strategy, or could this simply be a reflection on the raising of teaching standards and student diligence and intelligence? These developments are not without comment (Staff, 2017, Adams, 2018a, Adams, 2018b, Weale, 2018b). With the increasing number of young people securing not only degree passes, but being awarded first class degrees, means there is the risk of grade inflation. Professor Wakeling (York University) suggests, in the world of mass university education, the first degree may not be enough for future career development and that the acquisition of a second degree is almost a pre-requisite for future employment (Wakeling and Laurison, 2017). To what extent have young people factored into their deliberations that the first-degree choice may have implications for future study and career development. These additional factors

have become extra considerations for sixth-form students to factor into consideration.

Associated with the expansion of tertiary education and access to public universities has been the promise of lucrative employment and social mobility, yet several historical themes not only continue to operate, but seem to be even more firmly entrenched. Notwithstanding the expansion of higher education provision under successive governments these developments have served to consolidate the hierarchy of university establishments as shown when universities are ranked according to academic student selection processes, research standing, social and economic exclusivity (Boliver, 2015a, Boliver, 2017)[27]. The link between the established traditional universities and the professional elites continues to be relevant today. The importance of family background in connection with applications and outcomes remains strong (Crawford et al., 2016). In consequence, elite status of class and privilege are perpetuated, often extending beyond the university attended and into future professional occupations and remuneration packages (David et al., 2009, Bathmaker et al., 2013, Boliver, 2011). The linkage between class, school and family and a successful application to one of the more highly regarded universities may have been identified by academics, but has this knowledge been factored into a prospective student's deliberations?

One of the results emerging from these educational reforms has been a change in the traditional patterns of relationships between students, teachers, and institutions; a relationship which is changing as each party comes to terms with their new roles and expectations. Perhaps it is the changing relationship between teacher and student, as expressed by Sir Keith Burnett (vice-chancellor Sheffield University) who regarded the traditional relationship as unique and not being equivalent to any other kind of relationship (Cited in Benn, 2018:37-38) which is seen as an attractive aspect of university by sixth form students. This traditional kind of university education based in a collegiate approach to learning has now been replaced by a more hard-nosed commercial consumerist contract. Are prospective students

[27] Premia Oxford & Cambridge, Second division remaining Russell and now defunct 1994 Group, Third division the 1992 former Polytechnics and the Fourth division consists of former FE institutions.

factoring these changes into their deliberations? Satisfaction with university provision is currently recorded in the annual National Student Survey (320,000 students (2018) responding to twenty-seven questions) and is used as part of the criteria for university ranking (Bhardwa, 2018). The recorded levels of student satisfaction are important indicators for the success of the university application process, yet for those students who felt less than satisfied with their university experience raises questions about their experience. To what extent has their experience been the product of a mis-match between perceptions and expectations, misinformation and/or other factors and circumstances? The implications of this rapidly changing environment may mean that sixth-form tutors and university guidance teachers may have somewhat outdated ideas about university, especially if based on their own experiences. Thus sixth-form students are having to make choices about universities based not simply on academic criteria alone, but on their perceptions of which institution is offering the best value for money and the greatest potential for future career and earnings. Students maybe well versed as consumers of material objects, but do they have enough knowledge and life-experience skills to be able to distinguish between the costs and the value of what is currently available in a very competitive education market? In essence this is at the heart of this research, namely how well prepared and what factors are most influential for sixth form students when they are called upon to make these all-important decisions.

2.5 Widening participation.

The emphasis by successive governments on expanding opportunities for tertiary educational by policies to widen participation at university, has become an important feature of central governments' narrative for education[28]. A key element underpinning the concept of widening participation is to make access to the provision fairer. The belief that such provision would enable potentially able students from lower social backgrounds, who may not traditionally have considered university as a post-school option, to achieve their potential by studying at university. This would be achieved by opening up the admissions process making going to university fairer. Within a meritocratic framework, grounded in the belief that through fair and open access, widening participation would reward those who

[28] *Widening participation in higher education* issued by the Department for Education and Skills' (2006, 3) stated that: 'widening participation means helping more people from under-represented groups … to participate successfully in higher education".

could demonstrate they were the best. In this context, education was to be regarded as instrumental, in terms of facilitating social mobility because successful graduates would have greater choice and opportunities as they benefitted from improved health, higher income and personal fulfilment. Simultaneously, society with its increasingly qualified citizens would advance its wealth and status on the global stage. Accompanying the expansion of university provision has been the establishment of ever closer links, initially with industry and then later with commerce and entrepreneurship (1988 Education Act), between universities and private sector investment, both to influence the nature of research and to absorb graduates into the workforce.

The narrative of the correlation between a degree and employment has gained common acceptance, yet there are several aspects of the policy to widen participation which need to be clarified. First, was widening participation aimed solely at school aged students from non-traditional backgrounds, or was the expansion to include adults who missed out initially on the opportunity to go to university, and/or include those who might want to requalify? Research undertaken by Tight (Tight, 2012) concluded that there had been "some progress in recruiting" from three of the four groups under investigation (women[29], lower socio-economic groups, mature adults and ethnic minorities) only the lower socio-economic group remained lower than expected. Secondly, was the expansion of higher educational provision based on the assumption that formal higher education, rather than other forms of knowledge acquisition, for example apprenticeships, was a more worthy aim? There is a wealth of research literature into widening participation at HE level (over four thousand articles when reviewed by researchers from York University (Gorard, 2006)), but there is very little research into either FE developments and/or the impact of the emphasis on HE expansion to the detriment of FE. Third, by what criteria would widening participation be judged to have been a success. Is there any evidence to substantiate the claim that students admitted from disadvantaged backgrounds fulfil their potential?

[29] Female/Male admissions in 1994 show 133,000/138,000 which by 2018 had changed to 304,000/229,000
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/milestonesjourneyingintoadulthood/2019-02-18

Evidence to substantiate the claims that widening participation would provide opportunities for non-traditional students to benefit from university attendance, is provided by Springford (Cited in Stuart, 2012) who's findings revealed that state educated pupils often out performed privately educated A-level students. And detailed quantitative research into student admissions at Bristol University[30] (Hoare, 2011) has shown that, given the opportunity to attend university, many students from non-traditional backgrounds can achieve top grades. The researchers found that, students from independent schools may have had greater A-level points scores on entry into university, but these students did not always secure the top final university grades. In fact, fewer first-class degrees were awarded to the independent school educated students when compared with state school students[31]. The results may indicate a correlation, but do not establish a causal link. The researchers acknowledged that prior school performances, along with education participant rates within the locality, plus class, gender, and ethnicity, all to varying degrees singly or in combinations, have and continue to play an influential role. There can be no doubting that there has been substantial capital and human investment in the utilitarian project to widen participation. Yet once again the outcome seems to have advantaged the already privileged middle and professional classes, who have used their abilities to manipulate their social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu), along with their economic and associated access to power (Foucault) to secure the maintenance of social positioning for their off-spring (Ball, 2003b). In consequence, not only have existing social and economic inequalities been replicated along the lines of class, gender[32] and race, but they have widened the gaps still further (Burke, 2012). Harris (OFFA, 2011 : 2) reported that although university participation had increased during the five years leading up to the 2009-2010 report, this had not been the case at the more selective establishments where in fact the least advantaged forty percent had flatlined since the mid nineteen

[30] Bristol University has received adverse coverage for its programmes of widening participation, in 2003 it was accused of bias towards state educated children, by 2019 figures showed that with 40% of its admissions it was now in the bottom fifteen universities accepting state pupils https://epigram.org.uk/2019/02/19/only-65-of-bristol-university-students-came-from-state-schools-in-2016-17/

[31] Interestingly it also raises questions about the use and suitability of A-levels as both entrance criteria and indicators of potential intellectual development – perhaps the basis of another research topic.

[32] In terms of increased numbers attending, university women seem to have been the main beneficiaries; closer examination of family backgrounds, suggests that perhaps class is a more significant factor than just being attributable to gender.

nineties. The expansion of higher education provision has seen a transition from a small number of students attending a restricted number of elite establishments to a system of mass education catering for large numbers of students, in a variety of institutions. Accompanying this expansion has been a reinforcement of the social divide, along with a strengthening of the hierarchy and status of the more traditional and prestigious universities at the expense of the former FE and Education Colleges which constitute the post-1992 group of universities. In addition, narratives, along with selective discourses about maintaining standards and safeguarding traditional academic courses, reinforced by published league tables, have all helped to increase the competition for places at the more prestigious universities. During the 2021 UCAS clearing cycle, Clare Marchant (Head of UCAS) warned that competition would be even more intense following a reduction by a third (4,500 to 3,000 places) at the Russell Group pf universities (Woolcock, 2021). The pressure on places is even more intense when the status of the university attended can be a more important factor than the possession of a degree when making applications to the more established and distinguished professions.

Key to widening participation and changing the social composition of the student body, was the need to raise aspirations[33] so that a university degree could be seen as the way forward to a rewarding career. Whether such moves should be regarded as part of a wider strategy for social engineering, or merely seen as being in response to the need to expand the funding base for university finances is of course open to debate. In many ways this debate is critical to the role played by universities within society. Is the primary motivation for widening rates of participation to enable many more students to achieve their potential or is it merely an income generating mechanism for universities following the withdrawal of central funding. Notwithstanding the motivation for the expansion, the Labour administration's 'Aim Higher' provision (2004) sought to address the issue of inequality by encouraging a number of initiatives. These initiatives included outreach activities which might involve university visits and residential summer schools, along with a series of masterclasses and mentoring schemes, all of which were designed to

[33] Aspiration can be seen in terms of both having opportunities to pursue courses of action not normally open to an individual obtain, and which in consequence may result in social mobility, as well as the more commonly accepted aim of securing an occupation with wealth and improved standing of living and wellbeing which is associated with social mobility.

encourage young people, who might traditionally not have considered further study after post-compulsory schooling to think about what university might have to offer them. A second initiative introduced by a Labour government was the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)[34] to insure that university fees were set at a level not to deter potential students who traditionally had not been required to pay for their education. In addition, OFFA was to ensure universities were committed to widening participation by offering and implementing recruitment programmes which transcended traditional admission policies and barriers. Both policy initiatives were subsequently revoked by the Conservative and Liberal Coalition government.

In looking to address issues of inequality by providing opportunities for individuals to participate in higher education, are we not actually overlooking the real issues of inequality which are societal, rather than educational? With such a hegemonic approach which prioritises HE as an unassailable ideal and thus privileged over other forms of learning, several questions are raised, not least - what is meant by 'education'? Equally, by giving priority to the fifty percent of young people who are expected to be included in higher education establishments[35], are the other fifty percent of young people to be regarded as having limited aspirations, and are required to settle for poorer prospects and curtailed expectations as they swell the cohort of NEETs? Even amongst the numbers of sixth formers who are eligible to go to university there may be a reluctance to apply in the first instance, and certainly they may not be inclined to apply to the more prestigious and highly competitive universities. Could this reluctance, on the part of some non-traditional students, and expressed as 'not for the likes of us' (Attwood, 2009) be a rejection of a key element of university expansion, namely, to raise aspiration and realise potential, or one based in a more realistic interpretation which sees behind the narrative of wider participation? Bourdieu and Passeron (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), discussed how the university habitus more closely replicates middle class norms and values, rather than those of the working class. If middle class aspirations regard university as a formative stage in the acquisition of middle-class status, by contrast, the idea of university education for many working-class students is seen purely as

[34] Since January 2018 this body has been superseded by the Office for Students which operates under a different remit

[35] Reference to Tony Blair's call at the 1999 Labour Conference (Bournemouth) that the party's aim would be to have fifty percent of the age cohort receiving a university education.

instrumental in terms of securing future employment (Glover et al., 2002, Attwood, 2011, Parr, 2013, Kirton, 2018b). Reay's empirical research into working class attitudes suggests that there are different value sets which are operational when educational matters are considered (Reay, 1996, Reay, 1998, Reay, 2013, Reay, 2017). Also, it is not unusual for working class children's experiences of schooling to be negative. Thus, the rejection which can be seen as symbolic violence may well produce a sense of alienation resulting in self-protecting strategies and disengagement from further humiliation and shame (Reay, 2017), as well as from academic culture and conventions which constitute the hegemonic narrative of education (Burke, 2012).

2.6 Meritocracy

Accompanying the rhetoric of wider participation, are the narratives of fair access and meritocracy which will, within an equitable and fair society, enable social mobility. In depth research would appear to contradict such claims (Hauser et al., 2000, Themelis, 2008, Owens and de St Croix, 2020), whilst there is some evidence to suggest a hybrid form of mobility is created (Jin and Ball, 2020). Yet the emphasise within English education that merit, diligence, and hard work at school, rather than the happenchance of birth, would lead to securing university admission and ultimately be rewarded with employment, money and power leading to a healthy and prosperous place within society is generally accepted. Some eighty-four percent of respondents in the 2009 British Social Attitudes survey stated that hard work is essential for getting ahead and was more important than luck and/or having family wealth. The narrative of individual effort, rather than inherited advantage, will lead to success has been generally accepted, it is, to some extent, based on a flawed premise. Favourable circumstances[36] that advantage some students over other equally talented individuals seems to have been overlooked or ignored altogether. Therefore, to what extent, is such an ideology merely a coded reinforcement of the existing social stratification by implying that the social order is the natural outcome based on individual effort and the realisation of latent potential? Is there not some irony in a system which claims to reward success within a meritocratic construction

[36] Many of which are related to class and wealth such as geographical location, catchment area and staffing regimes.

widens and more deeply engrains inequality[37]? If by believing that meritocracy rewards hard work and diligence, without acknowledging the possibilities afforded by favourable circumstances contributing to success, is there not a risk that success may be attributed to individual endeavour alone? A consequence of which may lead to a self-congratulatory confidence, resulting in an inclination to be less self-critical, or to examine one's own behaviour for signs of prejudice that can lead to a belief in personal superiority resulting in discriminatory behaviour. A phenomenon which is perhaps best described as a 'paradox of meritocracy' (Castilla and Benard, 2010). Although talent and/or ability honed through effort may support successful outcomes, they are not determinants in their own rights, they are moderated by any number of real-world external agencies and opportunities. Whereas on the other hand, for those who did not make the cut, there is sense of personal failure and rejection. The sense of failure and rejection being compounded in having accepted the narrative of meritocracy as being fair and open to all, they have failed to make the cut in system in which the 'winner takes all' and the responsibility for failure resting with the individual who has failed to meet the required standards.

With the expansion of schooling and later universities, the belief in meritocracy and the rise of social mobility would be re-affirmed for those individuals who had worked hard to achieve certificated success. This narrative which was articulated during a period of rapid post Second World War changes in social policies created better standards in health, housing and living, and when combined with rising educational attainments provided opportunities for intergenerational social mobility to flourish as the newly enriched increasingly became occupationally middle class. Reference to a more critical analysis of educational policy in this period suggest a different picture. The 1944 Butler Act, which has been traditionally regarded as a significant piece of educational legislation was, despite the changes introduced to secondary education, little more than an up-dated version of earlier governmental commissions and

[37] "No matter how we look at it, their life chances, in terms of their ability to access higher education and thereby graduate-level jobs remains severely restricted" (Newby (2005 ; 5) cited in Stuart, 2012 :7)

reports[38] which in essence allocated occupation by birth (Williams, 1965). Education, rather than providing opportunities for social advancement merely replicates social inequality (Themelis, 2008). The provision of compulsory secondary schooling contained within the 1944 act laid the foundation for national examinations at both general 'O' level and the advanced 'A' level in 1951. Although introduced as recognition of educational standards achieved whilst at school, they can also be seen in terms of sponsoring mobility in that the certificates were used as criteria for employment.[39] This belief in the narrative that through competitive examination results obtained in an open and fair system of educational provision would enable the more academically able to advance socially, has been fully embraced by all political parties in the parliamentary acts since the Butler Act of 1944. The Oxford Mobility Study (1972) led Professor Halsey to conclude there was a 'tightening bond between educational attainment and occupational outcomes" (Marshall et al., 1997 : 72) within industrialised societies where there was a greater trend towards meritocracy, but also acknowledged that class origins were important factors. The fact that better examination results are often achieved by students in private and/or selective schools, would seem to indicate that in a system in which educational provision that historically has been rooted in inequality, perhaps owes more to a careful selection of ones' parents than any other contributory factor (Crawford et al., 2016). Does this mean the idea of meritocracy, as revealed in the association between class origins and destinations (facilitated by educational attainment), is nothing more than a defence of class inequalities?

2.7 Social mobility

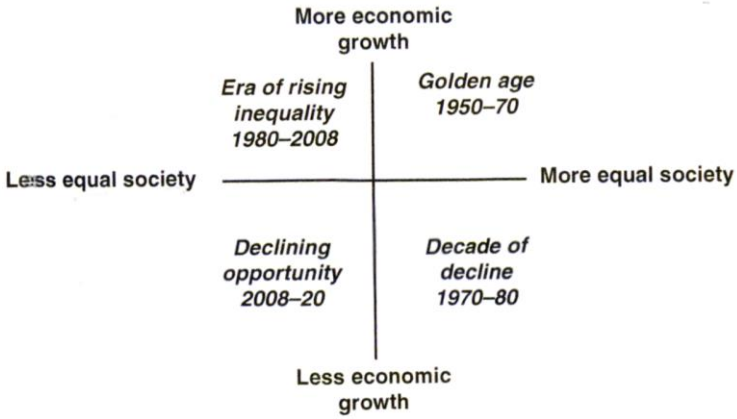
Through policies designed to widen access to university which are based on fairness and merit, existing concerns about social justice and mobility could be addressed. Such an assumption presuppose that society is sufficiently open for such changes to take place. Social mobility is usually defined in economic terms or from a sociological perspective. These two different approaches define social

[38] Taunton Commission, the Hadow, Spens, and Norwood Reports all confirmed and consolidated the ordering of society on rigid class divisions

[39] Gladstone's observations on preparation for the civil service following the Northcote-Trevelyan Report (1854) was that entrance should be by examination and that the gentlemanly classes would fill the higher posts whilst at a lower cost to the exchequer practical and lower order positions could be filled by less qualified people.

mobility from different perspectives and epistemologies. It is usually the economic measurements, associated with occupation and earnings, that are traditionally regarded as the more dominant explanation. Other aspects associated with class structure, such as patterns of consumption, health, and happiness, are increasingly recognised as important indicators of changes in mobility and social justice (Geiger, 2020). Furthermore, there seems to be little common agreement as to whether both concepts should be viewed in terms of intergenerational, intragenerational or multigenerational, absolute, or relative change. Notwithstanding the ambiguities over definitions and approaches, any reported findings will invariably conceal variations within and between the data purporting to show social mobility. Politically, the concepts of social mobility and justice have been championed in terms of equality of opportunity with education as the medium through which such change will take place. Thus, educational policies would make for not only a more inclusive society, but also for a better performing society. By casting the net of educational opportunity wider, the pool of talent, rather than being dependent on a small, privileged cohort from established self-generating social groups, would be diversified, as well as increased.

The question of social mobility, was in the aftermath of the Second World War reconstruction, the subject of in-depth research undertaken in the United Kingdom by Goldthorpe and others who concluded that social mobility was a product of occupational restructuring, rather than due to any other factors (Goldthorpe, 1968a, Goldthorpe, 1968b). In more recent times, changes in the occupational sectors have seen large scale retractions in primary and secondary forms of employment centred in geographical locations. The dramatic increase in footloose service and tertiary services, along with working from home, mean that many new occupations do not need to be tied to specific geographical location. The implications of the changes associated economic development have been summarised by Elliot Major and Machin in the diagram below. Their findings would seem to confirm Goldthorpe’s earlier findings that changing economic fortunes within a global context, rather than just a national framework, were more likely contributory factors to changing patterns of social mobility than educational policy and provision.



Four ages of social mobility in the past seventy years
(Elliot-Major, 2020 : Figure 2.1, p: 14)

The narrative that everyone can achieve success through self-actualisation, continues to be espoused, especially in terms of the role played by aspiration and striving to achieve success through individual effort (Wigfield et al., 2017, Heckhausen and Heckhausen, 2018, Lacey et al., 2022, Urhahne and Wijnia, 2023) Thus, although the conflation of education with employment may been consolidated, advice from a central government report (Stuart, 2013, Long, 2018) revealed somewhat surprisingly that careers advice was only regularly available in just eleven percent of schools in England. Within the schools which made up the eleven percent only half of recommended benchmarks were met (the average being just over two of the benchmarks being met). Twenty percent of schools were reported as lacking in all eight categories (Gatsby_Foundation, 2020). The linking of education, qualification and employment has seen a growth in the provision and abundance of academic and formal qualifications which serve as both an indication of introductory competence, as well as possible potential. Yet, even though the workforce may be more educationally qualified than in previous generations, such qualifications are not sufficient in themselves to guarantee suitable, or even paid, employment. Data publish by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2019) shows that 31% of graduates had more educational qualifications than was required for the work they were doing in 2017. That included 22% of those who graduated before 1992 and 34% of those who graduated in 2007 or later (Weale, 2019a). Does this finding detract from one of the key selling points that higher education leads to better paid employment? Developments in

globalisation, along with advances in digital restructuring within many traditional occupations, allied to the growth of modern electronic and digital industries and occupations, may have created demands for new skill sets and intelligences which require higher levels of educational attainment, but by the very ephemeral nature of such developments and the associated volatility within the jobs market can often result in a lack of employment security. As each year's new cohort of graduates swell the already saturated graduate labour pool with their more up to-date qualifications, previously qualified graduates are being challenged in the rapidly changing employment marketplace. The implications of such changes have perhaps been best highlighted in a series of publications by Sennett who's research into the impact of modern employment (Sennett, 1998, Sennett, 2003, Sennett, 2006) looks at the personal cost to individuals both in the workforce and wider community. Notwithstanding the claims that social mobility will follow personal investment in education, there is some evidence to suggest that in countries where the wealth distribution is most unequal the chances for social mobility are in fact the smallest (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010) irrespective of educational attainment and achievement. The National Equity Panel 2010 (Hoskins and Barker, 2014) identified "deep seated and systematic differences", and observed that the differences in earnings and incomes between the various groups was higher in the United Kingdom than in other industrialised countries. After four decades of education policies to raise standards and reduce social inequalities, the Social Mobility Commission found marked regional differences within England (Butler, 2020) and that there was a feeling that the gap between the social classes had not changed. These inequalities in social mobility merely serve to reinforce and reiterate one of the common themes running throughout English education that the advantages of birth and social class are constant factors which continue to be replicated. At this stage perhaps it is timely to question the part played by education in promoting social mobility and social justice within the UK when family background would appear to play a majorly significant role in socioeconomic success (Bernstein, 1971, Bernstein, 1973, Bernstein, 1975, Ball, 2003b, Ball, 2006, Reay, 2006, Hoskins and Barker, 2014, Brown et al., 2015, Reay, 2021). The intergenerational association between educated parents, especially those who have been privately educated, and occupational and social standing reveals a significant correlation (Sutton Trust,

2011). Therefore, is the narrative that opportunities to succeed and prosper are championed merely to conceal the increasing contrast between the rich and poor? Data from UCAS Multiple Equality Measure shows that admissions in 2018 for English students from disadvantaged backgrounds were fifteen times less likely to be awarded places at the prestigious universities. Not only have such admissions remained consistently low, especially when compared with access to other universities, the ratio has actually increased over the 2006 figures (CSJ, 2020). Does this mean that education has been 'weaponised' for those who are in a position to take advantage of the opportunities available (Elliot-Major, 2018)? Students in private schools and the top performing state schools often have the additional support of dedicated university advisers, plus they have access to private tutors who can help to secure top grades and places in the elite universities (Herrmann, 2020). Interestingly, a closer examination of social mobility in this country as measured in terms of wealth and landownership, would seem to suggest that wealth from overseas 'activities', along with celebrity status associated with the media, entertainment and/or sport (Shrubsole, 2019) are more likely to secure social mobility than does education. Notwithstanding such observations, if education is designed to create a highly educated and skilled workforce, is not the persistence of an over-educated cohort of workers counterproductive in that it throws into question the need for a policy of evermore graduates in the first place and in so doing, does it not also debase the university experience (Dore cited in (Smith, 2012)? Yet despite the persistence of overeducation, figures show, even allowing for gender and ethnic differences, that the graduate premium which reflects the earnings differential between graduates and non-graduates although less than in previous years[40], is still seen as being an important consideration for going to university (Adams, 2019).

The narrative that through hard work and aspiration just rewards will accrue has been reinforced by politicians, employers and schools, yet nevertheless the repetition of such a powerful story, inequalities in opportunities and outcomes

[40] Graduates born in 1970 enjoyed a premium of 19% by the age of 26, in contrast the premium for graduates born in 1990 which had fallen to 11% more than non-graduates

remain, and education rather than facilitating social mobility has reinforced existing inequalities (Machin quoted in Exley, 2019). Todd observes that rather creating a fairer society the narrative of social mobility has consolidated societal hierarchy in that it provides an opportunity to justify the status quo by claiming that merit is rewarded because some are allowed access to the more prestigious and elite institutions and thus indicating that society is open to societal advancement (Todd, 2021)[41]. The admission of a few students, on criteria controlled by members of the elite, perhaps should be regarded as sponsored mobility which although allowing the introduction of 'new blood' into the upper echelons does so without diminishing the power base of the elites. Does this mean, as Marshall et al. (Marshall et al., 1997) have suggested, that the emphasis on social mobility to address issues of social inequality have been lost because:

> "The idea of social mobility is cherished in unequal countries as an excuse for inequality." (Quoted in Exley, 2019 p: 218)

Tawney's conjecture (Tawney, 1975, Mckenzie, 2014) and Walford's (Walford, 1990) observations about class attitudes towards education would appear to be relevant today as borne out by the Conservative MP John Hayes who commented that:

> "….inequality is the inevitable consequence of a free economy in a free society. The tensions to which this gives rise are both mitigated and ameliorated by social mobility." (*ob.cit*)

If such comments are to be accepted as the underpinning rationale for the role to be played by social mobility, then this would seem to indicate that for most people they are expected to occupy the lower strata within society and in consequence individual and societal potential are impeded and the opportunity to flourish denied.

The conflation of social mobility with education is questioned by the profound observations espoused in Bauman's (Bauman, 2011, Bauman, 2013) thoughts about living in flexible and uncertain times, which poses questions about the

[41] Ideas expressed earlier by REAY, D. 2013. Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: tales of emperors, frogs, and tadpoles. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 34**,** 660-677. and OKOLOSIE, L. 2016. Social mobility doesn't exist – and grammar schools are part of the problem. *Guardian Opinion Higher Education* [Online]. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/28/social-mobility-doesnt-exist-grammar-schools-part-problem. also provide additional observations on the creation/consolidation theme

relevance and validity of what is on offer and whether young people are being well prepared for their futures (Bauman, 2007, Bauman, 2011). Prospects for Millennials and generation Z young people are looking less financially and career secure than in previous generations with the very real possibility of downward mobility (Elliot-Major, 2020). The levels of income mobility indicates a U-shape with a large precariat arm of under or unemployment operating within the uncertainty of the gig economy, and at the other extreme, a consolidated intergenerational elite are excluding aspirant middle candidates from accessing the higher levels.

Little did I realise when the question of what factors influence student choice of university was first raised that they would generate so many related questions and concerns. Various literature accounts offer explanations, but such generic descriptions failed to address the issue of what factors and influences were most important for individual sixth form student choice. In searching for an answer, wider issues were raised and became important components in sketching the wider picture. What is the role of the sixth form, do they provide opportunities for social mobility and an opportunity to address concerns about social equality? Is the idea of an education system based on meritocracy illusory? Will happenchance, which favours a select few in terms of university admission and career advancement, continue to be a dominant factor? Are there alternatives to going to university? Are these issues of concern to students thinking about university and future employment? Against a background of change in uncertain times, where conflicting and competing claims vie for a student's attention, that are the basis for this research - what factors and influences are most important when making a choice of which university to attend? In the next chapter, the most suitable methodology is identified to provide the most appropriate context to provide an insight and explanations for the influences and the rationale for student choice.

Chapter Three - Methodology

'ab uno disce omnes'

Methodology justifies the rationale for the data gathering processes to 'achieve a goal' (Smith, 1980). Research can be pure (academic), or applied when addressing a practical problem (Booth et al., 2008). There is a long association between teachers as researchers (Elliott and Elliott, 1991) with much of this research being linked to practice:

> "…research is any systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge" (Bassey, 1999:38)

in that both the rationale and research questions are based on experience. It is important to remember that:

> "Research is the servant of professional judgement, not its master."
> (Pring, 2000:139)

The aim of this research is to understand the perceptions and influences on students as they negotiate their way through the plethora of information about universities. Much of this information can be complex, especially for those students who have little or no familial experience of university. Often there are competing expectations from self, parents, teachers, schools, universities, and would-be future employers about what course of action they should take with regards to subject, courses, and university admission.

Schools and universities are socially constructed institutions which operate on a multitude of levels with a myriad of exchanges between different groups and individuals. The interpretation attached to any given situation will reflect individual perceptions and understanding of the information available and advice given. Responses by students to questions about future choices are dependent on their understanding of the factors which influence and inform decisions. An individual student's knowledge and awareness which contribute to their understanding, will at best be a relative, time-based judgement. Two respondents with similar backgrounds may have different expectations and personalities which will result in different responses. Yet:

> ‘In a socially constructed, intersubjective world, our direct awareness is the only thing we can really know, since all knowing depends on individual perceptions.’ (O'Leary, 2014:120)

Research is more than collecting data and testing assumptions, it is about conceptualising the problem. Behaviours only start to become intelligible when there is an understanding of the background which has influenced and shaped the perceptions within which they operate. Establishing the research parameters requires careful consideration of a wide range of interconnected factors to secure the most appropriate research methodology and realistic outcomes. Thus, from the epistemological considerations, the choice of a suitable methodology indicates the naturalist, interpretivist, qualitative paradigm would be most appropriate. This complex interplay between a number of variables that are not readily isolated within a ‘bounded unit’ (Stake cited in Simons, 2009), suggests that ontologically, the most suitable approach would be to use the case study. Although the case study is not a discrete method, it is naturalistic and self-contained.

Case studies which are set in a real-world context seek to be naturalistic, holistic and are mainly noncomparative. They attempt to be empathetic, and interpretative whilst avoiding reductionist and/or comparative conclusions associated with other forms of research. In essence case studies attempt to illustrate a more sophisticated way of looking at the everyday world, in that by looking at a general principle through a specific instance, or what Stake (Stake, 1995) identifies as ‘a refinement of generalisation’ to reveal in-depth knowledge. Being centred on those with first-hand experience of the phenomena under review and grounded in the belief that there is a synergy, where the ‘whole’ is greater than the sum of the parts. The ‘whole’ is revealed through description, comparison, and evaluation which give access to greater insights, deeper knowledge and understanding of the unfolding complex of dynamic events associated in ways not always accessible to other research methodologies or numerical analysis to produce a unique lens to reality. Case studies are not concerned with *a priori* definable objects, nor with looking to discover major theoretical revelations or produce generalisations, but rather with the

aim of understanding social creations, speculation, and thoughts within a defined spatial context.

The development and use of the case study has evolved over time and whilst perhaps more often used in qualitative research, there are examples to be found in quantitative research (George and Bennett, 2005). An example of which is Yin's approach where he advocates looking for patterns in the data from which hypotheses maybe tested. Such an approach is deductive. By contrast, an inductive, or even abductive, approach can result in speculation about generalisations form the generated data. Kemmis (Simons and Usher, 2000) claims that methodologically case studies cannot be defined by virtue of the case being indeterminant; nonetheless, over time, different academics have identified different typologies – descriptive, exploratory and explanatory. Case study classification, however, is not always clear cut as case studies often stray across, or combine, different typologies, this eclectic approach renders a precise methodological definition difficult. Merriam (Cited in Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013) suggests four design approaches - ethnographic, historical, psychological or sociological – to case studies, yet rather than accepting such definitions, should case studies be viewed as an approach to research? An approach where the capturing of the inter-connected complexity of relationships, perceptions and understandings, can be regarded as genre (Elliott and Lukes, 2008), in its own right?

The precedents for the use of case study in educational research has long been established (Stake Robert E., 1978, Lawrence Stenhouse, 1978, Lawrence Stenhouse, 1979, Lawrence Stenhouse, 1980, Simons, 1980, Gillham, 2000, George and Bennett, 2005, Simons, 2009, Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). The appropriateness of the case study in education, centres on its ability to respond to contemporary issues of importance within the context of the present, real-world, rather than a decontextualized setting. The significance and contribution made by case studies in recording and analysing a moment caught in time (Macdonald and Walker, 1975) provides an opportunity to reflect on the perceptions and reactions of participants involved with the aim of arriving at a deeper understanding of events within the organisation and how individuals are affected when confronted with the

prospects of choosing, preparing and applying to go to university. It is the belief that knowledge is a social construct woven from experience and imagination (Kemmis cited in Simons and Usher, 2000) that qualitative case studies attempt to answer 'how' and 'why' questions in order to produce holistic, empathetic and interpretative accounts and in so doing to eschew reductionist conclusions.

Case studies are selective and are based on prior, or tacit, knowledge (Sennett, 2008) of where the case study sits as an example in the context of a wider picture -

> 'Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context.'
> (Simons cited in Thomas, 2011: 10)

and that:

> '…. the objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation' (Yin, 2009 quoted in Bryman, 2012: 70)

The case study may be the medium through which generalisations are formulated (Simons, 1980), but it is the subsequent analysis and reflection which enables understanding and empathy to develop. Yet, rather than describing such results as 'findings', perhaps as Erickson (Stake, 1995 :42) suggests, 'assertions' would be a more appropriate term to use when respondents generate data.

By their very nature case studies are intricately connected into a unique social, historical, and especially personal environment, and thus makes an appeal to judgement. A judgement based on any number of inter-related factors, and reflections, which will promote discussion and ultimately deepen understanding. It is within this context, that the strength of the case study approach comes to the fore with its appeal to the readers existing knowledge and experiences in that:

> "… case study research offers a surrogate experience and invites the reader to underwrite the account by appealing to his tacit knowledge of human situations."
>
> (Adelman, Kemmis and Jenkins in Simons, 1980p. 52)

It is this appeal to the readers' own experiences and judgements which may enable a more empathetic understanding (verstehen)[42], and which may ultimately lead to a more nuanced and thus more readily acceptable agreement about any concluding generalisations. Rather like a good story well told, so too the quality of the case study narrative is an important and integral component of the research. Writing the narrative calls for 'coherence, integrity and progression' (Bruner, 1991). Having established an area of concern, self-questioning and critical reasoning will test the veracity of any of claims and arguments which have been made, and of the methods used, and the questions asked. The narrative also needs to be accountable to various audiences. To this end, the writing-up of a case study calls for what Geetz called 'thick description' to provide a full context for the reader to engage with the respondents within their setting as events unfold.

Revelations revealed as the research evolves may provide an insight into explicit and tacit knowledge about events, which may ultimately lead to a richer understanding of the unfolding and developing events (Lawrence Stenhouse, 1978); however, they require a structure in order to give the research authenticity and Stenhouse's observation that 'history is a critical refinement of memory by evidence which makes it public' (Lawrence Stenhouse, 1979: 6) is a useful analogy for the case study. In this case study, use was made of the historian's case record methodology, which is initially an account without comments which is then used as part of the presentation of evidence and findings. Subsequent publishing of these findings invite discussion, judgement, and comment about not only the findings, but also their relevance along with the methodology used to substantiate the claim.

Narrative and dialogue are key to this kind of research. Being mindful of Vygotsky's pronouncement that:

> "thought is not merely expressed in words: it comes into existence through them"
> (Vygotsky, 2012: 231)

and as Kemmis observed:

[42] Verstehen is concerned to identify and interpret meaning, as well as the causes of social events.

".. we weave the world through our experience and imagination"(Simons, 1980, p125)

The qualitative generation of dialogue data from the student respondents relies on the assumption expressed in Sen's notion of capability (Sen, 2001) that by giving people the opportunity to be involved they will respond thoughtfully, yet not all generated data will be necessarily germane to the research, nor necessarily of equal merit, nor necessarily sincerely expressed nor truthful. Truthfulness and honesty are essential, but they cannot always be guaranteed; however, inaccuracies and discrepancies can be reduced through structural and procedural rigour. Gillham (Gillham, 2000) counsels there may be a mismatch between what they actually say and do. Gillham's reminder however, needs to be qualified by reference to Bruner's observation that doing does not refer to behaviour, but rather to culturally located goal-orientated actions (Bruner, 1991) and this has resonance with Goffman's work on interaction ritual (Goffman, 1970) and expressive order associated with face and face work (Goffman, 1972), as individuals attempt to regulate and control the flow of events which are consistent with the mask and image of themselves they wish to project. Therefore, It is important to acknowledge that both participant and researcher are, to some extent, involved in a dramaturgical front of stage interaction (Goffman, 1969) and that new expressions and constructions will emerge from these encounters as life changing experiences are incorporated in new shared meaning and understanding. It is important that no assumptions are made and that statements are cross-referenced, where possible, with available and supportive documentation in an open manner.

It is important to remember that within qualitative research, the hermeneutic construct assumes that past experiences have shaped understanding, and that there is a difference between immediate and lived experience, in that the latter has its origins in the temporal spatial context in which it was constructed but has subsequently been modified by reflection. It is also important to make the distinction between the experiences of the individuals rather than the individuals themselves. Respondents in relating their narrative, express their perceptions in language which has been constructed within a multi-facetted socio-linguistic framework gathered from their everyday experiences. Reference to Gadamer's hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2013) proposes that language is a creative tool that is strongly embedded in experience, which in turn gives meaning to that experience. This then poses an

interesting question as to whether what is recorded is actually original perceptions, or merely a refocussed point of view (Daher et al., 2017). Does this mean that perceptions have become the new reality[43].

The resultant data will provide a combination of theoretical, practical, and speculative knowledge, all of which will contribute both to explaining and understanding what factors and influences are important for student choice. Therefore, rather than seeking answers to prescribed factual and controlled questions with a few to theory formation, the data generation methods used in this case study invite personal evaluative responses.

This research focuses on conversations with sixth form students at one centre in the belief that knowledge is a social construct woven from experience and imagination (Kemmis cited in Simon, 2000). By focussing on the factors and influences when students apply to university, the case study examines aspects of social activity which are often accepted, but seldom challenged. These social activities which are often embedded can be difficult to identify and examine in detail, but nonetheless can be very important issues shaping choice. Each student will have a different background and different experiences about the preparation process; therefore, the most appropriate method was to discuss individual student thoughts about the factors and people who they felt were most influential and helped to inform their decisions about their future course of action. The recorded conversation data was transcribed and reviewed. Patterns and similarities indicated several significant factors making possible a greater understanding of how individuals make sense of and reflect on their experiences as they negotiate their way through this transitional process. Originally the idea was to undertake a comparative study using three different centres but faced with the challenges of access, the study was reduced to a single centre.

[43] Reality, and what we understand by reality, is linked to the degree of importance we attach to our perceptions of events as they unfold within a spatial and temporal context. Does this mean perception is the new reality?

Currently, great store is set by quantitative research in that data, to which numeric values have been assigned, is regarded as objective, scientific and demonstrably valid (Cheek cited in Tracy, 2010). By contrast, qualitative research methodology's data generation and subsequent analysis and interpretation can be regarded as less worthy because their claims are regarded as subjective and not open to replication and substantiation using the same criteria which are applied to quantitative research. Yet close adherence to such a binary delimitation – scientific equates with objective and qualitative equates with subjective findings - fails to recognise how different perspectives generate data to substantiate different types of claims. The purpose of this qualitative research is to be both illustrative and interpretative. The underlying epistemology for this research lies in the belief that the social, unlike the scientific, world cannot be isolated into separate and discrete units. Stake (Stenhouse, 1975) argues that knowledge is constructed rather discovered. External stimuli only have meaning when internalised and referenced with memory. This constructivist approach to societal knowledge and understanding is the product of the synergy of activity between participants and events which are holistically interconnected. The complexity of perceptions which contribute to understanding about, and how, social interactions operate suggests there will be variations in participant's credibility. Key to such an approach is authenticity. Yardley (cited in Bryman, 2012) calls for sensitivity, not just to the social setting, but also to the relevance and theoretical context of the research. This research is set in a space/time continuum of social, cultural, and political phenomena and thus there needs to be a recognition and sensitivity to those influences which are operating on the case study students living in rural areas.

Data generation methods discussed in the next chapter were carefully selected following piloting with other students who did not form part of the data generation process. Each method was trialled to generate the most meaningful and telling data which will address the main themes underlying the research.

Chapter Four – Methods

Research of this kind needs to employ methods which can demonstrate credibility and are valid. Credibility is the extent to which the generated data is both plausible and probable, and ultimately believable, and therefore, likely to be acceptable. In other words, have the methods generated enough trustworthy responses to explain and answer the initially raised research questions? Credibility is to be found in transparency and in the explanations accompanying the data generation and subsequent analysis.

In this chapter, three data generation processes are examined along with any shortcomings and biases which may be present. The data generated from these methods is presented, along with initial comments in Chapter Five, before an in-depth analysis in Chapter Six.

4.1 Survey questions

There is an old adage that says if you want to know something, then ask a question. Whilst this may be true, there are different types of questions that can, and need to, be asked to obtain the required data. The four main category types of information are, according to Simon (Gilbert, 2008 pp 128-205) firstly, attributes in connection with personal and socio-econ details; secondly, behavioural, looking into what the individual has done and/or is doing; thirdly, attitudes which implies evaluation and perhaps the use of measured scales; and finally, beliefs and attitudes about a given event or activity. In this research type one questions were not asked, but rather concentrated on a combination of the other three types. The use of the questions to generate data is quite widespread in situations where the required data is relatively simple and straightforward. Yet, questions are never neutral, they come with, what Miller (Cited in: Burke, 2012 : 2) has identified as the ‘autobiography of the question’, in that experiences, philosophies, agendas and motivation have shaped the rationale underpinning the question as well as the questions themselves. Being mindful of Miller’s observations, every effort was made to frame the questions in such a manner that they would minimise the possibility that there was an expected response.

Whilst questionnaires and surveys are more often associated with quantitative data generation, usually in the form of surveys, because the standardised structure and format enables large, generated data bases to be interrogated and validated statistically, they can also be employed qualitatively to obtain in-depth subjective, reflective, and attitudinal information. There being any number of research manuals which highlight the structures and techniques for using questionnaires (Oppenheim, 1992, De Vaus and De Vaus, 2001, Robson, 2002, Cohen et al., 2007, Gilbert, 2008, Bryman, 2012).

The decision to use survey questions in this research was grounded in the belief that not only would they generate relevant data, but they would also form the initial stage in an iterative process. A process which would help to clarify areas for subsequent interview discussions and ascertain pertinent areas of concern associated with the topic. For this research, survey questions had the advantages of being able to reach the target audience quickly. In addition, potential respondents were not placed under immediate pressure to respond; in fact, the questions could be completed in a time frame that best suited them.[44] The survey provided anonymity and was less inhibiting than an interview situation giving students the opportunity to be more candid and forthcoming when responding to questions. The survey questions were standardised with many questions being closed. This meant that the returns could be processed in a shorter time span resulting in more time for analysis and reflection.

I was aware of the limitations associated with using survey questions and questionnaires in that the respondent's memory, knowledge and experience can all be influenced by the context in which they are completed. Likewise, motivation can also be a problem which manifests itself in terms of completion rates, especially when the researcher is somewhat removed from the potential audience and therefore not available to encourage completion. Extrinsic rewards were neither considered nor offered. Throughout the question setting phase great attention was given the structure of the questions with the aim of making all such questions brief

[44] Gadamer makes a distinction between immediate and lived experience (Cross ref with Gadamer experience p 60).

and using everyday language and presented in a simple straight forward manner using non-technical vocabulary. It was particularly important to ensure the questions are not ambiguous. Any ambiguities could result in misunderstandings which could not be corrected once the questionnaires had gone live. Underpinning the questions was the need to get the student respondents to provide personal information and perceptions about the preparation for and the prospects of going to university. The vocabulary and linguistic style needed to be sensitive to the situation in which the research was taking place, along with individual student sensitivities. Asking questions about perceptions and opinions are difficult and complex and in consequence any one individual's responses may not always be fully-formed. Respondent uncertainty can often be seen in the way that respondent's reply to scaled or Likert structured questions, in that in many cases the extremes of the full-scale range are not always used with respondents hovering around the average/centre.

The rationale for the use of the survey/questionnaire approach was to inform later interview questions. Such questions would also act as student preparation for the whole series of issues raised by the prospects of going to university. In this case of this research in order to minimise the work and costs associated with the production, distribution, and collation of the survey questions, I decided to use a digital, rather than the more traditional paper-based format. The rationale being that the sixth-formers would be more than proficient with digital communications. In addition, all students have a centre-based e-mail address through which the questionnaire could be forwarded and returned. This seemed to be the most appropriate method to reach the widest audience of potential respondents. The replies were to be submitted electronically and therefore this would save time visiting the centre and collating returns at the centre. Digital returns would also ensure respondent anonymity. The format of choice for the questions was to use Google Forms which were synchronously linked to Google Sheets so that when the respondent's data was submitted and received, the software would collate the returns by each separate question. Having made the decision to use Google, the next phase was to construct the questions and design the layout of the questionnaires. Whilst the format of the questions in the Google Forms program set the parameters, the structuring of the questions allowed some flexibility. After the

production of several prototypes, the questions and format were piloted using two former students (one female, one male) neither of whom were known to one another, nor in contact with one another. The first reviewer commented on the question format and the way the questionnaires were introduced and made recommendations for simplifying the language to make it more age-appropriate. In addition, suggestions were made about using different question structures to vary the format. These recommendations were incorporated into the second version of the questionnaires and submitted to the second reviewer. The second reviewer, apart from a typing error and a misalignment, agreed the revised formats. I then asked both reviewers if they would complete the questionnaires and submit their replies to check whether the data they transmitted was received and in a form which I could collate and use.

This piloting exercise proved to be useful in identifying errors in the questions and potential problems in the use of language, whilst also highlighting typographical errors and spelling mistakes. In addition to linguistic inspection, the pilot scheme also enabled comments on the visual presentation, style, and font types to be made to obtain the most user-friendly format for the questionnaires. An essential part of the pilot stage was the opportunity to test the efficiency and accuracy when student responses were submitted online. The pilot also provided an opportunity to test the software collating stages. The successful pilot of the software confirmed the decision to use an online software as being a viable approach to data gathering and vindicated the choice to use an integrated package which would enable first stage collation of results. I remain very grateful to my two former students, who took time to test and review the format and style of the questions asked and for their constructive comments on the survey/questionnaire questions.

Questionnaires may be a relatively straightforward means of data generation, yet they require a considerable input of time and resources to prepare, not just in in terms of question structure, but also regarding the design structure of the questions and their presentation for use on a variety of media platforms. Time was also required to make adjustments following the pilot review and critiques of the presentation. Time spent reviewing and piloting the questions before they were

released to the respondents proved to be time well spent, for once the questions went live and the responses started to come in, they were collated without any issues. (Appendices)

4.2 Focus Groups

In designing the data generating process for this research, each means of data generation was to be part of an ongoing iterative process of data gathering. The use of the focus group to generate data as part of this process was considered, The use of the focus group as a means of gathering information about attitudes, views, motivations, perceptions and shared understandings of a communal experience (Litosseliti, 2003, Barbour, 2007) can be viewed as an opportunity to examine a range of views and experiences explored through dialogue and thus provide an insight into social and community norms (Hennink, 2014). The focus group is much favoured by political and market researchers, but also has the potential to be a valuable source of data generation in social science research. In many ways the focus group can be viewed as a group interview or collective conversation (Ryan et al., 2014), a socially constructed narrative where participants explore and share opinions and understandings in response to 'how' and/or 'why' questions and from these discussions a consensus may be achieved (Smithson, 2000). The observation made by Hollander (2004) (Cited in Ryan et al., 2014) that the focus group is best conceptualized as a research site and not a research instrument, is both a valid and interesting observation. Hennink (*ob cit*) who suggests that the social setting for focus groups is an advantage in that it replicates social interaction within the confines of a non-threatening, and even comfortable, environment. In such a setting, it is envisaged that open and frank exchanges could ensue, even becoming flexible with the potential to take discussions over wide ranging and new issues. Such discussions have the potential to ground comments and observations in the pertinent reality of the participants' world and allow for social moderation by the group. Although the focus group may encourage participants to identify and talk about issues which might not be voiced under other methods of data generation, there are limitations to using focus groups to obtain deeper and richer perspectives. Focus group dynamics, as the discussions unfold, will influence individuals and group alike and as such are less controllable than individual interviews. The social interaction within any group, especially if composed of known associates or acquaintances may well, consciously, or unconsciously, influence responses though non-verbal as well as verbal communications. It is possible that dominant

characters, or hierarchies, might emerge and therefore the extent to which bias may suppress individual contribution would be difficult to ascertain.

Focus groups are different from interviews in that a moderator is required, someone who, whilst being neutral and non-judgmental, can also stimulate and keep the discussions on task whilst keeping all the participants at ease. This can be achieved by unpacking key issues and establishing the rules of engagement at the start. The questioning framework will involve several types of questions starting with semi-structure type to initiate the discussion before adopting more open-ended questions to enable a dialogue more akin to a natural conversation to take place. By the very nature of the dynamics of group interchanges there will be little time to think and reflect on responses so perhaps ‘why’ questions, which can also seem peremptory, are perhaps best avoided. Whilst maintaining unobtrusive control and acting as consultant, referee and writer, the moderator will also be paying attention to what is not said, as well as what is said, for sometimes these omissions can make a valuable contribution to the research. To test the relevance and feasibility of the focus group for this research, a pilot study was set up to evaluate the possible contribution focus group could make to the process of data generation in finding answers to the research question.

Following discussion with a gatekeeping member of the pastoral staff, arrangements were made for a date, time, and venue within the Centre’s busy schedule for those students who had agreed to take part in a focus group discussion to meet and trial a focus group session. Preparations were made for a member of the support staff to take notes with a second person to be available to summarize the proceedings. Unfortunately, on the agreed day, unexpected demands meant the support staff were not available and I had to conduct the session on my own. Two digital microphones which had been tested prior to the meeting were set-up on the tables around which the nine participants (six female and three male students from years twelve and thirteen) and I sat. Having explained the process and reiterated the purpose of the research a lively debate followed, and the allotted thirty minutes soon ran into forty-five minutes. Amongst the topics raised were the expectations that university was the next step (TINA – There Is No Alternative) and the pressures on

students to make decisions whilst completing their A-level studies. There was a general consensus about the very supportive efforts made by the support staff who helped to reduce the levels of stress associated with the whole process of researching and applying to universities. The use of Unifrog was highly regarded, but it was generally felt that more one-to-one personal information about particular occupations and career prospects would have been helpful to inform choices. There was the intention of running a parallel group with staff members, but for a variety of timetabling and professional development reasons this second pilot did not take place.

Research into methods used by social scientist for data generation led me to believe that the focus group approach had the potential to make a valuable contribution to the research question both directly by proving useful evidence which was cross reference and moderated by reference to the experiences of other sharing a similar experience. The importance of using a pilot to test the approach was salutary. After careful reflection on the experience, I decided that I did not feel sufficiently confident to conduct more focus groups as a data generating method for both practical and theoretical considerations. I felt myself to be lacking the practical skills and the necessary experience to be able to handle any contentious issues should they arise. The Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* would enable a more experienced moderator to make appropriate situated judgements and if accepting Chrzanowska's (Cited in Brinkman, 2015) observation that to be a good focus group moderator would require at least two years training to become qualified, then I clearly would have neither the opportunities, nor the time to achieve such a level of competence. This trial run clearly demonstrated the need to have multi-tasking qualities of listening, analysing, and keeping the discussions relevant, to identify emerging strands and threats and then weave them back into the main discussion whilst at the same time trying to involve all respondents in the process. The idea to use two microphones, which had been set-up to capture the exchanges, seemed to create problems when it came to transcribing the discussions, either because of the interference on the microphones and/or the sound of conflicting/discussing voices made it very difficult to distinguish who was speaking and in some cases, what was actually being said. One possible solution to this problem might have been to have video recorded the session. The video recording may have resolved the practical

problem but would have introduced more significant moral and ethical concerns associated with identifiable images of young people.

An additional factor which mitigated against the use of the focus group was that although much 'lively' discussion ensued, the session tended to be dominated by two rather forceful characters, leaving those who were less confident, even when asked specifically, feeling unable, unwilling, or disinclined to make little, or any, contribution to the discussion. I was concerned that this domination of the discussion by an articulate minority may introduce a collective group thought and response which would colour individual interview comments at a subsequent date. This group speak would be the antithesis of the research.

Two further ethical issues were to emerge. Firstly, there were concerns about confidentiality within the focus group, because the research into private lives would reveal feelings and understandings which would, when and if published, mean that individuals could be identified and thus invalidating any undertaking to ensure anonymity. Secondly, by observing and noting body language and social behavior within the context of the group, I increasingly became aware that there was the possibility the research was taking on an ethnographic perspective. Ethnographic studies are case studies with the researcher describing and attributing interpretation based on their analysis of the group's interactions and exchanges, and this was not what I wanted for the research, I wanted individual students' own thoughts not a group consensus. In retrospect, it would have been more beneficial to have arranged and obtained the views of a centre-based focus group, for whilst I needed to initiate questions, I did not want to pre-empt responses. Logistical problems associated with both timing of the centre's organisational day and access to the case study centre called for an alternative strategy. Following an online search, The Student Room's reported findings of an on-line survey (Geall, 2014)[45] proved to be informative and helpful. Not just in terms of guiding the questions, but also in terms of providing an insightful summary into key student concerns about post-A-level courses of action. A second area which in retrospect would have been more

[45] Unfortunately, not now able to locate survey report online, but my notes from the article are included in the Appendices.

effective would have been to have undertaken the introduction to the online research and survey questions in person, rather than having the topic introduced as an additional item in a morning assembly; however, the logistics of finding a suitable time slot for an extraneous presentation in an already packed centre agenda was not possible within the time-frame for data generation. With the assistance of a member of the pastoral team the task of completing the survey was raised and once the links had been forwarded the responses soon started to come in.

4.3 Interviews

The frequency with which interviews are used within our society for market research, product evaluation or service satisfaction, would suggest that there can be very few people who are not familiar with the purpose and format of different types of interviews, in fact they now are seen as a normal routeway to uncover aspects of the self, personality and perceptions and are used frequently in social research, where they are seen as being a quick and easy way to generate data. For Helen Simons (Simons, 2009) interviews get to the core issues and thus enable a greater depth of pertinent and insightful data to be generated. Yet there is more to interviews than just asking questions.

Interviewing is more than just the mechanical production of data. The process has been likened to a craft (Booth et al., 2008, Brinkman, 2015). The significance of craft status in the sense that craft conveys a mastery of skills and associated knowledge. Ideally the interviewer will have both personal skills and subject knowledge which, when combined with tacit knowledge and experience, will enable appropriate judgements to be made about posing questions with the appropriate use of intonation, sensitivity to pauses and demonstrates responsive listening skills, all of which can help to create and maintain a good rapport. It is the establishing of such a rapport, which is both responsive and sensitive to the situation and the interviewee has implications for the ethical aspects of research in that researchers will, by the very mature of their research, be faced with situations which require situated judgement, what Aristotle identified as phronesis. Not least of which will be when the personal is made public when the research findings are reported (Brinkman, 2015).

When preparing the questions, I was conscious that the structure could greatly influence the type of response and any answers given. In addition, the intonation, along with accompanying body language, can influence the expectations about response appropriateness. I was also mindful of the role played by the interviewer and their position of power, and to this end, the interviews were conducted in a neutral yet supportive manner to reduce any suggestion that there was a correct response to the topic under investigation. In trying to keep the interview conversations as spontaneous as possible to ensure the narrative would flow naturally, specific questions were not asked in a formal way, although a sheet of question topics was available to me as an aide memoir should the conversation seem to be flagging. Interjections from me were only made to seek clarification and/or develop aspects of the story so that in effect the narrative became self-editing and to some extent verified through the interjections and explanations. Throughout the interview conversations, the aim was to keep the conversations open and sensitive but trying to keep to the critical themes. The rationale behind this approach was to ensure the conversations by staying on track would reflect accurately participants thoughts, perceptions, and experiences.

When designing the interview schedule, I was conscious that the process was more than just creating a tick list of operations. In developing the process of an interview schedule the organisational and planning for contingencies helped to substantiate the claim that interviewing is a craft. Firstly, when securing informed consent, I felt it was important not only to inform participant of the purpose, but also to take time to explain the structure and implications that might arise, especially from the reporting stage in that if the respondent felt that comments could be attributable to then, or that their anonymity was not secured, then there was the potential to inhibit open and frank discussions. Secondly, I was conscious that when interviewing individuals from closed institutions, there was the possibility that the respondents may close ranks to convey the official institutional loyalty narrative; in which case there could be implications for the research. Thirdly, I was very much aware of the issue of confidentiality and the secure maintenance of data. The whole question of confidentiality was paramount, yet I was aware of possible problems if that during the participation and openness of the conversation more may be disclosed than was

intended[46]. This raises the question as whether anything is ever off the record, again the analogy with of craft may be relevant in that potential transgressions, or situations where this may occur, could be anticipated, and avoided if I as the researcher had forewarned knowledge and wisdom to foresee those areas where confidentiality concerns may become a concern. This then leads to a recognition of the power imbalance between the parties, an aspect which I had to factored in before and during the interview, as well as in the analysis and write-up stage. I sought to make it quite clear that I was not an employee of the centre, that my research was purely academic and no reporting, other than an academic write-up would be forthcoming. Interviews can be both descriptive and informative. Interviews may also facilitate the development of more abstract ideas and deeper insights, from which it may be possible develop or test theories.

For this research a more conversational style was preferred. This is because conversations are part of everyday life and, as we engage in conversation with one another, words flow and ideas, thoughts and experiences are shared and elaborated. Without knowing what the outcome will be, the conversation develops its own momentum and uniqueness which presents its own truth as we learn about one another's experiences and attitudes about the world in which we live. In this interview conversation, the researcher, in asking about and listening to what people themselves say about their lived world is also interested in how they describe and articulate their reasons for actions. As the dialogue evolved I was able to probe and uncover unnoticed feelings and from these intersubjective encounters a common interpretation of the world began to emerge, one based on experiences and from which meaning was able to be attributed to those experiences (Wierciński, 2011). Whilst however, such interviews may take the form of a conversation, I was very much aware that they were not conversations between equal partners, I as the interviewer set the agenda and asked the questions and would ultimately undertake the analysis and write the report. This raised ethical questions about relationships and epistemology concerns about how the data is produced. Perhaps therefore in this context, the conversation interview is best regarded as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess cited in Simons, 2009) in the sense that I was undertaking

[46] Safeguarding and well-being issues would be dealt with in accordance with the centre's policy.

questioning into a specific aspect of their experiences. I came to view data generation in terms of a ‘guided conversation’ (Rubin and Rubin cited in Simons, 2009) which would enable deeper and more profound comments because we were concentrating on fewer topics than might have taken place in an ordinary conversation.

Any resultant knowledge produced by our conversations was created through shared dialogue and it is from these narratives that a sense of social reality can be created, such narratives are rooted in language. This makes language powerful: but we are not necessarily conscious of the impact language may have on our perceptions, especially when considering that language and idea acquisition is often referenced through metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions. These frames of reference are strengthened through repetitious use. Therefore, it is important to make the distinction between **reflective** thought which is the product of logical rational appraisal and **reflexive** responses which because they are unconscious and emotional responses appeal more to the unthinking processes and as such are beyond control of the individual. To what extent is the generated data a mere construction between interviewee and interviewer, does this reflect the reality of the situation outside the conversation. How should these conversations be regarded, are such conversations accounts, in that they answer questions which were asked, or are they stories relating to past experiences? It is a distinction which was of significance when initially analysing the data, and subsequently drawing the evidence together.

There is a more fundamental question underpinning the use of interviews and that is the extent to which an individual’s perceptions are relevant for the research. Interview conversations can be very interesting, especially when delving into societal values, goals, and expectations, but do they represent knowledge? I was mindful that respondents in airing personal knowledge and opinions about the research question may not take the research any further. There was also the possibility that several themes may recur on a regular basis. In this case ‘less would be more’ in that fewer interview would reduce the burden of repetition, yet still produce the same information.

Who then became respondents? The question of sampling was the next important consideration I had to make. The research was not designed to be a quantitative study therefore large numbers of respondents for statistical significance were not required. In addition, comments from the initial questionnaires suggest that there were several common themes which would merely be replicated across many respondents. The initial questionnaire returns suggested that respondents fell into one of a small number of groups. In addition to sample size, the sample frame is also an important factor. In the case of this research study there was also the limiting factor of availability on certain dates and at times which where suitable and convenient to all parties. In consequence, the student respondents were self-selecting in that they were available and willing to take part in the research and represented both years twelve and thirteen. The student respondents covered a range of academic abilities and aspirations and included students who had decided on other post-school routeways other than university including gap year and apprenticeships. In total there were a dozen students who generously gave their time and thoughts about the issues that had been raised in the online questionnaires. The conversations took place in the spring term over a period of several weeks Contrary to some media portrayals of young people, most of the respondents were open, confident, and appreciative all that the centre was aiming to achieve on their behalf. They were very articulate and thoughtful. There was no evidence to suggest that their responses were anything other than truthful, but there was no guarantee they would provide knowledge and information that would be useful to the study. Any concerns I may have had that controversial issues may be glossed over were groundless and their views on issues which the staff felt to be controversial were addressed openly and in a matter fact manner. In the case of staff interviews, seven interviews were conducted with teachers who held positions of responsibility for various aspects of their respective subjects. Arrangements were also made to interview student support officers.

The research conversations were recorded and subsequently transcribed, which enabled a more in-depth analysis that was not possible while the conversations were taking place. The transcribing of the text and the analysis which followed constituted the second part of the conservation process. Being very much aware that analysis is more than just assigning a classification to the generated data, the

aim throughout this stage was to focus on capturing individual perspectives. To feel that I had both interpreted and understood the respondent's conversation required re-reading and re-listening. This re-reading and re-listening were, I found, best done simultaneously when subtle variations in expression and emphasis could be identified thus enabling corrections which helped to clarify the transcribed word. The hermeneutics of textual analysis required me to look behind the meaning of the words expressed for any discernible subtexts and symbolism which can reveal underlying values lay bare assumptions which shape the personal experience. Thus, from the personal experiences of a diverse group of students, knowledge is created to address the research question.

Chapter Five – Findings

This chapter introduces the case study centre and its history to establish the cultural landscape within which the research was undertaken.

There are four parts to the data generation process:

1. *Interview with head of centre and two academic support staff*
2. *Interviews with seven members of the teaching staff*
3. *Three student on-line questionnaires*
4. *Interviews with twelve students representing a range of views.*

In trying to capture the essence of the information supplied I have attempted to capture the whole picture and in essence the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the respondents as the process unfolded and made an impact on their lives. There has been no attempt to correct or alter any of the statements, each quotation is as recorded at the time.

5.1 Case Study Centre - background

The Poplars opened in 1953 as a rural secondary modern located some five miles from the regional administrative centre. Planned as part of the local education authority's post-war strategy for educational provision in a rural area dominated by agriculture. The school was provided with extensive grounds including provision for the teaching of rural studies. The school formed part of the secondary school component of the split into primary and secondary schooling housed in separate buildings following the 1944 Education Act. Twenty years later in 1973 the LEA restructured its educational policy abandoning the two-tier system in favour of a three-phase system, based on primary (5-9 years), middle (9-13) and upper (13-16/18) schools. Such a re-organisation was not without its critics. The removal of the top two years of pupils from the primary school threatened the continued existence of several village primary schools. The former secondary modern schools in the area became middle schools whilst a purpose-built upper school was constructed on a new site. The new upper school would, through its size (1200 plus NOR), be better placed to offer a wider range of subjects and operate with economies of scale. More importantly though the new arrangements would be able

to support a viable sixth-form. Integral to this rural re-organisation of the pyramid of schools undertaken by the county LEA was the requirement to bus the children twice a day to and from school. The bussing of children, often along narrow country lanes, was not without its critics, not only from the perspective of the times spent travelling, but also because of the limitations and restrictions placed on post-school day social, sporting, and cultural activities. These restrictions were particularly acute as the area covered by the pyramid of schools covered more than two hundred square miles.

At the turn of the millennium, a seven-classroom extension for the arts was integrated into the former buildings as numbers continued to increase following housing expansion in several of the school catchment area villages. In 2006 the county council began a review of its school provision. The LEA review was undertaken following performance attainment findings response to central government's introduction of four key stage reporting phases which revealed that children in the three-tier system made less progress than their counterparts with similar abilities who were taught in a two-tier system. In consequence of the review, it was recommended that schools be re-organised to address the concerns about under performance in the county's schools. The policy to reorganise was approved by the county council in 2007 with a preference for a model based on primary and secondary schools. Following consultations, it was agreed the reorganisation should be phased in by areas, each area being centred on an established secondary school.

The Poplars, in partnership with the neighbouring secondary school and contributory primary schools started their re-organisation consultations in 2011, although there was much support for the existing three tier arrangements within the pyramid of schools, the county council rubber-stamped the change to two-tier education in 2012. The pyramid had two years to make the arrangements. At the time the Poplars closed in July 2014 there were 700 pupils on roll. Unlike the other two feeder middle

schools which supplied students to the central secondary school (one closed and the other became a ‘free school’, part of a larger academy chain) the Poplars and all its premises were subsumed within the secondary school’s remit.

The newly reorganised secondary was faced with the dilemma of working on two sites. Operating a split site is always fraught with problems. The first decision was to move the staff rather than moving the students between sites. The second decision to make the former secondary modern/middle school into a separate sixth form centre was a more controversial decision and certainly not without its critics. Whilst the simplest and least costly option would have been to have used the Poplars site as a centre for the lower school taking the first two years of the secondary age range; the decision, however, was to convert the school into a self-contained standalone sixth form centre. The time interval between the closure of the middle school and the opening of the new sixth-form centre imposed some very tight deadlines on preparing the building to receive its first students, both years twelve and thirteen, for a September start. The painters and decorators were still in the building the day before the new term started. The transformation into a self-contained six form centre was favourably received by everyone. The new centre contained a state-of-the-art computer suite with IT technician, a common room and staffed library. In addition, a part-time careers adviser and two full time academic tutors (one for each year group) were appointed to support student academic progress and assist in the post-A-level transition into higher and further education or apprenticeships.

To what extent the investment was seen as a gamble, bearing in mind changes to the way sixth forms are to be funded and the very strong possibility that a new sixth form college was being discussed and proposed to be built in the nearby urban centre made the decision seem more than a little questionable. Especially as the new purpose-built college would attract post-sixteen students from all the LEA schools in the neighbouring town and surrounding rural hinterland by virtue of not only the state-of-the-art facilities, but also because of the great range of academic and vocation subjects that would be available. In addition, transport links to the town were both better and more varied than those available to the Poplars centre. The

fear of competition and survival were very real providing a constant challenge to the organisation and viability of the sixth form.

Although The Poplars has played several different schooling roles, pupils, and parents' attitudes and expectations of the role of education and the part to be played by the school, remained constant (Spielhofer, 2011). A combination of the diversification of the employment base and commuting saw the development of new housing estates in many of the catchment villages. The occupants of these new houses were often incomers and professional people who had more aspirational ideas about what a school should offer their children. A "good" education and examination results, along with the prospects of gaining entrance to a university became more important. It is therefore against this background that the research was undertaken to establish who and what were the biggest influence on student choices when deciding to go to university (Byford et al., 2012)

5.1.1 Reflections

There may be a correlation between the two systems of provision in which the two-tier school system does yield better league table and age-related performance results; but such a view is a rather narrow interpretation of the part played by the school within its community. Traditionally, education in rural areas has had to address two additional constraints. Firstly, educational funding and provision in rural areas has been historically less generous when compared with urban allocation of resources. Secondly, they also have the disadvantage associated with isolation and issues associated with the distance/time factor which limit, if not actually curtail, some activities. Not only are many children faced with a twice daily and lengthy bus journey to and from school, but they also have less ready access to cultural experiences such as theatres, museums, and other types of cultural activities. To some extent, the reduced opportunities for cultural, educational and employment opportunities have, perhaps, created a more relaxed approach to educational advancement (Defra data cited in: The-Bridge-Group, 2019) (Passy, 2019). It is important to record that in many ways rural schools perform important social as well as educational functions and often serve as focal points for numerous non-educational purposes to the extent that the school in the village takes on a

significant role which both fosters and maintains intergenerational loyalties amongst family and community members over several family generations to the school and its traditions.

5.2 Interview Data

The data generation was based on a series of interviews with senior staff, seven members of the teaching staff, two members of the support staff, and twelve students from years twelve and thirteen. All interviews took place at the centre and audio recordings were made using both magnet tape and digital recorders. The mechanics of recording followed similar arrangements to those used in the pilot focus group interviews. After the interview had finished and before the transcribing process started the recordings were played back twice, firstly just to ensure the recordings were audible and complete and secondly, they were played back and stopped whilst key themes and issues were noted down. The question of transcribing the recordings posed several concerns. Not being a skilled keyboard typist I wondered about using the services of a professional audio typist, or whether to use one of the digital transcribing services which are currently available[47]; however, this course of action was rejected on the grounds that the subtle differences which exist between the written and spoken word, plus the subtleties of voice expression and body language would be lost and I felt that in order to appreciate more fully these subtleties I really ought to transcribe them myself. I used the beta version of a Google program called Otranscribe which allowed me to control the speed of word processing. The process allowed for storage of the transcript both on-line, so that it was possible to complete the transcription over time, plus it was possible to take text file copies which could then be edited in most word processing or text editing software. This text file proved to be most valuable, not only in clarifying who said what and clearing up any possible mis-hearings when typing, but also by providing an opportunity for in-depth analysis and reflection as the narrative unfolded. Notwithstanding the above and in spite of my best endeavours, I am still conscious that as Bourdieu observed much is ‘lost in transcript’ (Cited in Brinkman, 2015 :204). It is possible, that with subsequent re-readings that a different emphasis, if not interpretations, especially regarding the way that spoken and written forms have different forms of punctuation, could be

[47] Although digital transcription has and continues to develop at a very rapid pace, the accuracy averaged approximately eighty percent. There were also problems in differentiating and accommodating different voices.

produced. Perhaps, however, the biggest difference lies in the fact the conversation is a discourse between two people exchanging views and ideas about an agreed topic of mutual interest. By contrast, the written transcript is available to a wider, non-involved, nor time aware, audience and as such has the potential to raise concerns about possible breaches of ethical conduct. Thus, in taking the transcript to the next stage, the analysis, calls for an even greater awareness of the power differentials in the relationship, plus the responsibilities of the author, of a shared experience, to protect the integrity and confidentiality of the participant's contributions.

The interview conversations have been transcribed verbatim in *italic* script and attributed to the correspondent by an **embolden** prefix:

e.g. **HoS** *" I am head of sixth form*"

additional commentary and/or explanations have been added for clarification.

The first interview conversations were conducted with the head of centre, academic tutor, and support tutor. The rationale for holding interview conversations with senior centre staff was to establish the background setting and philosophy, along with the guiding principles for the organisation and the deployment of resources. Once the underpinning rationale had been established, student generated data could be viewed in context. The head of centre, a vice-principal at the centre, was responsible for executive strategic planning of policy and its implementation. The role of academic tutor was a recent addition to the centre. The responsibilities of the academic tutor was to help the students keep on track with their A-level studies and to offer help and guidance for post school careers. The position is occupied by a non-teaching member of staff. This was a deliberate policy to distance the role from the traditional authority role associated with the teaching staff and provide an adult who was not in a performance judgement role. This is not to say that the academic tutor was not involved with progress reporting and liaising with the senior team and pastoral staff on a regular basis. The third person was the university support tutor who, although part-time had responsibility for supporting student university

applications. The English education system has developed a hierarchy of schools and universities and as a measure of a school's success and subsequent status the number of successful applications to the more elite establishments of the Russell Group are regarded as significant indicators of success. The role of the support tutor was to help students who had been identified by their teachers as being suitable candidates for admission to a Russell Group university.

Seven members of the teaching staff who covered a wide range of specialisms, responsibilities and experiences were then interviewed to provide background information about the developments in A-level subjects as a preparation for university admission. All members of staff, to varying degrees, had been involved in teaching A-levels for several years and were familiar with the pre-reform A-levels (which were based on a modular approach which examined module components over the two-year period of study), as well as the new linear course which uses a terminal examination. In addition, all had had some experience of being a sixth form reporting tutor and so were aware of the implications and requirements necessary to help students prepare for university.

5.2.1 Head of Centre

The interview conversation with the head of centre formed the basis of the narrative about how the centre had responded to and accommodated the changes to A-level provision and the expectations placed upon sixth forms to implement the changes. The conversation focussed initially on the centre's educational philosophy and how this philosophy had shaped policy in response to the changes. These changes included not only changes to the structure of A-levels themselves, but also required responses to address the issues raised by changes in the way that sixth forms were to be funded. In responding to the changes, the centre had to consider not only the practicalities of addressing and implementing responses to the changes, but also to re-evaluate its philosophy for education and future provision. A situation which, to some extent, was made more problematic by the potential competition from the proposals to develop a new sixth form complex in the nearby town.

The following generated data is the product of a series of informal discussions, which along with a recorded conversation provide background details about the centre's educational philosophy, strategies, and provision. These discussions focused on how the sixth form might respond to the directives from central government and how best to respond to challenge posed by the impact of the opening of a new dedicated sixth form centre in the nearby town. Data generated from the recorded conversations are interspersed with summaries based on the information and views provided by the interviewee and elaborated with insider knowledge of the centre.

Recent governmental reforms to the A-level structure with a stated aim of tying A-levels more closely and which were to be integrated more fully into university practices raises questions in terms of how sixth forms will resource and deliver the reforms.

HoS: *"I think the idea was that the A-levels then would dovetail into the university courses more."*

In order to establish the new courses, the DfE have consulted with (some) universities to produce linear courses which follow a very tight and prescriptive directive, not only in identifying the content and acceptable authorities to cite, but also, in terms of the marking criteria which strictly adheres to the directive. Whilst teachers have always been at liberty to interpret the syllabus, the new specifications, which indicate that credit will only be given for identified subject authorities, suggests this former freedom may be curtailed to some extent.

Me: *"So they are much more prescriptive?"*

HoS: *"I understand that's because of the, the inconsistency across in terms of what constitutes an A grade or C grade ……. But that, that appears to be the reason*

HoS: *"I struggled with the idea of, of um, having a marketized education system both at the school level and the further education and higher education level. My concern is that, you know, how does that work, how is that regulated? I'm sure the DfE got a good handle on that."*

Me: *"Okay. So as far as the school's concerned, what are the implications for the teaching of this? So are you're getting to be much more didactic in your approach."*

HoS: *"The immediate answer is yes.."*

The implications of the marking criteria which are content specific means that in order to ensure the best student grades a lot of material has to be covered. The centre had many meetings, and devoted CPD and training sessions to identify and share best practice. So what factors were identified as being important key centre values:

HoS: *"... the value of being an inspiration and intrinsic value of learning, of being a key motivator"*

Whilst there is a recognition, that in order to cover the content, a more didactic lecture style will be necessary, there is some irony in that this contradicts one of the goals of sixth form teaching namely which is to:

HoS: *"…cultivate their independent learning habits is, is much more relevant now than, than ever before"*

HoS: *"…when you're asked to, to cover more in terms of breadth and depth, but given a certain amount of, well, effectively less, less money and less resources"*

There is a sense of irony in that in trying get students to question and develop enquiring minds with fewer resources means that teachers will have to re-evaluate their pedagogic approaches to their subject. *(Something to explore when talking to the teaching staff.)*

One of the key changes to A-level was the replacement of the previous system of modularity, a system which allowed for separate module components to be examined and assessed at AS level as well A2 which were then combined to produce a final A-level result. The new qualification would be examined with a terminal linear examination at the end of two years study, a return to the pre-modular period. The rationale behind such a change was that it was felt that the final examination session was a valuable preparation for potential university students. Notwithstanding the debate whether modular or linear A-levels are most appropriate for students, one of the advantages of the modular system was a public exam at the end of year twelve which was indicative of progress against external criteria and national standards. The results of which were seen, by some university admissions tutors as being indicative for the offer of a potential university place. Centres were free to run the reformed AS and A-level courses side by side if they wished, but the AS could not be subsumed within the new linear A-level qualification which can only be assessed by terminal examination. This meant that few centres

would be able to fund additional fees for AS examinations, especially in times of financial constraints, on qualifications which would serve little value as a formative or diagnostic indicator of future performance. Following discussions, the centre decided not to have AS examinations at the end of year twelve, but for some subjects such as maths and to a certain extent science, which are more modular in concept, they would have been happier to have kept the former system. The move away from modularity was seen to provide a freedom to approach the subject in a more holistic way and not drilling for exam preparation:

HoS: *"I think that's a lovely thing to, to be able to do."*

In the early stages of a new qualification the examination boards send out exemplar questions and associated mark schemes as part of the marketisation process and it is these early examples which are being used by teachers to assess student progress to date. They do however come with a caveat in that there is a need to manage expectations associated with any results set against the exemplar material, especially in terms of predicted UCAS grades and possible final results. To what extent the removal of an external exam in year twelve has given teachers more freedom and scope to teach, whilst at the same time allowing students to take a year out from the pressure of exam work, maybe debateable. The reforms have produced four major areas for schools to consider and which will have, to varying degrees, implications for delivery strategies. The first major change was the decoupling of AS from A2 in that AS would become a stand-alone qualification and not be subsumed within and therefore count towards the final A2 grade. The only AS offered at the centre is Further Maths for those students who are taking the subject as a fourth option subject in year twelve and then decide not to continue their studies in year thirteen.

The introduction of any new examination inevitably generates meetings and training sessions arranged by both the examination boards as well as within the school, I was interested to know how much training the staff had received.

HoS: *…,the vice principal and I talked about assessment at length and he's taken a lead with heads of departments. Uh, he's led training with them and basically as always because lots of different heads of department at different experience levels*

in their career who require different types of training, but he's led, um, with me, with me, with me, and he's taking the lead of, have a running activities were actually from the key stage three all the way through to key stage five with life after levels was as part of that whole thing of really exploring what, what is a good assessment, what are you trying to assess, how are you going to ensure standardization and consistency? How often are we going to do it, what will the idea of exploring. I'm doing lots of short tests, ……?"

The discussion about developing the teaching experience and the issue of assessment and the importance of internal assessments as a teaching strategy, has always been part of the teacher's repertoire, in that teachers are constantly assessing for different things and then use the information to develop synoptic questions to help the students bring together the different aspects of their studies. The big difference being:

HoS: *"…about the statistical validity of any type of assessment and how we might use it or might not use it and how obviously the from his argument is the validity is all down to how you use the assessment"*

Whereas with the end of unit modular AS examination the:

HoS: "… *problem with the externals is that the focus becomes totally onto the grade rather than the process of, uh, of development"*

"… and children here talk in terms of numbers rather than learning"

Whilst the centre recognises that schooling has become very much associated with grades and passing exams as stages in the progression to a career, the centre still places value on the learning experience and the values of learning.

HoS: *"I think my concern is that the more prescriptive it gets, the more you feel like there are, there are tricks and secrets to getting good grades than actually just going back to focus on what it is all about"*

The centre's policy is to allow departments and teachers to follow their own preferred style of teaching and opt for the syllabus that best meet their needs. Concerns have been expressed about the inconsistency in what constitutes grade boundaries: teachers being anxious to get it right, especially considering they are judged by their examination results:

HoS: "*So you've got an inconsistent sympathetic inconsistency being led by the exam board and the teachers coming back feeling like we have no idea what the rules are here and yet we're going to be held accountable to the students as well."*

A second aspect of the Coalition's reforms was the reduction in the number of A-level subjects available for examination. How as this affected the centre's provision and what have been the guiding principles underlying the subjects on offer at the centre. Any reduction in the number of subjects available in the sixth form has potential implications for the range of subjects available for study, not only in the sixth form but also in the lower school which will have implications for staffing requirements. Such developments, in conjunction to changes in the way sixth forms are funded, has created a series of financial issues (Belfield, 2018, Camden, 2019, Pearsons, 2019) which have had an impact on both the planning of provision as well as subject range.

HoS: "*I've had to do an awful lot of calculating this year, this year, more than ever"*

Included in the calculations are the number of lessons (3 x 95 minutes) per week per subject; however, if there are fewer than ten students per group, it has been suggested that two lessons rather than three would be a way forward (reference at this point to earlier discussions on the Sixth Form Colleges Association's report into financing operations (Igoe, 2015)) and the DfE's report into cost provision (Parish, 2017).

HoS: *"And we've taken the stance. ….. What we should say is if we're going to run a course, we run it well, whether you've got five in your class or whether you've got twenty-five."*

In effect, the range and number of courses will have to be reduced:

HoS: *"…that you end up saying, well, instead of offering thirty-two courses, now we can only afford to offer twenty-four"*

and the casualties of the retraction being:

HoS: " *inevitably (that) music, dance, language and computer science"*

Another aspect of the financial restrictions and the reduction in the number of courses available has implications for the curriculum approach in that under the modular AS system year twelve students could take up to six subjects thus broadening their experiences before selecting and reducing the number to three or four at the start of year thirteen for examination at the end of the year. What would be the centres approach:

HoS: *"…a couple of angles on it. Number one in terms of students and university requirements. So our advice to students is look get, whether you're, even if you're applying to Oxford, Cambridge, get three good A-levels …the journey to get into that place is going to be different for different students. Some, some might want to do four and then drop down to three because they're not 100 percent sure what they want their three to be. And so we facilitate that if they've, if they've got the ability to say the workload, um, but I'm in the majority of cases"*

One of the consequences of the reduction in subjects available to students and the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on a limited range of subjects has been that the centre has embarked on a more integrated approach to guidance and careers advice. More time and effort is being put into interviewing and providing careers information for students not only in the sixth form, but also in years ten and eleven in order to:

HoS: *"…get them on the right courses early is good for them because if they go into university, then most of universities are saying, well we want an, A,A,B and, not a certain amount of points."*

An additional angle identified was that the British education system tends to specialise at sixteen whereas in other countries they tend to specialise later once they are university. Whilst the future destinations for most students will be centres of higher education, there have been a small number of students who, for a variety of reasons, have opted for study in other countries. This year for one young man who had been offered a place at Oxford opted to go to Yale and therefore needed a broader curriculum.

HoS: *"…I think there's some real sense in that something really healthy about having more breath, but at the same time I also recognize that there's….a need for advice to prioritise the subjects the student enjoys and if after twelve months……if you know by the end of year 12, you're saying, well actually I really want to be a doctor now and I'm taking history, politics and geography then, well, we'll have to cross that bridge when we come to,…"*

For those students who do change their minds later then it is possible to take up a conversion course and it is not unknown for students, who having once qualified, take up different careers:

HoS: *"… you can still go and do it. You just have maybe a slightly different route"*

One of the developments over the last few years has been the introduction of the EPQ (Extended Project Qualification – equivalent to half an A-level carrying 28 UCAS point) I was interested to see if this was regarded as a useful addition to the

curriculum. The subject is offered as an elective within the fourth option block, the first three being A-level subjects. Within the elective block students can select to do core maths (additional maths for students in subject where there is a mathematical component and may require deeper understanding), further maths or an EPQ, and there is also an option to undertake voluntary work to a minimum level of V50.

The EPQ:

HoS: *"…is one that really attracts lots of very early. They love them. It's an exciting thing. You know, they've never had that opportunity before, however, whilst they start off with lots of ideas the time and workload for some is too much, or there is difficulty in narrowing down the theme."*

The centre supports the EPQ with two trained teachers who manage the projects, one looking after the STEM related projects whilst the other looks after the arts and social sciences. The process starts after GCSE's when, after some coaching how to make a submission, they then e-mail their thoughts to the EPQ teachers. Following further conversations, the numbers are reduced to a core of committed students. The centre has considered the idea of making it compulsory:

HoS: *" … I'm wary of that I think that it's, it's not for everyone"*

"… I think it's a wonderful thing for a student to do but it, but it is something that may be if the student wants to engage with it and engage with it fully, it's a fantastic experience and it teaches them study habits and research skills"

Me: "*Does there seem to be any correlation between those who do an EPQ and those who go to the more prestigious universities?"*

HoS "*And our feedback from admission tutors is more about how they, um, when they, even when they go to interviewing, it's the fact they've got something to talk and to talk about"* "*…something really, really meaty to engage about. And I think that's, that's a wonderful thing"*

The value of predicted grades remains an issue for students and centres. In the past Cambridge put great store by the AS results as an indicator of potential performance, so in their absence how would the centre deal with the issue of predicted grades on the UCAS form? Traditionally the centre have argued that it:

HoS: "… *is against our professional integrity to predict you something that we don't believe you're going to get and that, that led to some very difficult conversations. But the world has changed."*

Whilst predicted grades are still required, the Russell Group have their own additional admission tests such as the BMAT, MAT, HAT, which to some extent

negates the need for a predicted grade at the top end of the university scale. The use of predicted grades and the increase in the number of unconditional offers may seem to suggest that the predicted grade is somewhat redundant. Whatever the rationale behind the unconditional offer, it would perhaps be wrong to suggest that it is the post 92 group who are using unconditional offers as a funding strategy, because both Birmingham and Nottingham (Russell Group) have made offers to 'outstanding students'. There is, however, the potential for conflict when parents and students have a possible course of study in mind and then ask for predicted grades which will give their child the opportunity to be considered by the university of their choice:

HoS: *"And we said, well, it's a reference, has professional integrity"*

The situation of predicting grades being that much more difficult in a period of transition. The new examination series which is supposedly measuring different criteria, combined with uncertainty about grade boundary and what constitutes grade levels make it very difficult to predict future grades. Somewhat surprisingly, the GCSE results have become much more important indicators because they are regarded as hard data which can be used as a baseline against which the predicted grades can be referenced. Some universities are now specifying GCSE subject grades in subjects related to the proposed field of study as predictors, so it is

HoS: *"….becoming a very messy business"*

Another aspect of the reforms and the financial constraints under which sixth forms operate centres on viability of group size with a point of delivery cost being suggested should operate with a minimum of twelve per class. How does the centre approach the question of size?

HoS: *"…even in that document that was sort of saying that even in (groups of) 12 and even going above 12, they didn't see any statistical difference in outcomes, which I find extraordinary"*

Like all other sixth form centres faced with the same situation of addressing the financial implications of funding, much discussion ensued, key to which was the underpinning question:

HoS: *"…what is the experience of the student over two years"*

The suggestion of moving towards on-line lectures which would be supplemented by one-to-one tutorials and thus cutting down the contact time was mooted. The idea was rejected on the grounds that year twelve students, when they move into the sixth form, are essentially still children and need the structured framework to support their studies. The collective response however was that teaching was felt to be more than the didactic delivery of information:

HoS: *"But I think also for most subjects, collaborative learning and, and discussion and, and having times when things are inspired and drawn out is what.. the way we pay teachers, you know, what we pay them."*

Throughout all stages of education, has been the concept of the holistic experience of shared learning and associated additional skills which are now recognised in terms of "value added" and seen as an important aspect of schooling.

HoS: *"….I think when they look at things like if you've only got three in your class, then can you really function? Can you really get those benefits?"*

The centre in keeping with its educational philosophy is indicated by its approach to modern foreign language which, if examination board figures are anything to go by indicate that MFL have been marginalised, but here the centre is looking to take MFL through to Key Stage 5. Currently French, German and Spanish are available in lower school and whilst it would not be feasible to operate all three languages at A-level, support might be available for those students wishing to take one or other of the languages not currently being offered in the sixth form:

HoS: *"Whether we get five or whether we get fifteen .. we will take it as a loss leader, but we provide that pathway for students"*

Another strategy being employed, again for those subjects which might be regarded as minority subjects and for which there were few potential students, would be the possibility of co-teaching years twelve and thirteen on the basis of a rolling provision, where the syllabus made such an approach possible. The dynamics of change have created a series of concerns which need to be addressed by the centre to provide greatest number of quality courses, staffed by experienced teachers, which will enable the students to achieve success at school and be in a position to make a successful transition to the next stage.

HoS: *"I think as a, as a curriculum designer, you have to decide what are the needs of the people in this part of the country. You know, what, what do we think we should be offering? And then again, without that into all the complexities of it, there are things like national agenda, perceptions that affect what children choose"*

There are additional ‘soft’ influences on choice such as friends and teachers. If the lower school experience was enjoyable and the students felt inspired this can have an impact on student choice, even if that subject is taken up as a third option:

HoS: *“…even if it's not a career path they want to go and if they enjoyed it and they, they, they trust that it's going to have a good experience and they've been inspired before then that will make it viable.”*

Whilst such may be the case for some subjects, the opposite may be equally valid when reference is made to the take up of other subjects which, despite the government who may have deemed to be key, are for any number of reasons, nonetheless less popular. Trying to balance and obtain the best provision is governed by the school’s educational philosophy:

HoS: *“…if we believe that this has a place on the curriculum, then we have a duty to make sure that the teaching of it is inspirational all the way through”*

Me: “*If there are student wishing to take subjects which are unable to meet the funding costs guidelines what about teaching with other schools? Do you actually work with other schools?”*

HoS: *“We don’t, and we explored every year in different ways. It's just logistically very difficult. It's very difficult thing to do because of being a rural school”*

Whilst some centres may not be interested in sharing resources because of personnel or the fear of competition from another centre poaching their students is not known or quantifiable outcome:

HoS: *“There are some schools that are just not interested because they see themselves as (in) direct competition. Not many though. Most. Most, I think most educators are still in a mindset of collaboration and um, but it's more logistics than…”*

The identification of the logistical aspect facing schools has always been an issue and remains a limiting factor. An alternative to moving students might be to buy in specialist staff and sharing the resource however:

HoS: *“… we have the staff - It's about the logistics of having a group that's viable”*

The reduction in the range of subjects available for study in the sixth form may have other implications:

Me: "…*if we take that and turn it around, teaching A-levels was always regarded as being the pinnacle of teaching. If you are not offering subjects at A-level does that mean then there's an implication lower down the school, are the specialists going to go elsewhere because of the opportunities? Are sixth forms with less than one hundred and fifty study no longer viable?"*

HoS*: "…we can make it a good go of it and we can make it work. But we're still at a significant disadvantage to compared to a sixth form of 1500"*

Me: *"There is the proposed development locally of new sixth form college, what provision have you made?"*

HoS: *"…it's made us re-evaluate what we are and who we are and what we offer. I think genuinely you have to look at, you know, you have to ask whether we can, whether we can offer something, they won't be able offer and accommodate and to, you have to ask whether you, you should still exist genuinely…"*

"…addition to that we talked to them and try to create relationships so that we can work together rather than against each other"

Both the recognition and concerns about the privately funded academy run sixth-form in the nearby town, some five miles distance, was a cause for concern. The loss of students to such a centre would have implications for the school and staffing. Against such a background the centre tried to focus on those aspects which they felt to be positive attributes:

HoS: "*We offer a different experience and genuinely I think a different experience to, to what you would get sixth from college a different post 16 experience"*

Key to this experience has been the development of student support and the conscious determination to create a supportive community. The decision to take the sixth form to a separate site called for a new approach to student supports. Whilst the traditional method was to have a form tutor who was responsible and would guide students through the years in the lower school, the practical implications of having tutors on one site and teaching on the sixth form site made for too many logistical problems. The solution was an academic tutor, a non-teaching member of staff:

HoS: "… *that looks after the whole year group then we have a support structure that is always onsite here and we have careers advisors and that sort of things in special education needs"*

The other strand was the development of the community, one in which:

HoS: *"They all know each other, they, they, um, we celebrate things together. We have assemblies three times a week. We have an environment which is, very much that you turn up and you are part of the community and you give to the community in and we support each other and united through the challenges of, of A-level, A-level exams and learning. I don't think you can do it in the same way if you've got 1500 students"*

Me: "*Are you attracting students from other centres?*

HoS: "*Not very many…. the location restricts …. travel is a big issue"*

The centre may attract approximately ten percent from other centres where the student's combination of subject choice may not be available. Some students may just want a fresh start. In the main students tend to progress into the school's sixth form because:

HoS: "…*students like to stay with their friends going from year 11 to year 12"*

Most of the centre's student body come through from the lower school.

With the combination of reduced funding and the questioning of the viability of smaller sixth forms I wanted to know:

Me: *"How do you see the future of the sixth form in general and the sixth form in particular here – are we all going to move to the college?"*

HoS: *"I don't know"*

Any reform has the potential to make significant and profound difference. Change to a more 'traditional' structure' where literacy skills are more strongly emphasised, especially in the lower school, is part of the central government's plans to address the findings of the PISA rankings which place UK less favourably than other countries. Which along with the change to a linear A-level structure and reduced funding for schools means for an uncertain future which is too early to predict.

The advice from examination boards which has been given is that centres should:

HoS: *"…stop trying to predict questions and really just get on with teaching and helping the students learn and leave the questions up to themselves, to the students to process on the day. And I think that if that happens, that's a really healthy thing to happen."*

However,

HoS: *"I think the, the long reaching effects of that are difficult to know"*

"But I think the long reaching effects financially are the big ones."

"… it's becoming a more mass-market type of model, a consumer led mass market type of model"

Traditionally A-levels have been regarded as a prerequisite for university admission and yet there remains something of a mismatch between state funded schools and students from private centres when it comes to university admissions.

Me: *"….do you have any contact with universities? Do you support open days. how many open days do students tend to go to?"*

HoS: *"…. almost all of those things. We have some admission tutors who come and deliver sessions here. Um, we allow them to go on as many open days as they want"*

Me: *"….do you have a link with any of those in particular?"*

HoS: *"..we have linked with Oxford and Cambridge in terms of tutors and coming to here, we have also (links with county based university) who we have regular open days"*

There is a recognition by the centre, that whilst A-levels are the stated criteria for university admission, enrichment programmes to augment good grades, would be a useful addition to support an application to a more prestigious university. There are several university and commercial organisations which offer additional experiences and support for those students who are wishing to improve their chances of securing admission to the more elite institutions and the centre is supportive of those students who wish to take advantage of such provision. These, however, are fee-paying and have to be privately funded.

HoS: *"…we've got five students who are going to do a course at UCL in the summer but they're having to pay for."*

Whilst such additional provision may be for students of wealthier parents, the centre is placing more emphasis on careers guidance and planning and starting sooner than with previous years.

HoS: *"…in March we had a day off timetable where the students are introduced to lots of different things from ex-students who were currently on courses coming in and talking to them about their experiences and helping them start to sharpen their ideas and in two weeks' time we have our beyond Poplars week, which for year 12, which is all about UCAS applications, apprenticeship applications"*

From summarising the data generated in conversation with the Head of Sixth above, the challenge of implementing the key elements to sixth form provision had had a profound impact on the strategic planning of the organisation. Key change to the A level reforms have led to a more prescriptive content and assessment regime which has given rise to concerns over grade boundaries. The changes and the perception of the implications of such changes have had an impact on both the pedagogic philosophy along with the teaching approaches to deliver the content and develop academic understanding. The reduction in the number of courses available for examination, along with the decoupling of AS from A2, has had an impact not only on curriculum breadth in the sixth form, but also has a potential impact on subjects included in the lower school curriculum. Underpinning these changes, the financing of sixth forms has further narrowed the curriculum by restricting how subject time is allocated and timetabled. Several alternative strategies to off-set the enforced limitations were considered. The use of online teaching was initially considered but rejected on the grounds that learning is a social collaborative interaction which is more than just collecting examination results. Covid 19 restrictions may cause the centre to review this possible alternative method.

The centre's rationale is to create a whole community of supportive learning. The teaching aim is to be inspirational and to motivate young people to learn, whilst developing independent learning habits. To achieve this there is more guidance and support for students prior to joining the sixth form and continues with the dedicated services of an academic tutor and careers adviser. Whilst the value of EPQ is recognised and supported it is not compulsory. Funding implications have created issues which have been addressed by exploring a variety of alternatives, co-operation with other centres and whilst the possibility of combining with other centres is a theoretical consideration, the practicalities of logistical considerations render such an approach virtually stillborn.

The centre aims, like all other sixth form centres, to provide the opportunity for each student to acquire the best grades which reflect a student's potential to go to university and continue their studies. The centre's response to these challenges have been the result of much deliberation, but how do the students themselves view

the provision? What help is available to the students? What factors and personnel are influential for a student when choosing to go to university? To assist in this preparation, the centre has implemented support strategies to assist, including the role played by the academic tutor.

5.2.2 Academic Tutor

Additional comments and observations have been added to the reported conversation with the Academic Tutor to put into context the structure behind the strands and themes explored in the conversation. Again, these additional notes had been informed by prior informal discussions with the Academic Tutor. The role of the Academic Tutor was introduced following a report which had been produced by two former members of the teaching staff who had been engaged in a consultancy capacity to help prepare students for university shortly after the sixth form centre had been created. The main recommendation of their report was the creation of the role of academic tutor to be permanently on site to help, support and guide the students throughout their time in the sixth form. The role should not be filled by a member of the teaching staff, but someone who had a non-judgemental role within the centre.

The role of the academic tutor is one that is ideally placed to provide insightful information into the preparation for and the support given to students in the sixth form, although not involved in the initial interviews for admission to the sixth form, the academic tutor, working in conjunction with the careers adviser (part-time), guides students through the UCAS process and is responsible for monitoring their progress throughout their studies. In addition to which attention is paid to:

AT: *"..study skills .. life skills employ-ability skills" "and a lot of other things - anything and everything that gets them to where they want to be"*

Essentially:

AT: *"My role in getting them ready for university..*

This is accompanied by a watching brief where following a DTT (Diagnosis Therapy and Treatment) session which is initiated by a member of the teaching staff completing a memo of concern. This is very much a reactive role when assessment results are less than expected, or they fall short of the standard required by the university for their proposed course of study."

"…I will meet with the students to see if they understand why they missed that grade .. perhaps they didn't revise enough, or they are just not understanding the topic and then I am in liaison between them and the teacher if I know there is an issue"

Me: "*How much information what kind and where does it come from - teaching staff?*"

AT: "…*we bring in professionals from various walks of life on one day so they can go in and talk to people who actually experience the journey if you like as well as both doing those roles now ... we also have past students coming in to talk about what they did last year and the years before .. we have admissions tutors coming in from ...universities… and they come in to talk them through the application process and what they need to do and we also take them to the UCAS Open Day"*

I was interested to see if there was any additional input which might help prepare potential students for what to expect at university:

Me: *"Do you take students to universities for a particular lecture?*

AT: "*I personally don't take them but we tell them about anything that comes through .. we will either put it out generally or if we know a student has got a specific area they are interested in then I will have to go and find that student and give them that piece of paperwork .. and they can sign up to any ... seminars, summer schools, taster days schools that they want to*

The UCAS process has been modified and continues to be developed and streamlined; however, UCAS, whilst it offers information and advice, is basically an admissions system for placing students on university courses. The process is now fully computerised, and students are required to engage fully with the online process. None-the-less the process remains somewhat stressful:

AT: *"…umm I think students find the whole thing .. stressful - they are having to make decisions for the first time in their life ..um I think knowing that they have got someone they can come to ..*

Me: "*That's the important thing, isn't it?*

AT: *"Yeah .. and I think perhaps in this school knowing that they have got me, because I am one person, where as in other schools they have got various tutors to go to and then you have got some tutors who are better than others, but .. here I am the one .. I mean they do have to do their personal statements with the Head of Sixth you know we have our other head of year twelve head of year thirteen take some of the personal statements.. um but I do the bulk of them and if they cannot find those three people, they will come to me anyway"*

Personal statements are perhaps the most difficult four thousand characters any student must compile. The agonies of constructing personal statements has not been helped by stories suggesting that some universities pay little if any attention to personal statements. Notwithstanding the anecdotal observations, centres spend

not an inconsiderable amount of time producing personal statements which are both a character reference and resume of personal attributes which will support their application and indicate their suitability for higher level study:

AT: *"I look at competences the whole time transferable skills so I am looking where they are collecting those skills outside of the classroom as well as in it um and I get them to record it we use something called UniFrog[48] for them to . investigate what courses are out there and there is an area on there where they can record their competences. so basically, I will look at that and get them to make a starting point what they think all their wonderful things and then I will sit and have a discussion with them and see if we call pull out anything more..*

And so, the process continues…."

Me: *"….there is a lot of information out there but there is a difference between information and advice and you are key to that .. do you find they are using you on a regular basis?*

AT: *"Yeah there will be some that I have to drag in yeah I mean there are some that will be in and out all the time there will be others that I have an appointment system if you like there will those who stick to the appointment system others that will try and get in between and catch you in corridors ..my classroom sessions I will do a whole session but will also then see individuals if they want to see me am I do that right up until UCAS deadline basically."*

Another important aspect of the UCAS process is the recording of predicted grades. Following the removal of the AS external examinations I was interested to learn how the centre was dealing with the potentially tricky question of predicted grades.

Me: *"Have you had any feedback about the change from using AS as an indicator to going straight into just three subjects from the students?"*

AT: "*Yes from the students and then from the staff .. umm I think that the problem that we have got is because there are no exams we have to do some kind of end of year testing.. teachers were telling students that was what was going on as their predicted grades ... umm students where very unhappy about that because they hadn't actually learned everything they need because it is a two year rather than a one plus one"*

"... the teachers were saying that is what is predicted ..myself and head of sixth, head of year were saying no - we can, they can be changed if you want them to .. so we have to really discuss with teachers and say that it can only be an indicator.. um and that we will have to go back and have a discussion with the student maybe involve the parents and the teachers to say you know has this person changed .. since they did that end of year exam because .. I think some of

[48] Unifrog claims to be the 'complete destinations platform', a logistics program that helps students and teachers when choosing universities *https://www.unifrog.org*

the students didn't take them seriously enough knowing that they weren't ASs .. the teachers were obviously trying to make them take them seriously in order to give them a predicted grade .. a grey area.."

The introduction of the EPQ is said to promote a lot of skills that are required at university.

Me**:** " *EPQ is that something you would want to encourage?*

AT: "*Yes we do encourage it ….but we do tell them it is hard work on top of what they are doing already aah we probably do have a small percentage who drop out when they realise that it is too much work on top of their A-levels but the rest do go through and do it and then there are some who regret it and ask if they can do in year thirteen"*

The reason for choosing any one university and course involves consideration being given to several factors, what were the most important considerations for students:

Me: "*From your years of experience would you suggest there are certain things students are looking for when they are looking for a course - is it the accommodation - is it the strength of the department or is it the course on offer, any ideas on that?"*

AT: *"Aah - I would say that the majority of times it is the course that they are looking at umm .. there are those that don't want to go too far away from home so sometimes it is based on the location and so we do get those who will apply to (local universities) …. going further afield.. umm and there are some who just want to get away from home so sometimes location plays a big part"*

" …*with UniFrog because you can actually look at what the employability is like for the course and I think that holds a lot of sway for a lot of students as well knowing what the job market is like out there"*

The reference to Unifrog and information about employment/career potential earnings seems to have some resonance with research under taken by Davies (Davies et al., 2017)

AT: *"We found strong evidence that mediating factors such as their beliefs about average graduate salaries and their own likely salary in each subject were affected by the intervention. This suggests that providing accessible and credible information on labour market consequences of school choices may influence students' decisions. In the light of concerns about the quality of careers guidance for school students and expectations that educational choices should be well-informed**, the study has clear implications for policy and practice.**" (Taken from the abstract by the author)*

My bold emphasis draws attention to the value of existing careers advice available to students in general, but in particular to those in the sixth form especially since the removal of funding for the Connexions program in 2012 and the introduction of a National Careers Service, which meant:

"*Young people do not, however, have access to any face-to-face guidance provision by the NCS and its remit does not extend to working with schools."* (Stuart, 2013 :8)

With Unifrog supplying information and with guidance no longer available from Connexions, who then, I wondered, was influencing student choices?

Me: "*Who is the biggest influence on them when it comes to choosing a course and a university? Are you the biggest influence?"*

AT: *"Ahh... I don't know really - umm I suppose parents would be a key thing - if the parents are really involved .. what we would, what we encourage every student to do if they are thinking about going to a university is to go and visit, go to an Open Day and go and visit the university and even if they love the course the deciding factor tends to be once they have set foot on campus they will know instantly whether they like it or not"*

Me: *"So important if you are not happy…"*

AT: *"Exactly exactly - we have had a couple of them who actually loved the campus then went back for a taster day, hated it on the taster day and changed their mind to something else so you know I think visiting is one of the big things that they need to do"*

Me: *"It is often felt that young people are both dependent on and greatly influenced by social media was this the case, where students making use of social media and what was the centre's approach to the use of social media. Do students make use of social media?"*

AT: "*Not really we often say to them not to look at social media umm because people only because people either post the only really positive things or the really negative things - you don't tend to get the middle ground as they are either having a fantastic time umm or it is all just dreadful .. so things like Student Room we do tell them not to go anywhere near it"*

Me: *"With the changes to the way universities are funded and with universities actively recruiting students, as reported in the media (Fazackerley, 2016, Fazackerley, 2017a, Sellgreen, 2018), I was interested to know whether many, if any, students from the centre were getting unconditional offers?"*

AT: "*They are getting more and more every year yeah yeah without doubt .. yeah usually the top end students will get unconditionals or those which have got some kind of sporting ability so if they have played for a national team or something .. yeah that sort of thing we have seen quite a bit of that"*

Me: *"How does the centre respond to the increase in the number of offers"*

AT: *".. the advice, we have an evening the head of year does an evening, brings parents in to talk to the students … and we say to them if you get an unconditional .. and you know that is one of the ones you really wanted to go to anyway that was your top choice - then fine -if it wasn't, it was lower down on your list is it wise to take it just because it was unconditional are you really going to be happy taking it, usually with students who want to go to that university they will continue to work hard even though it is unconditional for the others .. it switches them off and they think I don't really to try anymore `and what we are trying to say to them is those A-level grades are still important on your CVs for a few years yet anyway"*

Me: "*As a result of all the work that goes into researching, visiting and discussing which university and course to follow, what percentage of students actually got their first choice?"*

AT: *"... I don't know probably I don't know ninety percent of a year group applied to university I think with apprenticeships coming in that's going down now so we are probably looking at seventy-five eighty percent applying umm that's not to say that they all go once they left and I would say probably ..... I am thinking back to last lot that went through .. I would probably say a good seventy percent got their first choices."*

Me: *"Earlier you mentioned life skills - preparation for university is more than just the academic preparation – in what other ways do you help to prepare students for being away from home and having to cater for themselves"*

AT: "*I will do finances is one of the things so we talk about how they you know pay back their student loan afterwards, but more importantly we will look at accommodation costs and travel costs if they are not staying on campus , we will look at how much food costs, you know everything else they have not thought about how much money they will have at the end for going out and partying umm as well as looking at bank accounts so you student banking accounts, overdrafts how they work and you know credit cards debit cards and those kind of things"*

Me: *"It's a big, big change for them having to make decisions on their own do you find they take to it readily, or is this something that frightens them in general?*

AT: *".. we start looking at their life skills 'cause they are moving away from home and can they cope…Some do and some don't it's down to the individual and I think to the parents as well, some parents are even more scared than the students are.."*

Me: " *Some of the responses to the earlier questionnaires suggested that for quite a few young people were interested in apprenticeships, how does this fit in with your workload?"*

AT: "…*so apprenticeships are growing and urm so it used to be that once the UCAS deadline went we start to concentrate on apprenticeships urm and jobs and interviews and CVs and so on .. we are finding that with the new apprenticeships that now the windows are opening earlier so that is now going neck and neck with the UCAS deadlines because I assume they want to get the students before they apply to UCAS"*

The idea of apprenticeships, including degree bearing awards, have been more actively promoted and encouraged by central government (Gov.UK, 2012). This development has increasingly become part of the post sixth form choice options. The idea of apprenticeships can seem to be most attractive to some students in that they are in many cases guaranteeing a career/job at the end of the training and the apprentice is paid whilst earning a recognised qualification without incurring the debt associated with university.

The creation of this role as a non-judgemental supporting role, designed to both help and available to support students throughout the various stages of sixth form was one of the centre's responses and was put in place to reduce student stress during a critical part of their schooling. The Academic Tutor was able to work with the teaching staff who had DTT concerns about a student's progress and offer support and guidance in those specific areas which had been identified as being in need of remedial action. The role is also very much that of a conduit for information coming into the centre and directed to those particular students who might gain from such materials. The introduction of the Academic Tutor, along with the systems in place may have made the UCAS process more straightforward, the use of the commercially produced Unifrog program has enabled students to become much more personally informed about university and careers and much more proactive in researching their future courses and universities. The centre is very fortunate to have the services of a part-time careers adviser who is well-regarded and respected as indicated in the some of the student interview reports, Unfortunately, in spite of several attempt s to meet and interview, circumstances prevented such an interview taking place. Reference to the findings of the Gatsby Report (Gatsby_Foundation, 2020) would seem to vindicate the centre's approach to involve a careers specialist, even if not meeting all eight of the Gatsby recommendations.

Concerns about predicted grades remain a very contentious issue, and the idea of post-qualification admissions process would appear to be a less stressful and time-consuming alternative to the current system. Additionally, the use of unconditional offers required careful and personal counselling for those students in receipt of such

offers if the unconditional offer was not to be regarded a cynical place filling exercise by some universities to recruit fee-paying students.

The UCAS process continues to be a stressful process. Recent developments in apprenticeships, especially those which include university level awards are becoming more popular for those students who have identified a specific career. The apprenticeship application system, whilst not yet as structured as UCAS process, nonetheless requires support and guidance throughout the application and interview process and is no less stressful for the student. It would seem as though the appointment of a non-judgmental support academic tutor to have been a very positive, and well-received initiative for the centre.

5.2.3 Student Support

A development to the role of Academic Tutor has been that of the appointment of yet again a non-teaching support guide and counsellor. A former student and Oxford graduate has returned to the centre to offer guidance and support to sixth form students. Again, the recorded conversation was the final part in an ongoing dialogue and the additional comments reflect some of the issues raised in these earlier conversations. I was interested to see how previous and current university preparation compared. The former student recalled A-level choice followed a couple of parents evening events. A single teacher was identified as being helpful:

FS: *" .. ..but he recommended certain subjects that would be nice in combination with history ... which ended up, he recommended I take politics which I did take politics and he also recommended I did a science ...um just to show that ... you know that I am just not a humanities student, that I have scientific background"*

"With additional advice from older siblings and from the father of a friend who suggested studying what you enjoy in the belief:
"that will stand you in good stead later on ..."

Me: *"Is there a difference between information and advice?"*

FS: "... *but then surely information is advice in the right scenario?*"

By contrast the UCAS process in the past, a paper-based exercise and which offered little support by contrast with that which is currently available. However, there was support from the form tutor. Based on the former student's memory, the form tutor did not seem to be very pro-active, merely processing the application

stages when and as required. A single subject teacher took a small group of potential Oxbridge applicants to the two centres. The importance of university visits was subsequently highlighted when the student, having identify potential universities persuaded his father to drive him to one such Open Day and after a four and half-hour drive:

FS: *" (we),..were there for five minutes and I said we are going home ..I do not like this one bit"*

"…the Oxford open day.. and I remember thinking at the time .. it was great bit I am not really seeing .. the real university .. you know"

"…so the only bit of the open day I found particularly helpful ….I met a couple of students who weren't part of the open day ..... just got talking to them in the JCR .. so it is a far more informal deliverance of the information rather than the formal deliverance of information"

This approach from someone who was outgoing and aware that the Open day was an opportunity to advertise its courses and the institution, was itself being evaluated by the prospective student who could access informal sources about courses and the university. This opportunity, along with the confidence to talk to other students, was, in the case of the former student, was of more value than basing a decision simply on information contained within the university prospectus.

Part of the narrative for studying A-levels is that it is relevant to what is yet to come, however:

Me*: "Did you find you're a-levels were a good preparation for your studies at university?"*

FS: *"…, I remember the first time I met them on the day they were handing out tutorials they said in* ***no way shape or form will your history A-level really have prepared you for what you are about to do*** *... so in both terms of I suppose methodologies, but also work rate ... was just nothing in comparison really ... so it was learning from day one*."

This response was not unsurprising to hear, whether the recent central government's reforms had moved A-level subjects any nearer to university expectations remains to be seen and will have to wait research findings when the current cohort of students have completed their first years at university. Interestingly a parallel development has been the introduction in recent years of the four-year

degree with the first year serving as a foundation[49] year, originally offered to overseas students who had not followed a traditional British curriculum but now available to UK students.

Me: "*How do you approach your role at the centre?"*

FS: *"…I make no pretences being a teacher and I make no pretence of offering necessarily impartial guidance ... so I try to be as straight up .. and honest and in many cases blunt as I can be to try, I suppose the things I would have liked to have known..."*

In comparison current day students have access to more information about examinations and university and careers as part of a continuum:

FS: *"….I think they are now more aware ... that it is a jumping through hoops exercise"*

Me: *"Do you think they are too focused on getting through the exam?*

FS: "….*Yes , absolutely, ... but then that's .. both a symptom of being made more aware of jumping through the hoop thing ..... I would personally attribute it to a decline in individuality of teaching professions…. teachers tend to be more identikit now .. they have more formulae in how they approach the subject and how they want to teach"*

This comment showed an awareness of the role that examination results mean for the centre in terms of league tables and the associated perceptions of what constitutes a 'good school'. There is also the consideration that teacher accountability means that any deviation from the prepared script makes both the individual and the centre open to accusations of institutional failing in terms of management and accountability. In addition, the adherence to a prescriptive and formulaic marking scheme, along with a narrowed subject base and little integration between related subjects reinforces student attitudes to there being a 'right answer'.

Another difference I wanted to explore was associated with the idea that universities have changed from being an elite form of education to a system of mass education and what impact this may have on students and the way they viewed the prospects of going to university.

[49] The foundation year as a preparation for, and integral to, a degree should not be confused with the foundation degree (Fd) introduced in 2001 as a sub-degree which allows vocational subjects to be taught with an academic component. The foundation degree can later be 'topped-up' to a full degree with an extra year's study.

FS: "…*the prevalence of ..... the assumption that one will just go to university and acquire a degree ... I think is, well an inevitable consequence that you have devalued it ... if a good becomes more widely available …the value goes down"*

"When universities were selecting students the hierarchy and status attached provided an incentive to achieve the required grades"

"….was a good thing and people were like I am going to work hard to get my A and two Bs to get to that good university"

Me: "*With there now being more universities and courses available may this have removed some of the impetus to achieve?"*

FS: *"…so why bust your gut to get three As and go to Warwick when you can get an A and two Bs ... and go to Coventry ...."*

"…I think that has been eroded to the detriment of the system as well as I think 'cos all it does is to increase the stranglehold of the elite over the rest"

The former student was able to recall being able to make a judgement as to whether to study A-levels and then to decide to go on to university or not. The experience of spending three 'amazing' years at university was regarded as a unique and valuable experience. Could the same be said of today's students? Comparisons with the current sixth form would, however, suggest that A-levels may not actually be any more of a preparation for further study than was formerly case, in that if the focus on securing 'good' grades, is perquisite for whatever the next step may be, is suggestive that A-levels are a tool for selection rather than the development of academic knowledge and understanding. The proliferation of different degree courses and universities poses questions about the value of some of these new developments. Notwithstanding the published figures and claims made by the Russell Group of widened participation rates and uptake by under-represented groups, there is increasingly research suggesting that the reality may be somewhat at variance with these claims especially when it comes careers and membership of the professions (Ball et al., 2000, Ball, 2003a, Ball, 2006, Ball, 2013, David et al., 2009, Bathmaker et al., 2013, Boliver, 2007, Boliver, 2011, Boliver, 2013, Boliver, 2015a, Boliver, 2015b, Boliver, 2017, Wakeling and Savage, 2015). Thus, the purpose of going to university has become part of the transition process into the adult world of work – it has now become unquestioningly accepted by schools and parents, and many students, that this is the only way to achieve a successful personal outcome. In many ways the commodification of education has created a sense of expectation, if not actually entitlement to go to university.

The link between sixth form studies and the passage into university may have become established and unquestioningly accepted (what Bourdieu identified as 'doxa' [50]), yet the reality of going to university may be different. If the student satisfaction survey results are a true reflection of experience, then not everyone who goes to university has a good time (Bhardwa, 2018) and for some students leaving university is the only option. The dropout rates being sufficient for the secretary of state to ask universities to address the dropout wastage by looking at the all-round welfare of the students rather regarding them as "bums on seats" (Hinds, 2019).

The idea that A-levels as a preparation for higher education and its conflation with a financially rewarding career seems to be at some variance with the expectation that only thirty percent of student loans will be repaid (Bolton, 2019). In addition, research suggests that some thirty percent of employed graduates are over qualified for the work they do (Weale, 2019a) and up to five percent of graduates unemployed (Warren, 2019). Does this not suggest that one of the key selling points for higher education has fallen short of expectations. To what extent does the acceptance of the narrative govern student choice? What factors and who are the people likely to influence students and their choices? Anecdotally teachers have been cited as being influential in shaping student choices and future careers. The next set of conversations record some of the views offered by the teaching staff on their roles and the way they prepare their students for the A-level examination and the transition to university. The collected thoughts and responses of the teachers provide a context which, to varying degrees, influences directly, or indirectly, student perceptions and choices.

[50] Doxa, as defined by Bourdieu, is an unquestioning acceptance of societal explanations and expectations associated with one's place within society and which through various socialisation processes become accepted as self-evident truths. When internalised this misconception can be manifest in self-justificatory statements such as "not for the likes of us" when students are considering university choices. BOURDIEU, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. BOURDIEU, P. & PASSERON, J. C. 1990. *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*, London ; Newbury Park, Calif. : Sage in association with Theory, Culture & Society, Dept. of Administrative and Social Studies, Teesside Polytechnic, 1990.
1990 ed. / preface by Pierre Bourdieu.
BOURDIEU, P. 2010. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* London, Routledge.

5.2.4 Teaching Staff

Whilst the senior management team have set the ethos and policies for the school it is the teachers who are responsible for course selection and the strategies to achieve the standards expected by the awarding bodies. Any major change to an examination syllabus brings forth several problems, some of which can be foreseen and anticipated, but there are others which by virtue of the untried and untested nature of the syllabus must remain unknown unknowns until such time as they occur. Again, in the past teachers were deemed responsible for the work they did, the students they taught, and the results obtained, yet with the shift to a system of teacher accountability, the relationship between what is taught and how the course is delivered have placed a greater emphasis examination results and student profile grade targets. It was against this stressful background of teacher preparation that several teachers felt able to share their views and concerns with me and for which I am indeed grateful. Again, I have interspersed the conversations with comments and observations based on my insider knowledge to expand upon themes raised in the conversations.

In discussing the reforms to the A-level with seven members of the teaching staff at the centre, several themes emerged. Firstly, there was a consensus that A-levels had changed to include a much greater topic range which was expected to be covered to a greater depth, whilst simultaneously developing extended skills sets in order that the acquired knowledge which could be applied, rather than merely learnt to be reproduced as feats of memory under exam conditions. Whilst the teaching and learning aspects of the reforms dominated the conversations, the underpinning rationale for the reforms was viewed by one experienced teacher as more politically motivated:

Teacher of Science: *"…it has made sweeping changes in order to impress the electoral body uh which it can claim to have invested several millions from the populous into education and got results hence it has introduced more, in its terms more rigorous labelling in terms of grading structure in order to make people more accountable"*

The major changes to the A-level specifications indicated a change in approach:

Teacher of Geography: " *…its more complex language certainly the um textbook we are using …..is very good and exactly mirrors the course - it is a lot more complex, there is a lot more explaining we have to do of the terminology so that*

there is a lot more understanding I think that the students have to acquire more than just rote learning they really have to understand the concept I think more"

Teacher of History: "… *far far less time to teach the skills we want to teach for the subject"*

"…the exam boards haven't actually reduced their expectations for skills so what is very very difficult is that I feel we can do neither side effectively because in trying to get over a vast amount of content it is much greater amount of content that needs to be .. I would say far too much for anyone who is not in the top percent to actually take on board and understand not only with doing that but trying to then use that content in giving skills-based answers"

With new specifications, and in some cases a change in examination awarding body, it is to be expected that terminal examination would be the focus for the teaching strategies deployed. A recurring theme in teaching towards the final examination was the importance attached to shaping the approach and relationship to the application of knowledge.

Teacher of Mathematics: *"… There is a different approach to some maths questions umm so for example in maths we now have a modelling component and there is more emphasis on proof so there are changes to the way I teach in that I always make sure I do some modelling questions and we do some proof questions…."*

Teacher of Geography: *"I think you have to do in the early days don't you really because you have less experience of what the exams requiring so yes you teach to the course you teach to the exam."*

Teacher of History: "…*but of course there isn't the time to prepare them for the skills based answers and so what we are having to do is reduce the expectation for the skills down to formulae applying formulae so that everyone can .. can at least access some marks on a mark scheme and I think what that is doing that it is taking away the freedom to learn and actually being very counter-productive"*

Combining the increased content whilst developing the necessary skill sets to be able to answer the synoptic questions, whilst not new to A-level, seems to lend itself more readily to the linear examination in which the various elements and components contained within the specification can be brought together. To what extent was this change in testing regime proving to be difficult?

Teacher of Social Sciences: *"…it is more in terms of the focus on ..more difficult questions really…. and more synoptic questions umm so that their kind of major issues."*

Teacher of Geography:"…*another thing about the new course is the synoptic links which they find a bit more difficult and is more challenging to teach…"*

"*…we do this massive brainstorming on how the links which is a great revision process but it does require them to sort of think much more you know broader really so you cannot learn something in a little chunk you know there are links - more difficult"*

Teacher of Science: *"…it's not so much these days a memory game in as much that you have more application rather than just complete memory so from that point of view I would suggest that the preparation of the students and the grades they get more aptly reflect their ability"*

Teacher of Social Sciences: *"…they have now a lot more of the 'to what extent' type questions so they have to present both sides of the argument they have got to apply their knowledge they have got to think through the balance of their answer more than they had to before so I think the answers are less obvious immediately I think they are more thought provoking - which again I think is a good thing"*

One of the stated aims behind the reforms was to make A-levels more rigorous, not only in terms of changes to the examination structure, but also as a more appropriate and robust preparation for university study. I was interested to learn how well the teaching staff felt the new A-levels prepared their students for university. Such reforms cannot be separated from the requirement on the centre to produce their examination results for publication in national league tables. Key for this research is the question of whether the centre would focus on A-level results, rather than the development of the whole student and the preparation for university?

Teacher of History*: "… um I think the A-level course prepares them really well for university in many ways because ..um it is certainly is extremely rigorous and many of our students when they come back to talk to us say that it is actually much easier at university than it is at A-levels so I do feel that they are being prepared for it"*

However,

"*…fail give them hooks to go and do their own research which I would like to think the top universities would expect we are not achieving that because we are not giving them the time*"

All centres will strive to achieve 'good' results for their students, not just for the individual student but also in terms of league table performance.

In this drive to prepare students for the terminal examinations, is there a potential conflict between two key stated aims of the government's reforms? Namely that A-levels should include more depth and content, and yet somewhat ironically be

examined within a very strict examination regime. Secondly, one of the aims of the new A-level structure was to encourage an independent, questioning, and reflective approach to learning, yet the course guidelines which prescribe the sources to be used would seem to be contradictory to the stated aim of intellectual development.

Teacher of Geography: *"…independent study is the biggest issue you know we do mollycoddle them look after them in the sixth-form don't we and sort of dictate to them really what they are doing"*

The transition from the school-based classroom philosophy of recipient learner to that of a learner actively engaged in their learning is,

Teacher of Geography*: "…a huge jump from what we do in the school we prepare them for exams we are teacher driven, we do spoon-feed to a certain extent because we know how important the results are to them and then the biggest jump of course is the courses where you know they have limited face-to-face time in lectures and an enormous amount of time for personal study and they don't know how to do personal study - I don't think we prepare them particularly well for independent study but that difficult situation in the sixth-form is how much freedom do you give them to their own preparation and independent study - is that preparing them in the best way to meet the criteria of the exam board - so you know you go round in circles don't you?"*

Teacher of Maths: *"… yes some sort of understanding of the proportion of lecture to independent study that's one of the reasons why I don't think the maths A-level does really support any better students into university than the old one did because actually a maths A-level can't because maths A-level is a very closely taught affair you can't really send the students off to do independent learning because as I found last year when I had a very low timetabling for my further maths group when they had two lessons out of three taught because they were such a small group was that they had to do flip learning as it were they had to go off and teach themselves certain things but then I would have to spend the next two lessons unpicking all their misconceptions because that sort of level abstract reasoning is very difficult to pick up with their background knowledge at the stage they are at its difficult to pick up researching it yourself and I think actually university study there is so much more independent learning but maths A-level doesn't*

Teacher of Geography *"..the transition is huge but it's for all sorts of reasons, social reasons as much as academic and I don't know how you get round that - except having better links I think maybe with students who are university this idea perhaps of spending a day with somebody shadowing them or budding up for a day or week or something like that - but even then it is only a snapshot of what life is like…"*

Me: *"In terms of preparation for university study what attempts have been made to address the difference in teaching and study styles?*

Teacher of Science: "…*in the past done visits to local university where we've done a day where they have experienced a lecture in a particular subject and then gone and had that experience so they can make a decision based in full knowledge … - we also recommend of course that they go and do visits to universities if they are interested in a particular course"*

The concerns about preparing for and applying to university have been issues of importance for me as a tutor and teacher, and therefore I was keen to learn how other teachers viewed the prospects of their students going to university. The centre, like so many other centres, have, over the years, refined their procedures to complete and meet all the UCAS requirements.

Teacher of Science: " *…in terms of getting the students prepared we take the students off timetable for a week basically during the summer term and we specifically go through the UCAS process so I feel the students are particularly well prepared for the UCAS …"*

Whilst the procedural UCAS requirements are honed, in place and operate smoothly, the underlying pressure to find a university place and comply with the requirements of the next stage in their development is placed on students. The process of making decisions based on informed choice requires time and reflection and thus makes the distinction between information and guidance more pertinent. Whilst it is not uncommon for former students to cite the influence of a particular teacher in connection with a career or university course, I wanted to know whether teachers felt that their views and opinions were considered when selecting a particular course or career pathway. Do students ask for advice from their teachers?

Teacher of History: *"Yes they do and the advice I give is, as far as I can make it tailored to them, I don't have a stock answer…. I look at campus versus .. city ….all kinds of opportunity for charity work refugee work ….and get so much out of that beyond what they get in the university and therefore I will say exactly that to them so that they know on what I am basing the advice. Others need I feel need to be cossetted a little more ….so I do talk to them about it and I will say to them bring me the prospectus and show me what courses are on offer and I will tell you If I think you will enjoy them because they haven't done lot of history topics they have only done three so I will tell them what hey entail and you know say knowing that you have enjoyed this I think you might like this because it is this - yes I give them lots of advice like that - **when asked**" (Emphasis is mine)*

As individually tailored as the above may suggest, the relevance of such advice in a rapidly changing environment adds additional responsibilities on teaching staff to keep abreast of developments within their subject.

Teacher of History: "*I personally keep as updated as I can through the papers through, I do read the latest league tables and see what I think …..but I don't ever feel confident that I know enough - that's up to date and I am very aware of that so I am very careful in any advice I give always say to them you must look this up I am telling you this is what I know to be true but you have to remember this may be outdated on this particular point - you need to look and this is how you look and once you have looked if you want to come back to me with what you have found we can discuss."*

The recognition that the myriad complexities of course combinations at various HE institutions is so vast that it makes it difficult to keep abreast of all the developments. The significance of this up to-date information when helping to advise students is so important that perhaps a committed person should take responsibility for keeping the centre abreast of such developments.

Teacher of Geography: *"I don't think as teachers we are I wouldn't feel particularly well informed on what all the different you know courses involved …. I think possibly there needs to be a more dedicated person in school that is more familiar with those courses"*

The point about asking for advice, and highlighted above, seems to suggest that asking for advice does not come readily, is this indicative of an approach which suggest that there is an unquestioning acceptance of what is on offer?

Teacher of Maths: *"…they might be asked to come and see me or suggested by their academic tutor that it would be an idea to come and see me so I do have students mmm who might come and ask advice about something, but it is usually a suggestion has been made by their academic tutor that they go and…"*

UCAS requires the recording of predicted grades. This has always been a potential for conflict between teaching staff, student, and parents. Whilst the process is often one of negotiation based on university requirements and teacher knowledge of student's work and potential, the current arrangements are both time consuming and of questionable value. It may be time to reconsider the value of predicted grades, especially when the predictions are not that reliable (Wyness, 2016) [51].

[51] Conclusions from the research found a high level of inaccuracy of grade prediction. Among the students with the best A-levels in three subjects, only 16% of higher education applicants' grades are accurately predicted.

Teacher of History: "…*you know what universities you are looking at and what kind of grade do you think you are going to get and so there is a bit of negotiation there….it is very much easier for the centre to resist a student request but when a parent asks for a change then I have been put under pressure in the past* "

Associated with the application process and predicted grades has been the recent increase in the number of unconditional offers made to students by some universities; however, not by all such offers came from the newer Group of 92 universities, for Nottingham (Russell Group) also made a number of unconditional offers to high flying students who they felt would benefit from the security of having the offer of a place.[52] I was interested to discover the views of the staff as to whether the making of an unconditional offer was, in their opinion a valuable stress reducing development or an invitation to ease back on their A-level preparations for the examinations. The responses seemed to cover three areas, firstly the cynical:

Teacher of Geography "…*Unconditional offers - - Yes getting students there - it's a numbers game isn't it?*

Teacher of Maths *" … yes it is not a development that I feel comfortable with really and it feels like it's a bums on seats thing"*

A second theme was that an unconditional offer may alter their approach to their studies:

Teacher of Maths "*…And I have had students say to me well it doesn't really matter what I get because I am going to Nottingham anyway …. Yes but not to do maths obviously ... music or something so their maths grade doesn't count for anything oohhh yeah um ..... "*

Teacher of Science "…*um yes I do think it affects students in as much that they tend to relax a bit, relax too much and don't put the emphasis into the exam and then suddenly find themselves scrabbling around at the end trying to think - oh my goodness I don't know this ….and in my experience people perhaps on the borderline between B and A - would not necessarily put the work in that they need to achieve the higher grade".*

The third aspect was associated with the learning process which, in which the intrinsic value of learning a subject may have become lost:

Teacher of Geography: *"… if they are getting more and more unconditional offers it's not an incentive is it - whereas if its post-qualification then they have to work as hard as they can to get the best grades and then they know what they are dealing with"*

[52] Nottingham has announced it will end its policy of unconditional offers in Sept 2019 following the introduction of the Highflyers scheme in 2014.

Teacher of History: *"…you don't get that golden moment of having worked really hard and deserving your summer having achieved an entry to university because they have given it to you on a plate so we are not taking away the problems, but we are denying them the reward "*

The UCAS process coinciding with preparation and the stress associated with grades adds an extra burden on the students, would it not be wise to move to a post qualifications admissions system (Atherton, 2019)?

Teacher of Geography: *"…I think I would prefer post-qualification admission - if its post-qualification then they have to work as hard as they can to get the best grades and then they know what they are dealing with"*

Whilst successive governments, through various educational policies, have sought to widen participation at university to foster personal aspirations and thus enable social mobility, is there not a danger that going to university has become an end itself without leading to increased social mobility? Currently, the idea, even expectation of '*going to uni'* has almost become synonymous with sixth-form admissions, however, for many students in the current sixth form they may well be the first members of their family to think about going to university. This lack of familiarity with the more nuanced aspects of what is involved, notwithstanding the centre's UCAS provision, raises questions about where to go for the most appropriate and personalised advice and encouragement?

Teacher of Social Science: *"I think I am increasingly so because the ... it depends on their parents or background really but students have... if they have no experience in their family of university then the debt becomes a big barrier and so talking through what that debt really means is quite important to quite a lot of them ..."*

Teacher of History: *"…I think we should be more honest with that because again if we are not then that whole system is a privilege of the educated classes it tends to be the ones with no idea about universities who make the worst of the choices".*

These reflective comments from the front-line teachers raise an interesting consideration for the research; is too much expected of students, who have limited experience and, not infrequently, restricted cultural resources, to be able to acquire the social intelligences necessary to deal with the complexities of the everchanging circumstances which inform choice? The more so, in that for students who, up and till this time, have not had to analyse and think about the implications and consequences associated with the choice(s) they make. Therefore, rather than

talking about “going to university” should we not be looking at individuals and how best they might maximise their experience relative to their needs and requirements?

Teacher of History: *“I think we need to be talking more in terms of what each individual university has to offer and making those choices more precise so that they can be even more consumer savvy and say really what I want I am looking for in a university is this I know that this one is not widely respected, I am going to choose it because it gives me that -but I do know that up against someone with a degree from another university here I would have to prove myself in another way and I think we should be more honest with that …”*

A final area for questioning was whether the teachers got any feedback from former students once they had left and gone to university and whether such contacts might influence the advice and guidance, they, as teachers, were able to offer their current cohort.

Teacher of History: “*Most of them say they have made the right choice in the first couple of terms they come back and they don't always like it and when they do its not for the academic ….but it is not always because of the academic courses there are many different things and that’s why I don't think we are preparing them quite enough - I think the centre really tries to - to be fair it’s got better and better at doing it but how do you actually access a student's open mind on those things when they are doing everything else and all they are thinking is writing personal statements again that is where an extra year would come in handy”*

The idea of a post-qualification admission process has been discussed by many sixth form teachers over the years. The ‘seventh term’ as was the case in the past with potential Oxbridge entrants[53] has been offered as a solution to the timing and stress associated with the university admissions process. In 2020 the idea of post-qualifications was posited by the Secretary of State for Education (Williamson, 2020) and was subsequently rejected by the Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan) (Lough, 2022). The process of applying to university whilst studying for A-levels has been seen as a contributory factor causing stress amongst sixth form students (Crausby, 2018, Stafford, 2019) and for the interviewed teaching staff at the centre, the idea of a post-qualification process would be one that they would welcome. It will be interesting to obtain the views of the students themselves on the idea of separating A-levels and the application process.

[53] Dramatised by Alan Bennet in his play “The History Boys” BENNET, A. 2014. *The History Boys,* London, Faber & Faber.

In conversations with the teaching staff their commitment to teaching their subjects and helping students to both understand and develop their learning was very apparent. In response to the A-level changes, teacher priorities have concentrated on implementing the requirements of the new specifications with particular attention being paid to synopsis requirement contained in the terminal examination. It was the introduction of the synoptic element in the terminal examination which was designed to allow the student to demonstrate the application of their knowledge and advanced academic skills rather than just memorising notes. This development which fostered the skills of applying knowledge was felt to be a very positive development for A-levels. As ever, the teaching staff felt that the time available to cover, and to do justice to all aspects of the subject at the same time as acquiring the necessary skills to tackle the synoptic terminal examinations, was a constraint. The teaching of the skills and how to work independently were seen as being important functions of their teaching roles. The acquisition of these skills were thought to be useful prerequisites for university study and would also help students when making their choice of university course to follow.

Concern was also expressed about the whole situation associated with predicted grades and the associated increase in the number of unconditional offers being made in terms of the impact they could have on student motivation when studying and preparing for A-level examinations. The teaching staff were willing to offer advice and support in the UCAS process but were mindful of their own limitations especially with regards to the rapidly changing developments within universities. The ethos of both the centre and teaching staff was to stress the idea of achieving potential based on individual effort and ability. It is from such conversations that it was obvious there was a willingness to help the students when making decisions, especially when requested by students on an individual basis. The extent to which this willingness was either valued or influential is difficult to assess without reference to the student's own perceptions about what university study means and its relevance for an individual's future.

Amongst the teachers, there was some political awareness which was expressed about the underpinning rationale for the changes to the structure of the A-levels, in

particular the prescriptive content along with the reduced range of subjects available for examination.[54] Likewise, the increase in unconditional offers from universities was regarded as “a numbers game”. This development was seen as a means by which universities could attract fee paying students to secure their futures following the abolition of the previous block grant system. Notwithstanding the arguments that pressure could be taken off students if they knew their place at university was secure and not dependent on final grades raised concerns about the impact that such an award may have on student motivation to achieve the best A-level results [55]. The question of unconditional offers would be a key issue to explore with the students themselves to elicit their opinions about such offers.

There was also some reservations about the acceptance of the narrative that university education was the right thing for everyone post A-levels and sixth form. The doxa of the A-level – university – career was accepted and implemented by the teachers and the centre as part of the remit of education, there was a recognition that universities may not best for all students. Unfortunately, alternatives to the accepted and expected progression are few and far between, although as evidenced by the Academic Tutor earlier, work on apprenticeships is being developed as a viable alternative. In conversations with the students this aspect of alternatives and who might be influential can be explored in more detail. One of the observations that can be drawn from the conversations with the teachers was a recognition that as practicing teachers, they may not be the best placed person to provide information about universities, nor able to offer the most pertinent advice to students.

The thoughts of the staff at the centre and how they have prepared the strategies to equip the students to face the challenges of the A-level requirements along with the process of the UCAS admissions to university, can now be compared and

[54] STEM subjects being advocated for the potential contribution to the country’s wealth creation, at the expense of arts subjects which saw a contraction

[55] This observation need to be tempered with reference to the fact that both departments and the centre would be judged on their success in league table standings by the number of top grades they achieved. In addition, funding for departments may be conditional on previous successful A-level outcomes

contrasted with the students' perceptions. Through their responses to questionnaire questions and conversations it will be possible to test the match between staff and student perceptions and thereby identify the most influential factors affecting student choice. The students' thoughts are recorded in the following chapter.

Chapter Six – Student Findings

The online questionnaires made available to the students were designed to initiate thought and reflection on the motives for staying on in the sixth form, looking at aspirations following A-levels and important considerations about university. In addition, the generated data provided a framework for subsequent interview questions. A variety of questionnaire response techniques were used with each section having provision to elaborate on their response. The questionnaire data requests were based on informal conversations with staff and students and were designed to highlight key considerations. (Copies of the questionnaires are to be found in the appendices.)

6.1 Sixth form studies

First question:

A-levels are seen as opportunities to study in greater detail those subjects which students found of interest in their GCSEs. The option boxes for selection were designed to gauge the extent to which students felt educational engaged with their subjects areas of interest. Whilst the next two option were looking to assess whether social influences were important considerations.

Current Studies Please indicate why you decided to go into the sixth form.	*Responses*
☐ To improve my qualifications	*45*
☐ Wanted to learn more about my subject	*48*
☐ It was expected that I should stay on at school	*17*
☐ All my friends were staying on to take A-levels	*8*
☐ Other	

The results showed that in various combination of choices the overwhelming driving force for staying in the sixth form was educational. Interestingly, comments in the 'other' box indicated additional reasoning including the response which indicated the influence of the family. This example did not spell out the form the pressure took nor the reasoning behind the pressurisation.

> *"There was a lot of pressure from family, but I also found a subject I really loved"*
>
> *"I need A-Levels in order to go to university"*

"A pathway to university"

"A-Levels are required for future goals"

These responses were not entirely unexpected, given the increase in the number of aspiring professional families who have moved into the centre's catchment area. The significance of these responses is that they suggested that both the sixth form and A-levels were recognised as part of the educational continuum which was seen as instrumental in setting aspirational targets to achieve future goals. In many ways the responses to this first question indicate both an acceptance that higher education has been conflated with future prospects along with an acceptance that the process has become recognised as part of the normal transition to adulthood. Secondly, that although students were making the decisions, several influences, which to a greater or lesser extent, had an impact on the decisions the students made. Significantly, and because the decision to go to university is such a major change it is perhaps inevitable that adults would have a leading role to play in helping students to finalise their decisions.

Second question:

In looking at subject choice, obviously an interest in the subject was going to be important, but to what extent was the teacher influential in making such a choice? The result showing that this was only cited on five occasions, and this seemed to be at variance with popular stories about an inspirational teacher opening doors to higher study and a future career. This result being an unexpected development was one which would need to be followed up in the interviews. The recognition that certain qualifications were necessary for career and/or university admission was indicating a more nuanced approach to selection rather than just subject interest – again this was an area to be developed in the interviews.

A-level subject choices Please indicate the reasons for choosing you're a-level subjects.	*Responses*
☐ Interest in the subject	*67*
☐ I liked the teacher	*5*
☐ Qualification needed for future career	*43*
☐ Qualification needed for university admission	*23*
☐ Other	

Other than the very pragmatic – I got the grades (presumably at GCSE to enable continuation to A-level) – there were no additional comments. In some ways I found the lack of elaboration a little flat; what aspects about the subject sparked an interest, what qualities did the teacher have to encourage/persuade a student to follow a particular course, such elaboration was missing. Was this lack of articulation an indication that the process had been accepted at the expense of the subject and developing intellectual curiosity?

Third question:

The choice of choosing just three or four A-level subjects in the sixth form, having studied ten or more at GCSE, created something of dilemma for the students. Examination grades would perhaps suggest they could have been equally qualified to continue their studies in any number of subjects.

Therefore, when faced with making a decision, not just for the immediate two years ahead, but one with implications for future university and career pathways, what factors were the important and what influences would be most telling?

Influences Please indicate the influences behind your subject choices.	*Responses*
☐ GCSE results	*56*
☐ Family (Immediate)	*28*
☐ Family (Relations)	*7*
☐ Friends (School)	*13*
☐ Friends (Outside school)	4
☐ Teacher (Subject)	26
☐ Careers Staff	5
☐ Social media	2
☐ Other	

Following on from the pragmatic response to question two, the practicalities of acquiring the entrance criteria seems obvious. Three areas for interview question development centre around how in what ways the immediate family might influence

choice. Secondly, again cross referencing with responses in question two, looks at the influence of teacher input when making choices. The third area for more in-depth interview questioning would need to address the low returns for citing social media. Initial reaction was surprise considering the amount of time young people spend on their mobile telephones and apparent regularity with which they engage with social media. The combination of influences as indicated the multiplicity of reply options would suggest that subject choice was not taken lightly and that some discussion and thought had been given to the final selection having consulted with others. For others it was simply personal choice or the requirements of a future career which were key determinants.

Fourth question:

This question was designed to be open ended to discover what other influences might be important:

> Making Choices
> What, if any, additional help and support do you think would have been helpful when choosing you're a-level subjects?

A particularly valuable insight into the thoughts and concerns about sixth form studies. There were several themes which recurred in various guises, and these were arranged into nine categories:

Practical	Info	Subject info	Careers	Universities	Talking to other students	Teacher input	Advice	Positives

The category with the largest number of submissions centred on subject information, especially in terms of what was required and expected when studying A-level subjects:

"More of a breakdown of courses in a way that's a bit easier to understand as when choosing which course may be better to take sometimes it can be confusing looking at specifications."

"Being told realistically how difficult it is"

Followed by careers information:

"A list of professions and what general A-Levels and grades were needed"

"More information on the future possibilities that my chosen A-levels open doors to".

“A list of professions and what general A-Levels and grades were needed”

The transition from GCSEs to A-levels was recognised as being significant by the students and the practical suggestions about trial and taster sessions seemed to be a thoughtful response to dealing with an uncertainty when making a decision.

“More taster lessons before the summer of Year 11”
Or
“*Multiple induction days where you can see more subjects”*

In this context, some universities do offer sample lectures on Open Day visits. Some of these sample lectures have been well received, others less so. Young people can be very perceptive and will quickly identify a lack of sincerity, or carefully managed productions.

Of particular interest, considering the responses to question three above, was the importance attached, by some students, to advice from students in the year above them:

“*When I picked my A-level subjects we were able to look through past and current students work and talk to current students which was really helpful as I fully understood the course going into it”*

“Honest student opinions about the gaps between GCSE and A-level”

“*Being able to talk to the A-level students*” and “*Hearing more sixth form experiences*”

Interestingly, when the new secondary school first opened in1973, the pastoral support was through vertical tutor groups. Each tutor group consisted of students from each academic year and had attached at least two sixth form students. This integrated approach provided opportunities for such discussions, or at least the opportunity for lower school pupils to gain an insight into what the sixth form and A-levels might entail.

The one comment under the heading of Teacher Input was illuminating on several different levels:

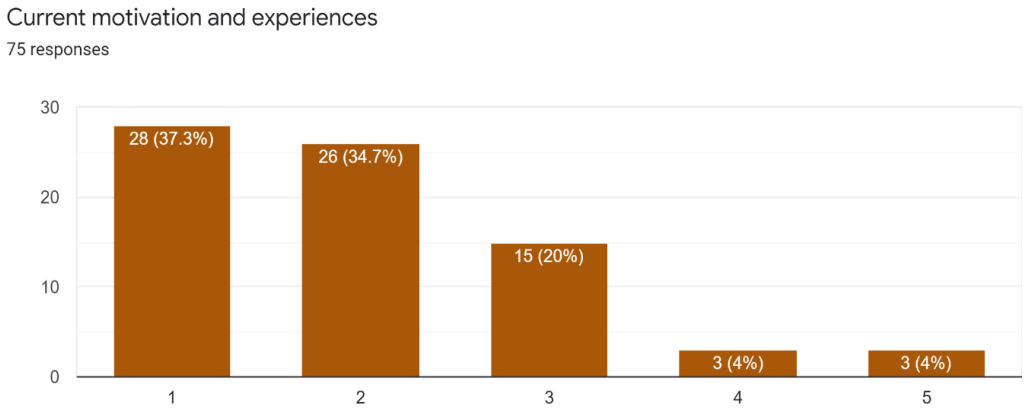
"More straight forward advice from people who have taught me and who know my behaviour and potential skill (not a designated third party who just looks at data)"

The extent to which this sentiment was more widely shared was not discernible at this stage; however, this observation has some relevance to the comments made by Sir Keith Burnett (vice-chancellor Sheffield University) (referenced earlier p:40) about the relationship between teacher and taught. It was also a poignant call for personally targeted and specific guidance, rather than just information. Important distinctions between information, advice and guidance have come from the students open-ended responses. These distinctions ideally need to be teased out later in interviews with both the staff as well as the students.

Fifth question:

This question, along with the next four questions, use a Likert Scale to gauge the level of feelings in terms of agreement/disagreement with aspects of their experiences of A-levels at the centre.

> Current motivation and experience
> On the scales below please indicate by selecting one of the values which best reflects your position. Value 1 indicates you strongly agree with the first statement on the left, whilst 5 at the other end of the scale means you strongly disagree with the opening statement.

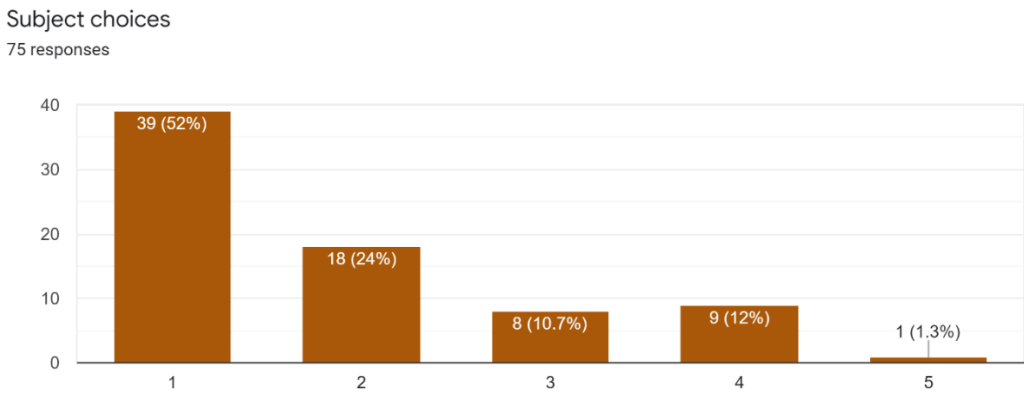


From the first charted returns, more than ninety percent of the students claim to be enjoying their sixth form studies. Intriguingly was this return genuine, or merely an

illustration of Goffman's Facework and interaction (referenced earlier p:63). The extent to which this level of satisfaction was purely subject based, and indicative of a 'good' choice was not possible to discern. Equally, could this level of satisfaction be attributed to being in a separate purpose built sixth form centre, along with all its provisions, to which lower school pupils did not have access. Could the separation from the lower school have provided a unique sense of privileged identity. The influence of the building, location and setting were not clear, and this is something which might we worthy of following up later during the interviews with individual students.

Sixth question

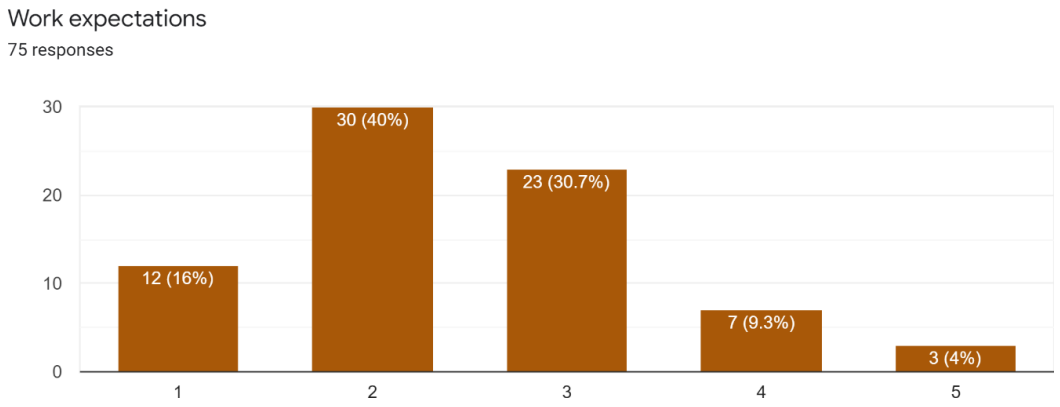
How pleased were you with your A-level choices?



Interestingly one in ten students questioned whether perhaps they made the correct choice and there are some parallels with the findings from the open-ended questions expressed in the Fourth question noted above. What this finding is indicating is the need for more targeted and specific information to inform individual and personal student choice to better match student profile and subject choice. The implications of making a poor choice could have an impact on future courses and careers.

Seventh question

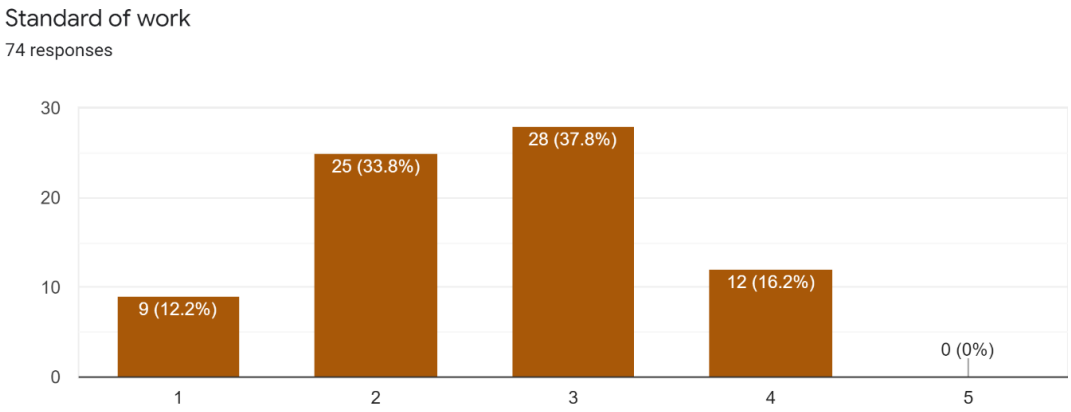
Did your experiences of studying A-levels match your expectations of what would be involved in studying at this level?



These returns are significant in that the move from GCSE to A-level, in terms of what is expected by the students, is not always appreciated, nor understood, at this level of study. Again, cross referencing with some of the practical suggestions and the subject responses reported in the Fourth question would seem to indicate that centres would benefit if their students were able to gain an insight into A-level and sixth form before embarking on such a course of action.

Eighth question

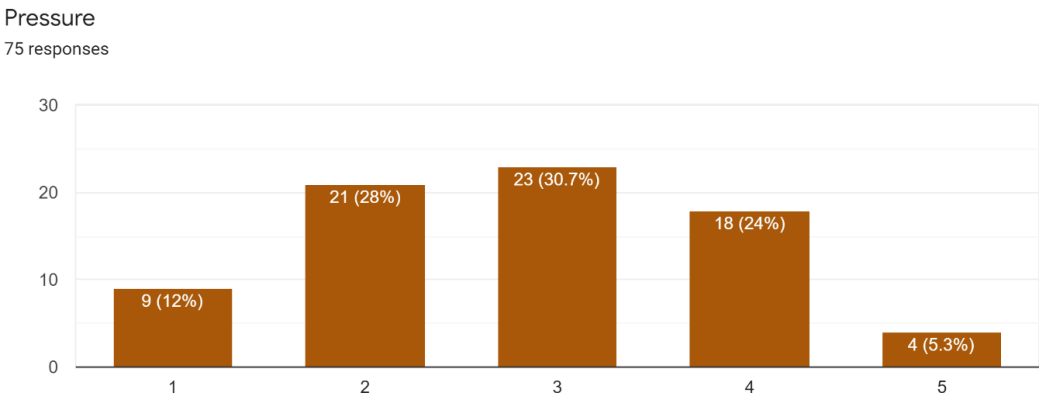
There is a step change between GCSE and A-levels – how did you find the standards measured up to your expectations? Was the standard of work greater than expected? A somewhat difficult question to respond to in that defining standards from a personal perspective can be problematic. The returns indicate that some twelve percent of student responses indicated that the standards were more difficult than first anticipated, whilst sixteen percent that they were easier than imagined. Obviously without reference to subject choices and student past academic history such a comparison does not really have much validity, but perhaps should raise questions about parity between subjects, contents, assessment structures and continuity with earlier studies.



In the last two graphs the distribution is more of the standard Bell curve distribution. The question of standards, whatever standards maybe, would appear to be a little more problematic for students to gauge when in many cases they have come from streamed groups set by ability in the lower school into non-streamed classes along with a shift in pedagogic style. Looking into expected standards maybe important when considering university application. The expectations associated with levels and standards need to be incorporated into later questioning.

Nineth question

The choice of A-level subjects and the need to achieve results in these new subject areas at this stage in the student's educational development means that they will inevitably feel under pressure to achieve the best results possible. The chart reveals that forty percent felt that the pressure to achieve had an impact on their studies.



The extent to which students feel under pressure is an important aspect of student welfare and is monitored by adults at the centre. The sources of pressure are coming from teachers and the school as increasingly they come under scrutiny by external agencies to meet set targets and benchmarks on the one hand and from parents and students themselves. What needs to be clarified if possible is the extent to which this pressure is perceived directly or indirectly through inference.

Tenth question

Additional information

For any of the four scaled responses above, you have the opportunity to record any additional thoughts and/or concerns.

This opportunity to elaborate on the previous five Likert scale questions only produced twelve responses, which I have categorised into three subsections, however, to varying degrees they are mostly related to stress. The first two comments are indicative of the pressure on teachers affecting the relationship with students:

"I think the beginning of A-levels in the first few weeks is extremely overwhelming & quite a shock - it's not quite the level of work/step up required but the realisation of how much needs to be remembered over the two years. Furthermore, I think more needs to be done in the first few weeks to make students realise that it's okay not to do so well in their first tests as it's quite a shock going from a high level to ultimately a lower one then they are expecting as it's quite pressuring trying to leave a good impression."

"I feel that the level of constant assessment and resits if I don't get an A, while sometimes necessary, can make you feel like you have failed a lot of the time"

Whilst for other respondents it is the self who is imposing the stress:

"I think I put the pressure on myself rather than others placing it on me."

Or blaming themselves for the stress:

"I always feel like I'm under pressure, but maybe it is just me and my awful stress coping mechanisms?"

The third category relates to expectations associated with teaching, but still related to stress, but this induced by frustration, rather than imposed by external pressure:

"*I feel I could have been pushed harder. After coming out of streamed subjects for GCSE I found it quite frustrating to now be not streamed."*

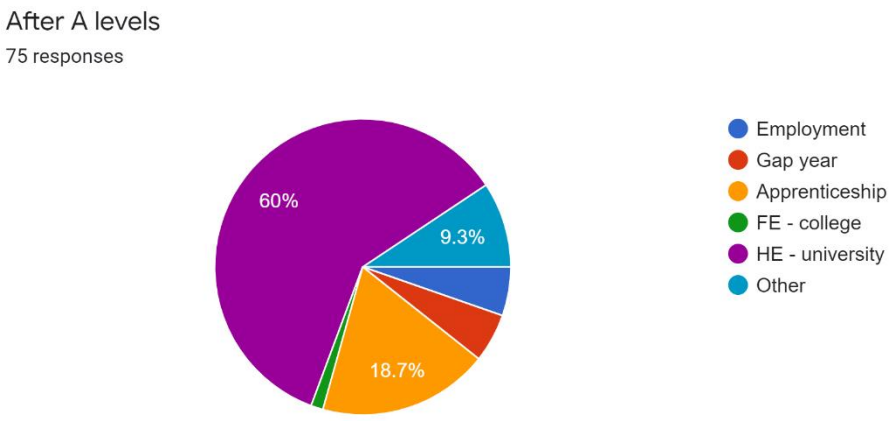
The issue of student stress in the sixth form has been researched and recognised as an important aspect for many young people. The toll taken by such pressures is difficult to

quantify. Each individual will be affected in different ways and to varying degrees, and in consequence will have implications for decision making.,

Eleventh question

This next section of the questionnaire examines the intentions and influences on students after their studies in the sixth form.

After A-levels Where do you intend to go after the sixth form?	*Responses %*
☐ Employment	*5.3*
☐ Gap year	*5.3*
☐ Apprenticeship	*18.7*
☐ FE - college	*1.3*
☐ HE - university	60
☐ Other	9.3



These returns were very interesting and need to be followed up in some detail with the teaching staff and academic tutors. The percentage who were actively thinking about apprenticeships is perhaps indicative of a very conscious effort to secure an employment and qualification whilst reducing/removing the cost burden. This again is an important aspect of the research. The interview/conversation data generating sessions must ideally include some students who are looking for alternatives to the traditional sixth form university route.

Twelfth question

Additional information

This is your opportunity to give more details for your choice in the previous question.

Interestingly, there is a mismatch between the responses made to the eleventh question and the additional information supplied when answering the twelfth question. Whilst some of differences can be account for in terms of coding where two categories were mentioned in the students' statement, the big mismatch between the returns for apprenticeships and others needs further investigation.

	Employment	Gap	Apprentice	FE	HE	Other	Total
11th Q	4	4	14	1	45	7	75
12th Q	9	4	7	2	38	15	75

There was a wide range of responses including:

"Still don't know yet", "I am undecided", "I am unsure what I want to do after sixth form"

Which in some ways was quite surprising, not only because they had made their subject choices and in so doing had potentially closed off certain courses and careers without thought, or with little consideration for the next stage. This raises several questions about why they enrolled in the sixth form which is often seen as an essential prerequisite for the next stage. By contrast some had a much clearer goal in that they had been:

"Looking at a number of universities for my chosen subject."

Whilst for another:

"*I would love to study psychology at university. I have always thought about going to university"*

And for others their choice was tied into a future career:

"Always wanted to go and the career I want to do requires a degree".

"Medicine courses are at university"

But a career choice was not necessarily tied to university attendance:

"I believe that apprenticeships are a better option than university. They allow you to get actual experience which makes you more employable."

"I would prefer to be working and earning experience in the workplace while earning a qualification than studying at university"

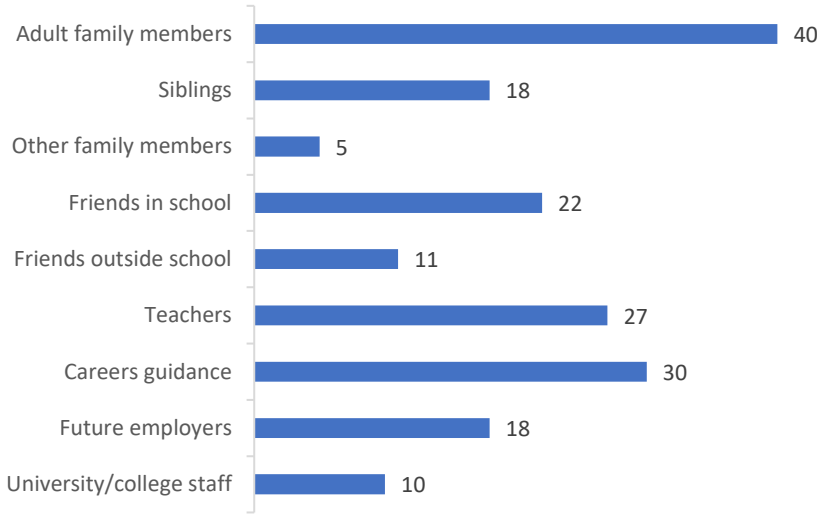
Within this wide range of choice, the influence associated with status of the university was suggestive of possible future academic research:
“Human Sciences at a Russell Group university”

Such responses counter the charge that students from state schools lack aspiration to attend the top universities, three students expressed a wish to go to Oxford and two were contemplating courses in America.

Such a range of responses provided a valuable insight into student motivation (in the main) and was indicative of time spent on research about courses and universities. With this background information the interviews would be more firmly grounded in the reality of the student experience.

Thirteenth question

Influences on your after A-level choices It is possible that more than one of the following influences, to varying degrees, are applicable. Please select all those which are applicable. There is space to provide a more detailed response below.	*Responses*
☐ Adult family members	*40*
☐ Siblings	*18*
☐ Other family members	*5*
☐ Friends in school	*22*
☐ Friends outside school	11
☐ Teachers	27
☐ Careers guidance	30
☐ Future employers	18
☐ University/college staff	10
☐ Other	13



In a combination of selections, the two most important influences, unsurprisingly are family members and the professional staff at the centre. What will be interesting will be to tease out in the interviews what kinds of influences, is it just the parents providing the emotional support, which influences directly or indirectly, whilst the centre staff influence through their professional knowledge?

Fourteenth question

> Influences on your after A-level choices
> Please give details of the way that some/any or all of the above influenced your decision.

Overwhelmingly the family were deemed to be important factors followed by staff advice. What is significant for the interviews will be to try and tease out subtle differences in what students mean by, and the form taken by, the words - influenced and inspired - and the relationship between student and source of influence/inspiration.

"family is a big influence"

"All went to uni"

"Inspired by a family member and encouraged by others and School staff"

"My siblings have gone to university and enjoyed it thoroughly and I have a very academic family"

And the enigmatic:

“Follow in footsteps of others”

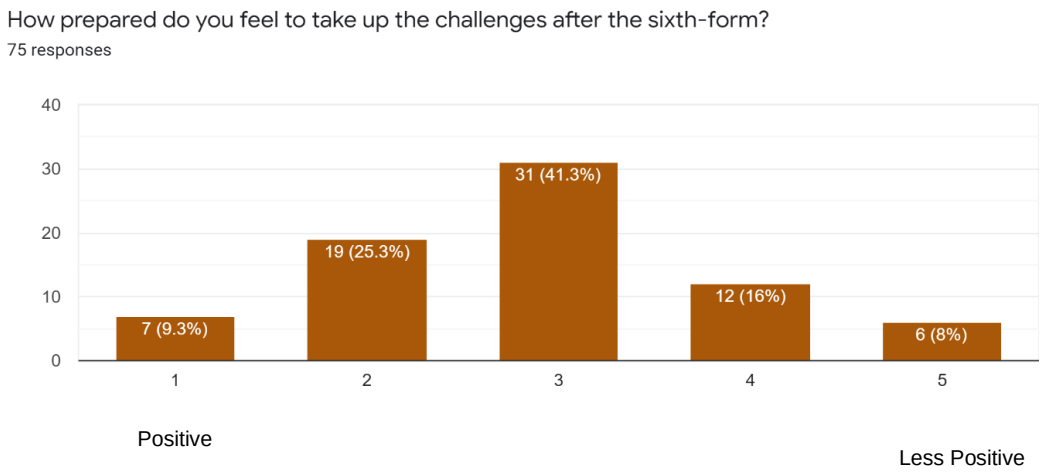
However, it would be unwise to assume that all influences from the family followed the same pattern:

“I've seen my adult family members careers and do not want to follow them. Also future employers have impacted my decisions as I wish to have the best degrees so I can be employable”

In this case a negative created a drive to discover more about what a degree might mean and thus provide an incentive to consider higher education.

Whilst the responses to this question provide insight into individual perceptions at a very subjective and personal level, they also touch on fundamental issues within a wider socio-political context, in particular with reference to Bourdieu’s ideas on cultural capital and doxa, along with Gramsci’s thoughts on hegemony. In other words, to what extent, notwithstanding the significance of the family as identified by the students, have wider societal structures pre-ordered the background within which students, families and schools operate? It is going to be interesting to see whether the later interview/conversations with the students acknowledge the wider influences of socio-cultural policy on individuals and the freedoms they have within a narrative of choice operating in a meritocratic framework.

Fifteenth question



Whilst the distribution is not unexpected in that because of the uncertainties associated with a change of work regime and expectation there should be a degree of uncertainty; however, the interesting part will come in the next section where the students can give voice to their thoughts.

Sixteenth question

> How prepared do you feel to take up the challenges after the sixth form?
> This is your opportunity to give more details.

The range of comments from those who felt prepared ranged from:

"Fairly prepared", "prepared", "very prepared"

Being indicative of the degree of subjectivity of this type of response. Whilst for other students who had reflected on their school life to date had more nuanced perspective on their experiences:

"*I feel the new GCSE's have really prepared us for the higher level working and independence of A levels."*

"I feel like I've done everything right to get to where I want to go. Largely through self driven projects and additional study, as the bare bones of A levels isn't enough these days to open many opportunities."

Uncertainty about the future is perhaps well placed:

"I don't know what the future holds" …… but then does anyone?

"*It's hard to say at this point because I don't really know what is going to happen and what I am going to do"*

"*The unknown is quite scary & so to not really know anything about the whole applying process & what is going to happen in the future makes me quite apprehensive but I think this will change as I go on throughout the year as we start getting more information & learning more about universities & visiting them."*

Somewhat interestingly, for one respondent the concerns were rooted in the more pragmatic experiences of living beyond the immediate and protected environment in order to come to terms with the realities of living:

"I feel alright academically but i need to learn general life skills"

Some comments which express concern are not unexpected:

"I have no clue what I want to do, so I am terrified that my A-level choices will not help me to go wherever I want to in the future. It is scary because I have no idea what I am doing at all."

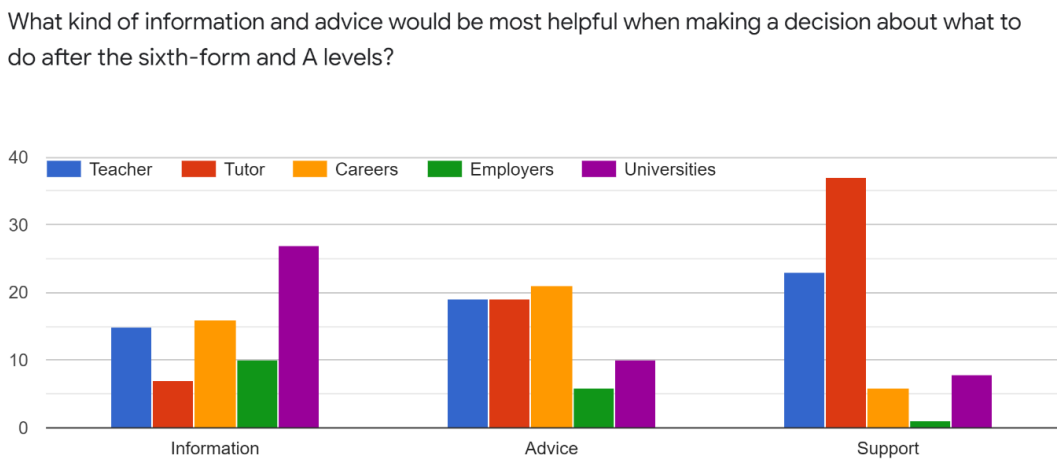
“I do not feel confident getting a student debt”

By contrast, it is often the negative comments which are most revealing in that they shed light on aspects that had been assumed and/or not recognised; they can also be very insightful.

“Is this the point of sixth-form? I don't think sixth-form prepared me for my degree (although others might feel differently) and it certainly didn't me any skills necessary to survive in the real world! I always thought it odd that we were constantly told to take responsibility for one's learning and that we were "young adults" but in reality we were just as managed as we were in main school.”

Astute observation which needs to be cross referenced with the centre’s take on provision and expectations, in that it recognizes that the comments made will not apply to everyone. Is this a dissatisfied student, or one who has looked beneath the rhetoric and narrative of presentation and the purpose of education?

Seventeenth question



The rationale behind this question was to try and tease out the level of awareness between three aspects of engaging with higher education. Information is freely available from any number of sources and can be accessed almost anywhere, but in being “information” rather than “data” does this mean the latter has been processed to varying degrees and often with a particular purpose in mind e.g. Unistats are presented to give details which are deemed to represent the university in the best possible light. Advice falls into two divisions, firstly generic advice which is a broad-

brush approach in that – 'with these A-levels you can do…' and secondly, more personalised advice which is centred on the individual where the person giving the advice has knowledge of both the student and the requirements and expectations of the proposed course of action. Support would seem to indicate that in addition to practical issues, emotional and psychological scaffolding needs to be in place to take the student through the process of choice and selection, and this needs to be available in the early days after the transition period into the sixth form.

Responses shown in the graph would seem to bear out the above-mentioned underlying premises with the role of subject teachers and tutor being valued for their ability to provide information, advice, and support to varying degrees. These findings along with the following student comments will be helpful in framing the parameters for subsequent personal interviews.

Eighteenth question

Information and advice – your response
This is your opportunity to outline the kind of assistance which would be most valuable to you:

Making decisions about choices is always difficult and the students who are faced with taking an important life changing decision, with far reaching implications, are not surprisingly concerned. Consumer choices are based on individual evaluation of the information available and for many students more information about university and careers were felt to be lacking:

"More information on how Universities will work, as to be honest I'm clueless"

"Just more information on good universities for my specific subject & also more information on the whole applying process".

"Information from universities, such as the work load, how much of the course is based on essay writing, etc. would be useful. Advice for picking a university that could be right for me would also be useful".

The acceptance of higher qualifications equating with higher paying employment means that for some students an honest careers assessment would be appreciated:

"Information about future careers is vital for me as I would like to know what there is out there. After being in school for my life and being "sheltered" almost, I would like to know the opportunities out there. Support is something I don't care for, I need to be independent for future life."

"Careers advice and how students should be preparing and planning for the A levels and university."

"Information from Careers in specific areas, advice from those employers and then support in university."

Centre staff were recognised as being import with teachers being seen as the way to help secure academic success:

"Assistance in how I can achieve top grades and what processes would be applicable"

"I feel teachers play a huge role with the support they give students and it's really useful to get advice and information from industry professionals"

Plus, the support offered by the centre were also appreciated:

"Our academic tutor alongside our careers advisor provides us with all the necessary information support and advice we need to know about career routes and our options after sixth form. Our head of year and head of sixth form also provides us with information support and advice about life after sixth form."

However, schools in looking to achieve recognition outside the immediate confines of the centre may well take cognisance of one young person's plea:

"More opportunities for people which are not attending Oxbridge"

The link between qualifications and employment whilst recognised, for some students they would welcome the opportunity to learn more about the workings and expectations of employment:

"I would like the employer to sit down and take me through everything. Speaking to potential employers (Particularly apprenticeships because I feel sixth forms do very little to help those who don't want to pursue the university path)"

Whilst the above looks at information and advice it is often 'top-down' coming from adults in positions of some authority and whilst valued by many, for some there is a need to temper their input with real life experiences from their contemporaries:

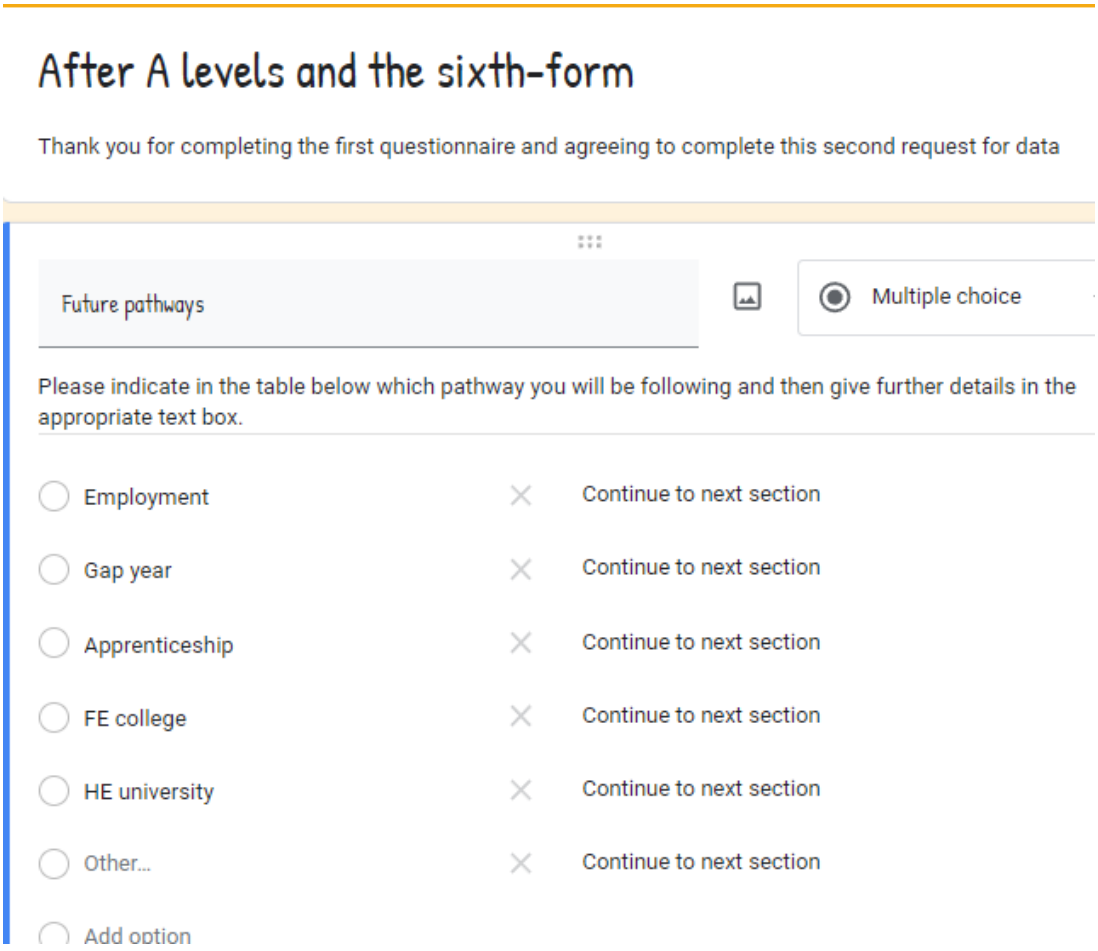
"*Ex-student experience would of(have) been helpful."*

"information about experiences which people have previously had is helpful"

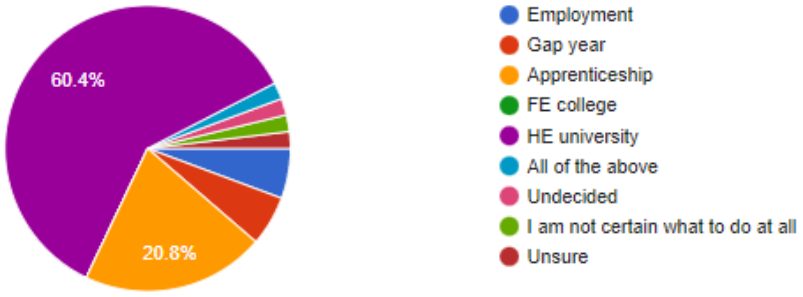
This aspect of peer input poses an interesting line of discussion in the interviews, to what extent, especially considering young people's use of social media, do potential students consult and value information from those who have already followed a similar pathway to their proposed route.

6.2 After A-levels and the sixth form

The second online questionnaire starts with a tick box to identify personal preferences which is then followed by an opportunity for the respondents to elaborate in an open-ended section. There are five standard post-school routeways identified, plus the option of adding an alternative route. Responses are documented in *italics.* Additional comments and observations are based on additional information provided by centre personnel in earlier conversations.



The collated returns which are displayed in a pie chart which show that for almost two thirds of the respondents the university option was the intended route, whilst a fifth identified the apprenticeship route as their preferred option. This finding was both significant as well as interesting.



In an earlier conversation with the Academic Tutor, it had been indicated that increasingly the apprenticeship routeway was being promoted at the centre. These findings would suggest that active consideration was being given to this alternative. The significance of this finding for the research was that centre staff directly employed to help may be quite influential in helping to formulate student decisions. Quite what the appeal and rationale for such a choice might be, was difficult to assess at this stage, but would be an important part of the student conversations. Could it be that the prospect of incurring student debt was a negative factor? Or could the reasoning be attributed to the prospect of linking the apprenticeship routeway with both a qualification and future employment, without a debt represent a more attractive prospect? Or some other consideration? At this stage without further data such ideas must remain as speculation and conjecture. The other significant aspect was that for some students, they still had no firm plans in place. Once again, the reasons for this response can only be guess work but does perhaps suggest that the students in question would benefit from, and thus be influenced by external personnel who could offer guidance.

For those students who had identified employment as the next stage, there was a range of possible employment types which are listed in the responses below:

Employment Responses

Childcare
I would like to go into a career in software development. I do not know if I need specialised training prior to going into a career such as this.
Army

I would like to be an personal assistant, or an author???
Child or clinical psychology
something to do with spanish but i am unsure of what that is yet
Physics, work experience
Not a clue
Geography/animal related
marketing
Education

When and where the students had made their decisions about post-A-level employment is not indicated, but there must have been a variety of influences on any individual's choice. What these influences might be was not evident in these returns. Choosing any occupation requires an appraisal of what the job entails and an assessment of whether such a choice would be suitable for the person in question. Such a decision would be the result of enquiries and advice. A concern of central government has been a problem of young people who are neither in education nor training (NEETs), but these returns are indicating that, in the main, students will be gainfully employed and not fall into the NEET category. Without specifically stating that a course of education/training would have to be undertaken as a pre-requisite for such work there was an implied recognition that further education would be needed before they could undertake and progress in their chosen occupation.

The idea of a gap year has been promoted as an opportunity for young people to gain experiences through volunteering, especially in other parts of the world. Such activities would provide opportunities to increase their range of personal, especially the so-called 'soft' skills before embarking on a university or career pathway after their break from the traditional school – college – work routeway.

Gap year Responses:

Work/travelling with volunteering
My intention is to do volunteering, get some work experience, and work on building my employability. After the gap year, I would like to do an apprenticeship.
Really not sure...I am so sorry
No gap year
Probably not

i intend to either do an apprenticeship or a working gap year
I want to return to education Travel Volunteer

It is interesting to speculate, although not part of the research as to whether social class background made the idea of a gap year more or less likely to appeal, and/or be feasible to anyone individual. Anecdotal observations would suggest that for students from higher social backgrounds the idea of a gap year would be more likely. By contrast, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may regard the prospect of taking a year out as not viable because they would feel the need to enter the workplace at the first opportunity to reduce the financial burden on parents, or to take every possibility to secure employment at the first opportunity. The question of being a financial burden on family resources would be a theme that recurred in the later interview conversations.

Modern apprenticeship have been promoted by central government as a means of addressing skills shortages in the country and reducing the numbers of young people classified as NEETS. Apprenticeships are available at a variety of levels. The idea of a higher-level apprenticeship as an alternative to university may be an attractive option for some young people (Parr, 2013). The more so when the apprentice will be paid to obtain an industry recognised qualification and the possibility of continued or further employment. The prospect of employment being an attractive proposition when compared with accounts of graduate unemployment, under employment and debt which are not uncommon amongst university graduates (Ratcliffe, 2016, Weale, 2019a).

The cost of training and preparing an apprenticeship is considerably more than the cost of producing a university graduate. Apprenticeship costs are carried mostly by the company, with additional funding made by central government to encourage the roll-out of the high-level apprenticeship scheme. In consequence, there is much competition for the limited number of high-level apprenticeship schemes which are offered to meet the expectations of the industry sector requirements. These apprenticeships should be regarded as providing an

alternative educational experience to university, rather than seen as a replacement for university. Are the chances of obtaining a high-level apprenticeship on a par with the chances of a young people obtaining a place at a Russell Group university?

Apprenticeship Responses:

*I would like to do teaching and I found out through this way during '**beyond sixth form'** week where information was given*
Aerospace Engineering Going to aerospace companies
Child care
I found out about apprenticeships from my academic tutor.
Paramedic
*BT - via (**academic tutor -name removed**)*
from family members
I'm not sure yet but I would want to something involving art or textiles
Careers support at sixth form broke down mostly what it means and it seems like the option i would most like to pursue
Most likey cyber securitual as I find it fascinating and important. I will be qualified for it as I would get a qualification depending on which level apprenticeship I take.
I found out about most of the opportunities via information days at school and going to job days like the Milton Keynes job fair.
Haven't found one
Probably not
via school

Whilst the centre has been making great strides to promote and develop a programme of information and support for students looking to follow up a placement on approved apprenticeship schemes. It would seem as though there is still room for further investment if this routeway is to become a viable alternative to the traditional sixth form preparation for university. Perhaps a closer working relationship with local employers and Chambers of Trade would raise the profile of apprenticeships locally and show case how schools, colleges and employers can work more closely to integrate expectations and needs of all parties concerned.

FE has traditionally been the underfunded Cinderella educational provision (Simmons, 2008, Norton, 2012). The association of FE with practical skills and lower level/status occupations seems still to hold sway. In many ways the FE is seen as an alternative to sixth form education, rather than competing with

universities. Currently, many FE institutions are offering a variety of degree bearing courses as subsidiary centres or franchised institutions for local universities wishing to increase their profile (Parry and Thompson, 2002).

FE college responses:

And learning about grooming techniques.
Probably not

The research focus is looking at the influences on sixth form student choice when choosing a course and university. The returns from this part of the questionnaire indicate, to varying degrees the extent to which university information has been consulted and used to inform the student thinking. Some responses may be laconic simple word responses, others provide information around which a career can be planned out such as the would-be computer scientist. For others their research has probed deeper into the unit components which will inform their decision. The geographer has taken the information one stage further to relate the course to his specific attainments.

HE university responses:

Whilst preparing for a course in Chemical Engineering.
Medicine
Primary Education (with QTS) - qualifications to become a primary school teacher
Psychology course
Applying to Computer science courses at Bath (5 years with a placement and integrated masters), Leeds (4 years BSc with placement) and Exeter (4 years BSc with placement), all requiring AAA.
I have applied for medicine which requires the UKCAT test, 3 A's and an interview.
Biological sciences or human biology at Loughborough and UEA (main choices) to focus on genetics and communicable disease.
Geography course. It requires an AAB however as I got an A in my EPQ that lowers to a ABB. It covers a range of aspects from both human and physical geography and allows me to pick my own topics to study so I can decide what career I might want to pursue. The choice and breadth of the course was key to me.
I don't know
Unsure
Psychology

Want to study business further at university
Geography
Studies psychology
Architecture, BSc or BA, 120 UCAS points.
I haven't applied I'm year 12
Physics, 4 years, masters degree
I will be applying for Criminology
Medicine, haven't applied but aspire
Oxford- experimental psychology, neuroscience A A A*
I haven't applied yet as only just started Year 12 but I'm interested in doing a Geography or environmental sciences degree
*Human geography/ international development Needs ABB-A*AA*
I am applying for a psychology course. It will be module based and there will be practicals involved. my GCSE results: A in History, Bs in science and religious studies, 2 6s in English, a 5 in maths, Cs in psychology and German, a level 2 merit in Dance and an E in French. I hope to end up with a degree in psychology and then go on to do a masters and then possibly a doctorate.
I haven't applied yet
BSC psychology

The significance of these returns would seem to indicate varying levels of research and analysis on the part of the student. These findings also bear out the use made of Unifrog as a 'one-stop' information hub as highlighted by the Academic tutor. Such responses provide a valuable insight into how they see the course relating to them directly, especially in terms of their aspirations. Interestingly, these aspirations are not just tied into employment, but also look to continuing study. Whether taking their studies further is subject interest, or a recognition that with so many students going on to complete first degrees they need to consider a master's if they are to secure employment in a competitive workplace is not clear (Wakeling and Savage, 2015).

Additional information which can guide, and influence choice are the stated grade entrance requirements for the course. Such information may seem to be an obvious prerequisite, but with one in four A-Level grades being awarded in the top categories, and in some cases the making of unconditional offers, it is tempting to query whether the published grade boundaries are included for any other reason than convention? Are grades at A-level a useful indicator of future performance?

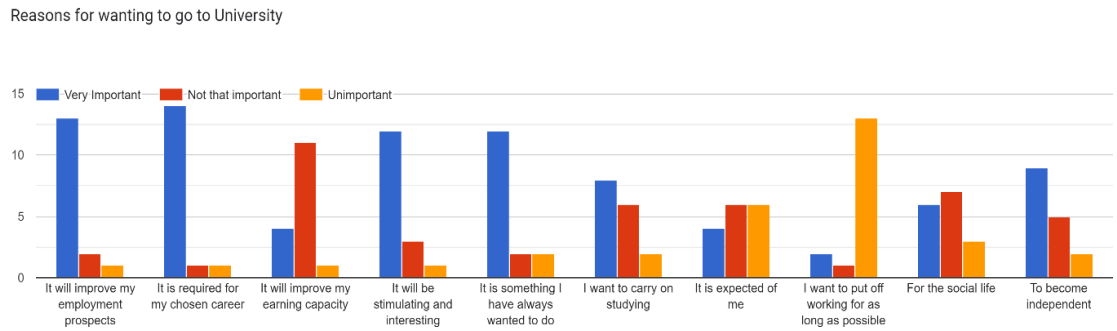
Other responses:

Undecided
Haven’t applied yet
I have no clue what to do... I need a lot of guidance please
In all honesty, I have not looked into it too much as busy with settling into sixth form at the moment. I chose university mainly as I want to expand the knowledge of my passions and interests so I can learn more about the world
Unsure

Are these five responses signalling a need for more personalised assistance. The idea of a smooth unproblematic recognition of the A-level university continuum is questioned in these responses. Should this be taken as a recognition that the process of becoming a sixth form student requires assistance and personalised guidance to help smooth the transition into the different expectations of study at this level?

6.3 Going to University

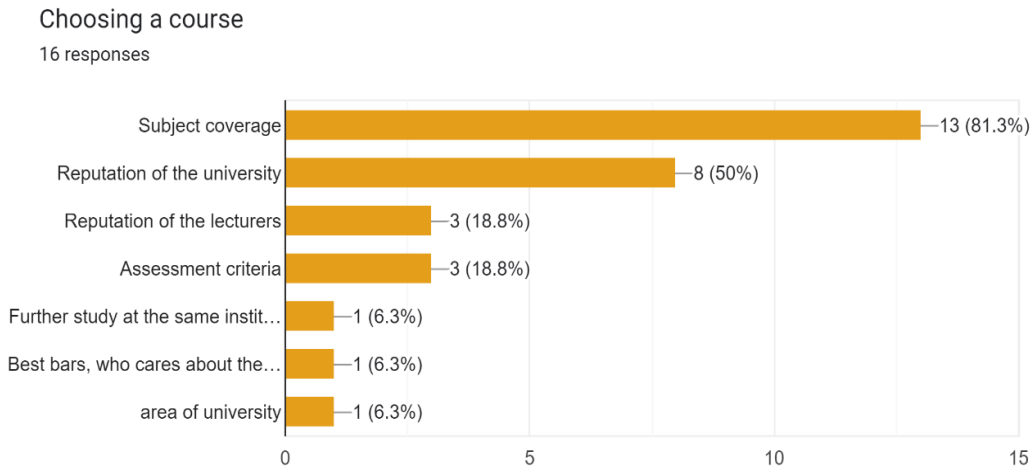
The third questionnaire sought to identify reasons for going to university. The first question focusses on ten possible reasons for going to university which had been



identified in earlier conversations with staff and students. Unsurprisingly the returns revealed a strong connection between wanting to go to university and employment, but furthering subject knowledge was also a major consideration.

When it came to choosing a subject, it was the subject coverage, rather than university or staff reputations which were deemed more relevant. This could be seen as indicative of a great deal of research into university provision and a mature recognition that university rankings change frequently, along with staff who can relocate. Increasingly universities are providing details about their teaching strategies and assessment regimes. This information may have been considered as an important insight into what to expect and whether such a course was more/less suited to their learning styles. Earlier conversations with students who were thinking about medicine highlighted two major approaches namely, practise based learning and traditional didactic classroom lectures. This information has the potential to be very influential when choosing a course and university.

Choosing a course - responses:



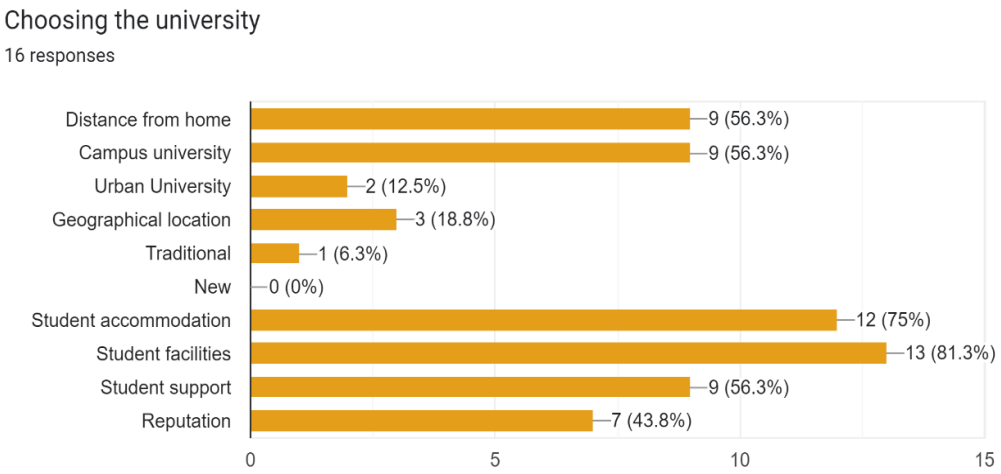
The opportunity to elaborate on these responses indicated a strong awareness of the connection between the course and university and its implications for future career aspirations as indicated in the more detailed open-ended responses listed below:

Structure of the course
I want to know that where I will be studying will give me the best chance of succeeding.
A university with a good reputation is more likely to have good equipment and staff, and good lecturers are more likely to provide a good education.
For my chosen career path, a good university degree is key and I am more likely to get the job I want if I go to a Russell Group university. The subject was more important as I needed to have a wide range of units to choose from to tailor to my career path.
Child care
the subject has to be interesting and current
The reputation of the uni(being Russell group) is important to me as I believe it gives you a better opportunity in employment

These responses are indicative that some comparative reflection on the data and information provided by the institutions had been considered. For some students an awareness of the values and esteem placed on various institutions was an important consideration. The reference to the Russell group or ‘one with a good reputation’ can be seen as an awareness of the implications and ties in with the conflation of university and future career development. Preliminary talks with the Student Support member of staff reported that there was an acceptance of the

hierarchies and league table without questioning, either in terms of the methodologies used to compile the tables, or the validity of the results.

Through informal discussions before the start of the data generation process, the topic of university accommodation and associated sporting and entertainment facilities featured very strongly in their concerns about living away from home.[56] Therefore, it was no surprise to discover that these two aspects of university were regarded as important considerations influencing choice. The high expectations associated with accommodation and available facilities are perhaps indicative that going to university is regarded as a total experience and because the students are paying, they expect value for money. The fact that when it came to selecting a university, accommodation and facilities were thought to be more important and relevant than university classification by type and/or location.



The elaboration to accompany the above table and findings indicate that personal preferences are important, but these preferences can be tempered by an element of familial influence. This familial influence recognised and acknowledged the need for support – *'Distance from home: It couldn't be more than 3 hours away from home'*.

[56] The investment in accommodation and facilities by HE institutions is perhaps indicative of the importance attached to neoliberal market forces in securing student numbers to maintain their most important operational income stream, but also as a means of widening their investment portfolio (SPIRE, Z. D. 2017. Student residential accommodation and student engagement. NEWELL, G. & MARZUKI, M. J. 2018. The emergence of student accommodation as an institutionalised property sector. *Journal of Property Investment & Finance*. REYNOLDS, A. 2020. Geographies of purpose built student accommodation: Exclusivity, precarity and (im) mobility. *Geography Compass,* 14**,** e12543.)

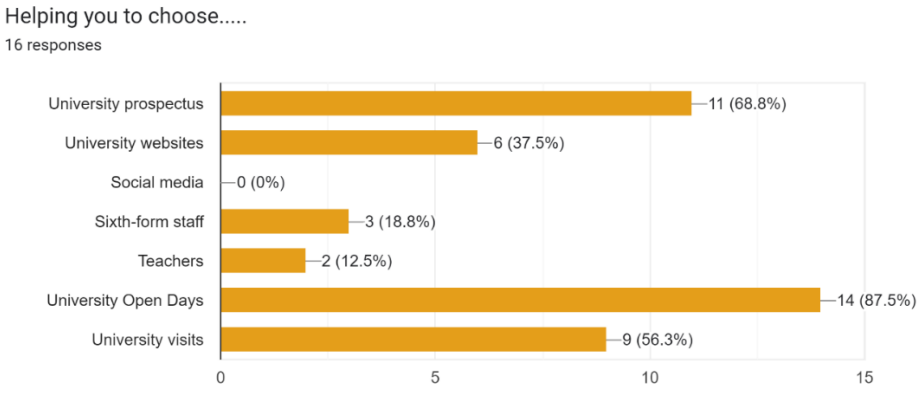
Students venturing into the adult world, a world where the former parental support and guidance would not be immediately on hand was of considerable importance to some prospective undergraduates. The availability of student support services was therefore an important consideration for some would be university applicants:

I've always lived in the countryside so want to be in a city, student accommodation is where you will spend a lot of your time, the facilities will allow you to have down time

Like to be fairly near to home but not so near that I don't become independent, don't want disgusting student accommodation, would like to be able to do extra curricula activities and having facilities to do so, and having student support so I'm not overwhelmed as much
Most important for me is student support and mental health support
What I want from a university
I would like to experience a new place. I like the campus feel. Student support is important to me. I want to know the university can help me.
I don't mind where I am, as long as I'm supported when I need support and I get to study with minimal limitations
I want the best university experience as a student and I want to be able to ask for support if needed.
Distance from home: It couldn't be more than 3 hours away from home. Campus: I felt more comfortable at a campus university rather than a city university. Geographical location: It had to have good train links so I could get home easily. I also wanted to go somewhere completely different to where I live. Traditional: It is what a lot of people I know have done. Student support: I needed to have a good support base to feel comfortable. Reputation: The university needed to have a good reputation as I need it for my chosen career path.
It gives independence
Because you want to feel safe and comfortable and not so far away from home so you have some sort of security
because a university needs to be supportive and comfortable for its students as well as a good institute based on its standard of teaching
Because I want to be living in the area where I will be studying.
Medical conditions which make me want to live at home as well as go to university
I would prefer a campus as it is easier to get around and I believe it gives a better social life (although this may not be correct) I want the accommodation to be nice but cheap I want facilities such as an oven so I can easily cook for myself and I know that some unis don't give you them The reputation is important as I believe it allows more opportunities for employment of your potential employers see you went to a Russel group uni

The returns for the factors which helped in making the choice of course and university produced both interesting and somewhat unexpected replies. Firstly, the initial research into universities, either paper- based or on-line needed to be

followed up by visiting the establishment, Visits to the potential universities were both encouraged and expected by the centre as commented upon by the Academic Tutor. Visiting potential universities is a sound course of action to follow; if you are going to spend the next three years and a great deal of money at university you need to feel reasonably confident that you have made the right choice and will not be unhappy. Secondly, the surprise was that social media was not identified as being either relevant or important. Considering the role played by social media in the everyday life of young people, it was remarkable that no one indicated social media as being influential. Whether this was because the Academic Tutor had highlighted the potential problems of relying on unsubstantiated media coverage, or the student's own acumen in discerning fact from fiction, was not forthcoming at this stage.

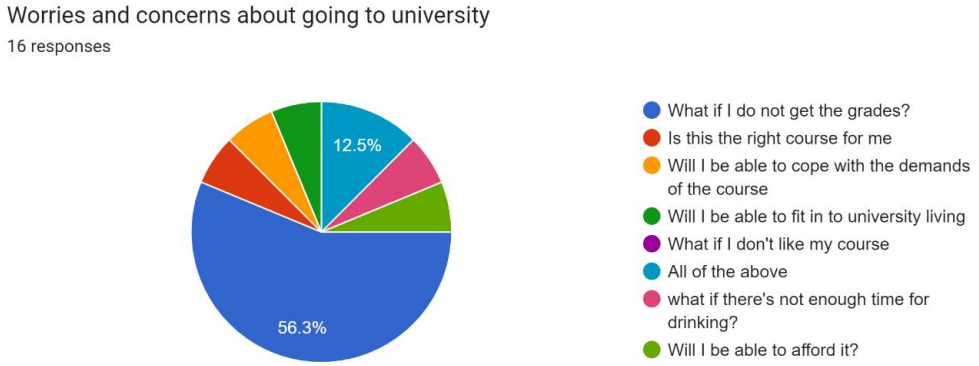


Uni prospectus: good because you can see courses and course outlines, weakness: might like a course but hate the uni Websites: lots of information but again don't know what it's like Open days: see what it's like and talk to people on the course
You can learn about the university by asking your own questions. They are trying to sell it to you.
Open days give so much more information about the university than other methods. You can talk to the lecturers, look at the facilities and get an idea of how the social life works there. Although prospectus' give detailed information on the course, you won't get the same idea than if you have an intro lecture at the university itself
University prospectuses: easy, accessible way to view courses. However can be misleading. Sixth-form staff: extremely approachable and accessible. However sometimes have out of date knowledge. Open-days: very helpful to see the course and the uni. However, can be subjective.
Gives an idea about the course
University open days allows you to see what it is like living and studying there. Websites don't give you the whole real experience

Opens days are useful when tours and course outlines are included.
Uni prospectus gives you an overview of the course and the uni but you can't tell if you like the actual uni Open days are great because you get to see the layout of the uni and what it would be like to live and study there as you get to meet the lectures. However, the uni from day to day is going to be very different than on the open days as they only show you the positive aspects.

The detailed qualification to responses given in the graph provide an insight into the respondents' thought processes. Open Days and sample lectures were welcomed, but the awareness shown by one student who commented that Open Days merely show-case the university to recruit fee-paying students and that the day-to-day realities would be different indicates an awareness of reality. The discerning consumer is the result of life skills acquired and could play a significant part in influencing a subsequent choice.

Increasingly there is evidence to indicate that students in both sixth form centres and universities suffer adversely from stress. It would be naive and unrealistic not to look at the influence exerted by worries and concerns of going to university. The



pie chart which shows that over half of the respondents were concerned about getting the required grades for admission. This finding strengthens the case for making admissions a post-qualification event. The reduction of the distracting influence of grade target stress would allow students to simply concentrate on their studies. By removing this negative source and concern, students would be able to focus on securing a result which more accurately reflected their abilities.

Worries and concerns about going to university

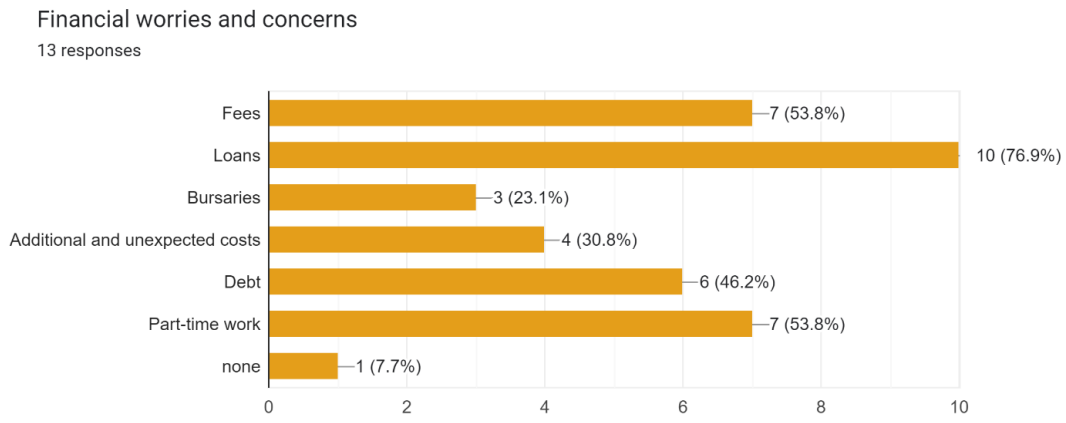
Pretty obvious I think.
Also concerns for will flatmates like me etc
I am just worried that I won't be accepted as I know it is competitive.
I overthink a lot of things, and this is the biggest decision I have ever made. The pressure of how much money, skill and competition rides on this is immense and so I naturally second guess everything.
Getting the grades as I do put a lot of pressure on myself. I also am concerned about fitting in to university living.
I might like the look of it but when I do the course I might not like it
Not getting grades would make me worried as I wouldn't know what to do
Only thing in the way of my career path are a-level grades.
Acceptance worries me, what will I do if I don't get in?
I worry about being able to afford it because although I get a student loan, I do not want to have to depend on my parents to pay for my living expenses (the loan will not cover it)

Perhaps one of the biggest sources of concern and worry for potential university students revolves around the question of funding their studies. Personal budgeting and financial life skills are not normally taught in schools, but in earlier conversation with the Academic Tutor, provision had been made to provide an overview of financial management whilst at university. Notwithstanding a greater awareness of the practicalities of everyday finances, the question of taking out loans and then paying off the loan once they start work was, and is, a serious consideration. Whether financial issues became the key determining factor would be difficult to say without more detailed questioning, but undoubtedly, the question of funding is a major influence, perhaps limiting, if not proscribing anyone student's choices.

There is something of a dilemma in that university education has been promoted as the means to securing better paid opportunities. Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and a research briefing paper (Bolton, 2022) indicated that eighty percent of graduates would have some part, or all, of their debt written off[57]. Reforms to the student loan system to address some of the issues associated with the costs to central government and reducing the tax burden may not be to the advantage of

[57] This briefing paper expects a reduction to 55% in 2023/24 for students who started in 2021/2022

students when it comes to paying back their loans (Waltmann, 2022a, Waltmann, 2022b).



Financial worries and concerns

I just don't have enough information about how it all works.

Paying off debts and loans.

Might be too much money
Paying back the loans or taking a loan out and becoming in debt makes me worried
Based on my parents earnings Im not going to get enough of a student loan to even pay for my accommodation
I struggle to cope with my part-time work with a-levels and living in London in expensive.
My feed will be covered by my student loan but my living expenses won't be and I don't want to have to depend on my parents as my sister is also about to go to uni and it will be a great expense for them. I worry about how having a huge student debt will impact me in the future for example if I want to buy a house I may not be able to take out a mortgage.

The whole question of finance is a major consideration, especially for those students who might be the first members of their family to consider going to university. There does seem to be an acceptance that university education is an investment that will be repaid at a future date. For students from wealthier and more privileged backgrounds the question of finances is of less immediate concern. The extent to which this acceptance is nothing more than putting a brave face on circumstances, over which the students have little or no control, will be teased out in the later interview conversations. Whatever the outcome from those interview/conversations might yield, the question of finance exerts an influence, either overtly or covertly, on any question of higher study.

6.4 Some formative observations

As the returns started to be received and collated in a spreadsheet, I soon became aware that during these early stages of my analysis that I was consciously looking for connections even where the evidence did not support the tentative findings. Being conscious of the ease with which the data at this early stage could be apophenic I developed a colour coding system which apart from the immediate visual impact allowed me to make more nuanced and firmly established connections between the different data sources. Secondly, as the returns from the student questionnaires were returned it soon became apparent that the hours of negotiation and planning which had gone into the preparation and construction of the questions had been worthwhile. The responses seemed to be genuine and openly replied to with little evidence of complicity. The careful wording to ensure neutral and nonleading questions which had been posed in such a way as to make little or no reference to external agencies which were underpinning and setting the whole education agenda, seemed to have elicited thoughtful and personal responses.

The choice of A-level subjects was rather in keeping with the expectations and experiences of the students at this stage of their educational journey, there being an unquestioned acceptance of the narrative that A-levels are the important initial steps on the road to a future career. The part played by school-teachers on influencing their students' choices of future universities has been documented (Johnston, 2010, Oliver and Kettley, 2010, Alcott, 2017, Malureanu and Enachi-Vasluianu, 2021, Burgess, 2021), yet the respondents' comments indicated that, whilst valued, the influence of the teacher was not seen as the most important factor. Was this a reflection on modern formulaic teaching which has restricted the inspirational eccentric maverick teacher to a few fringe subjects, or a more pragmatic approach to a selection process which places a greater store on the utilitarian value of the subject for future choices?

The education system in England is somewhat unusual in the narrowness of its curriculum in terms of its concentration on a small number of subject choices from an early age and in consequence closes many possible avenues for future study often resulting in stark choices between art and science subjects with little if any opportunity to study a foreign language. The limitations of this narrow selection

process have been queried by those who are looking to broaden the scope of pre-university admissions with a baccalaureate approach (Hazell, 2021, Smith, 2021, Booth, 2021). Whilst most students acknowledged this subject limitation as the norm, several students mentioned that this curtailment was problematic when deciding between one or more subjects: the choice being made difficult in that both their interests and teacher expressions of support and guidance suggested several routeways were potentially open to them. In the end the choice seemed to be made either in terms of the subjects which, whilst of interest to them, had provided the best examination result and/or was most strongly associated with a potential career choice.

Perhaps most interesting in looking at the factors which informed choice, there seemed to be a consensus that more practical, hands-on experience of what A-levels and university entailed, rather than just information (in whatever form such information was available), would have been generally more helpful if it had been in a more tangible form, such as taster days, when pertinent and personal questions could have been answered directly. This more personal approach, including shadowing students in the year above or liaising with students who had gone on to university was felt to be potentially more beneficial because having been faced with similar choices their observations and insights would be more pertinent and relevant and therefore valuable.

Whilst having some reservations about the use of the Likert scale and its value, their pictorial representation of the returns in the form of a normal Bell shape distribution graphically illustrated that for most students they were both happy to be in the sixth form and were happy with the choices they had made. Less positive returns however were noted for the students' awareness of what was involved in terms of subject content as well as what was required to make the standard and grades at A-level. The use of the Likert scale was not repeated in the two subsequent questionnaires.

In addition to providing valuable data, the questionnaire returns primed the respondents for the main themes to be covered in the student conversations.

6.5 Conversations

Conversations with the twelve students who volunteered to share their thoughts, had different and wide-ranging expectations about what in the sixth form would entail and what lay beyond. Contributions came from a range of students intending to go to university, a potential Oxbridge candidate, and those for whom a taking a gap year and embarking on an apprenticeship seemed a more attractive alternative. From earlier questions and research, several areas were identified for more in-depth investigation, starting with what advice was available when choosing A-level subjects and was any consideration given to post A-level options.

A key element of the conversations was to look at subject choices made at the end of year nine for GCSE. These decisions can have far reaching implications for future choices, not just as a prerequisite for A-levels, but also for university courses, employment, and career prospects. Some university courses, especially for those subjects and universities which have become extremely popular, may have specific subject requirements (Gardner, 2018, Ellett, 2017). In consequence such courses are often oversubscribed and admission is therefore highly competitive (Career-Alchemy, 2015). To what extent were the students aware of these requirements and if aware were they factored into their choice of subjects? Tickle (Tickle, 2015), in her Guardian article quotes several school personnel who advise students to consider what they are good at, and what they would like to study at university, whilst also being mindful of potential careers. Such advice comes with the caveat that students may, over the course of their A-levels, change their minds. The recommendation to include one or more facilitating subjects to broaden the potential range of subject options when applying to university would appear to be a sensible approach. In addition, the more prestigious research focussed Russell Group of universities have identified facilitating subjects which will assist a subject specific application. The need for good advice being critical at this stage. Burns' article (Burns, 2016) which suggests that some students felt more informed choice at A-levels would have been beneficial when looking at potential degree courses reiterates the importance of both information and timely informed advice at crucial times in a student's progress through school.

Although the focus of this work is upon A-levels, there are alternative options to the traditional sixth form emphasis on A-levels, such as B.Tech qualifications. This routeway, which can be rather specialised, may be more restrictive limiting the range of courses open to students at a later stage, and not all universities will accept them as relevant qualifications. The step change from GCSE to A-levels is significant; firstly, because A-levels necessitate greater subject knowledge and secondly, A-levels require a different approach to learning and the application of that knowledge when examined. Students should, therefore, avoid over committing themselves by taking no more than the three A-levels required for university admission. The subject combination should ideally avoid those subjects where there is a degree of content overlap [58].

Therefore, at this crucial stage, what advice, if any, was given, and from whom did the information and advice come? My initial questions focus on the link between choices made at GCSE and whether any thought had been given to future A-level choices and possible university and future careers. For some students the choice was a natural continuation of year nine studies without really much thought having been given to future implications of those choices:

"*Um I just picked what I enjoyed throughout school and in year nine"*

By contrast, other students had a long-term strategy in place, if not an actual subject area and/or career:

" …GCSEs that was more to do with what I was going to do after GCSEs than GCSE"

"um so I think what I wanted to do at university - well not necessarily the specific subject but I knew I wanted to go to university, so I didn't want to pick subjects that were all arts like for my subjects I wanted to have a big range"

The idea of keeping options open was a pragmatic solution to a process which tends to channel students down a particular routeway, either science or arts based at quite an early age, unlike many of their contemporaries in other countries where

[58] https://www.theuniguide.co.uk/advice/ucas-application/the-real-story-behind-entry-requirements

subject specialisation takes place after having followed a broader sixth form curriculum.

"*I didn't completely know what I wanted to at sixth-form so I kind of tried to choose a range so not narrowing down my options and they didn't really link that much . but they were merely just ones I liked and enjoyed and was good at*

"… but also I went for ones that I believed would open more doors I suppose so I did triple science even though science is not particularly my favourite but I did that because it would open more doors in the future it gives me a wider base to work from"

"… I think the subjects I was interested in and the ones I liked the most - but also things that would be useful to me later on

The significance between choice and informed choice is the product of research and asking for advice. When asking for advice the two most influential categories were those of teachers and parents. This tied in rather closely with the earlier returns from the on-line questionnaires which showed friendship and social media opinions to be less valued.

"… I spoke to my parents a bit about what they thought would be helpful for me later on and my teachers emphasised that I should choose what I was interested in rather than primarily what I was good at really"

"I remember speaking to my biology teacher about whether I should triple science and if it was a good idea and a couple of my other year nine science teachers"

"UMM well my teachers said just do what you enjoy and so did my parents so that is what I did"

Seeking information and advice, whilst perhaps being the initial strategy influencing choice, ideally required to be explored and expanded upon to turn this knowledge in to personal guidance:

"I wouldn't say one person, I'd say there was obviously all my teachers who guided me and opened my eyes to new career opportunities but there was an academic tutor who was helpful and introduced me to the government's career website and we spent tutor time looking through that looking at possible careers so I put in stuff that related to geography and found a list of careers that are kind of around that area"

Two years later and more decisions, to stay on in the sixth form and which elective programme to follow. Refining the numbers of subjects from ten to three restricts as well as opens future opportunities for further study. Staying on at sixth form seemed for most students to be the default position:

"..but sixth-form was definitely what I wanted to do next"

Whilst all students have a choice as to where they take their A-levels, practical logistics along with the provision were also important considerations.

"…but this one was my favourite one because it is like separate from main school and I quite like that about it which was really good"

An appreciation and understanding of the school regime could also be seen as an influential factor:

"…and I knew the teachers, obviously you shouldn't choose based on teachers but I knew a broad range of teachers so I thought I would be more comfortable

".. I knew that I probably wanted to come here because I already had the connections with most of the teachers and I felt the transition would have been easier"

Plus, the important social aspects of learning associated with friendship groups was an important factor to:

"and I know you shouldn't choose on friends but also my friends were coming here so obviously I did look around, but I just preferred the feel of this one"

In all the student conversations there was an acceptance that the next stage after GCSE was the transition into A-levels, no one really questioned the expectation. What then were the important considerations when selecting the A-Levels to be studied over the next two years:

"With physics, it was mainly just because I was enjoying them most at GCSEs that's why I chose them"

A series of Open Evenings to inform both internal and potential external students were arranged, here departments would present their courses in the new centre:

"…when we came up it was similar to GCSEs you'd come here and see what they had got to offer what facilities they got"

It seemed however, that a major choice determinant was based on GCSE result grades:

"I picked mine finally on results day - when I got my results and I think I saw the nine in English Literature and I thought I must be doing something right - I'll just do that one"

"I still don't have an idea as what I was going to do actually until I actually started sixth-form"

The approach taken by other students was more focused and based on an understanding of university requirements:

"… for geography they usually, most universities ask for at least two sciences -um and both maths and geography count as sciences so I had covered that which was quite nice"

Making the transition from lower school GCSE to A-level was, in some cases, a steep learning curve in terms of specification coverage as well as expectations about the way the subject was to be examined, for one respondent:

"It's a massive jump and I struggled initially but the more I have gone on the more I have got the hang it is completely different study –
you are learning to write completely differently now - which I had to admit was a shock cos I thought it would be logical to think we would be building on to our GCSE knowledge and from A-level build on to that when you go to uni if you studied English literature but that seemed a bit strange but you get the hang of it"

For some students' subject choice at A-level seemed to pay little regard to post A-level study. The transition from GCSE to GCE involves not only new subject knowledge but also new ways of learning. One the developments which has gained favour amongst centres and students has been the introduction of EPQ. For some students it can be seen in a positive step in their academic development:

"Yeah I think it is really good because obviously its lead completely by you and you have never really done that before and you are completely spoon fed at main school and so I think it is good that you have to do it yourself and then writing the report which will probably be useful later life and just being independent and it's something you choose that's something you are really, really enjoying and interested in"

For others, the EPQ as an elective was an additional constraint on their time. Notwithstanding the perceived benefits of individual study and presentation skills which would serve the students well in later university studies; it was perhaps the benefits associated with time management and organisational skills which were most useful. These are invaluable skills for academic progress were also seen as being transferable as important life skills. The EPQ was available to all students at the start of year twelve. There seemed to be a correlation between the more academically able and their completion rates, however, not all academically able students opted to follow this route. Therefore, I was interested to learn what advice was available when choosing A-level subjects and selecting an elective:

"I think we had a couple of assemblies about things like that and I spoke to the careers adviser would this - if I wanted to go into and do this would this be the right subjects to …..I think school was quite helpful in advising me on what would be the best option to take to get to where I wanted to be"

"Um yeah lots of teachers have had like sort of brief talks with a lot of students that I never heard but I never voiced that I was interested in university so I never ended up speaking to a teacher about it but we have had days and open evenings where we could discuss choices and we would get given advice on where it would suit us"

Teacher influence and the ability to bring more than just subject knowledge but a real sense of engagement was an important consideration for some:

"I think for my main choice of history, I would say it was my GCSE teacher who is now not here - but it was I have always had this thing were I wasn't sure whether I could carry on history just because I don't feel like my grades are high enough but for some reason in the end I got quite a good grade and then was able they said why don't you take that and my cousins are also history teachers so they had quite a big influence um and I always enjoyed maths so that Mr A and his part in the maths department and he was quite a big influence in that as well"

Whilst teachers can be seen, along with support staff, as the first port of call for information and advice, the opportunity however, to discuss with students already on the course, especially friends, provides both a different perspective on the subject in terms of content and expectations, but also about the social and personal issues of engagement with the course which can often be absent in teacher supplied information.

"…teachers mainly but I have got a couple of friends in the year above so then they gave me advice on what they have done and what they like and what they don't like cos they are quite like me, that was quite a big factor like speaking to people who have, not just teachers who can always sell their course, but speaking to friends in the year above who have actually done the course as a student understanding how they feel about it and what it entails , that was quite a big thing"

The role of the careers advice has not infrequently been subject to criticism (Long, 2018)[59]; however, within the centre the careers advice was appreciated by more than one of the respondents:

[59] In the introduction to Long & Hubble's Briefing Paper they observe:
"The quality of careers advice has come in for frequent criticism, and recent governments have made several reforms, including the establishment of the National Careers Service and the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), aimed at improving the quality and range of careers advice on offer.." p.3

"*umm I think the careers adviser probably because all of the teachers were like you should do this at A-level… um but the careers adviser actually advised me on what I wanted to do later and not just what I was good at - if that makes sense"*

Whilst advice and information may represent the more tangible ingredients of choice, often it is the influence of others, in many cases family members, who supply the less tangible, but perhaps more telling insightful understanding for the person and their proposed course of action:

"….I would say my parents did quite a bit uhh they were very much for going for the things I enjoy because at the time I think, you always get told that A-levels are so much harder than GCSEs that at the time it doesn't compute really you kind of think it is just going to be in extra detail but my parents obviously knew that no its not so they made sure that I took subjects that I enjoyed umm and that I wanted to do as well because I enjoyed them and I suppose my grades did as well like my best grades at GCSE ended up doing them at A-level"

"... my parents are really supportive they don't mind what I do"

This reference to parents and other family members would seem to indicate that an active and genuine knowledge of the person and the relationships established between the parties can be very influential and important. This relationship was particularly important when investigating and considering the possibility of applying to and attending university.

"I think so - yeah - I mean I have been close to teachers but never like close enough for them to for me to spend - I mean I have never spent like a huge amount of time with a teacher you seem them for a year and then it is a different teacher - so I don't think I have ever built up a relationship like that with a teacher so I would have to say it was my parents"

"Umm because I think because I trust them - so that they want what is best for me"

The idea of '*trust'* along with '*want the best for me'* I found particularly interesting concepts; was I was being oversensitive to the words used - the implications being expressed would require a more in-depth review. However, these two expressions raised questions: - Are teachers not to be trusted? Do teachers not want the best for their students?

To what extent did these expressions influence and play a part in how information and advice are received and valued? Whilst guidance may be seen as personalised,

albeit in a somewhat formalised and structured way, increasingly the idea of influence, as an important factor in decision making, became an important consideration in choice making decisions. The idea of influence can take many shades from the directly influential:

"Definitely which is one of the reasons why my dad has said out of all of the options given to me go to Manchester"

This positive almost deterministic approach can be contrasted with familial circumstances in which influence is almost akin to a process of osmosis, where the influences were absorbed within the home where there is perhaps both a tradition and, therefore by default almost, an expectation that university was the next stage:

"*Perhaps it was more that that was the only option I had thought of because everyone in my family had been to university and gone through the whole process and so far I have followed them completely so but my dad went to a tech college and then to university um but they have all gone to university my grandparents went to university my granddad went to like Cambridge and my dad went to Cambridge and mum was at York and they all talk about their time at uni and memories from it.."*

By contrast, parents who had not been to university may prove also to be influential when it comes to university applications, albeit indirectly, by referring to the perceived advantage of higher education within the employment sector when reflecting on their own lack of university education.

"quiet influential, I am around them all the time so quite influential - I think because my dad didn't go to uni., didn't have the opportunity to go to university, …….he's done OK, he's done well but he would have got to where he is now quicker if he had gone and I think that is quite a big influence"

The extent and significance of parental influence on their children's choice of university at this critical stage (Gurney-Read, 2014) is difficult to assess without further research. By the very complex and complicated nature of relationships between parent and child, the influence of parents either directly or indirectly recognised and acknowledge or not, means that to varying degrees the reservations parents might have about potential university choice, its location, safety, and access could play a part in the decision-making process. Whilst one respondent was able to report:

"I think it was fairly independent, my parents did not want to influence me in any way about a uni to go to"

another respondent, notwithstanding all the information, advice, and guidance available and on offer, reported after careful reflection that:

"umm…. Probably my parents to be honest"

were most influential when coming to a decision.

Information about universities has traditionally been supplied in glossy prospectuses with skilfully posed pictures which, along with carefully crafted texts, provide information and recruiting material for perspective students. Whilst still produced in their thousands, on-line versions are more in keeping with the digitally aware young person for whom the interactive format is more attractive and user friendly. How helpful are the traditional paper-based prospectuses?

"Not particularly to be honest"

Perhaps their value rests in acting as family references for discussions:

"I think they were more helpful for my parents who were looking through them"

The ability to navigate their way through digital information meant that on-line resources which could be interrogated and/or followed up were the preferred routeway, especially when used in conjunction with Unifrog

"….so yeah and then it comes up with all the unis and you have to research and look at what is best"

Access to on-line information enables searches to be more personal and responses to be quickly followed up making the process of information collation and choice that much more personally relevant. And whilst the UCAS site was found to be useful in a generic form, it was the ease of the commercially produced package – Unifrog[60] – that the centre had purchased, which soon became the chosen starting point for research because it could be personalised and was also linked to career prospects and potential employment statistics:

"I think I was just shown Unifrog and it just came up - and it's quite easy to use and it came up with - like yeah different categories so I was quite happy just sticking with that"

[60] https://www.unifrog.org/about#values

Whilst third party material provides background information and the basis from which a shortlist of possible places to investigate further can be drawn up, the next stage is a series of visits to Open Days and events to gain first-hand experience of the institution within their location and context:

"….but when I went to visit I went to look around the town and it was amazing so .. that is what I think swayed it for me"

Plus, the opportunity to meet other students:

"I found the most useful thing was speaking to students that go there"

The introduction of Key Information Sets (KIS) which populate university course information was introduced to provide statistical evidence for comparison between institutions and courses; however, the requirement to publish KIS data seems not to have been a major factor in the decision-making process:

"No it didn't make a big impact"
"Not much - not much on them I wasn't sure I could trust them to be honest"
"I think I have seen them, but I haven't paid any attention to them…"

Along with most other centres the UCAS process works well and although the information supplied by UCAS has increased, it seems as though it is the application processing part which remains the most important aspect of its role for students:

"Yeah - I looked on UCAS quite a bit mainly just for like the application processes and not so much looking at uni stuff it was only when I was applying that I was putting in my choices and thinking where I wanted to go that I looked in detail at UCAS things so just kind of like a last minute check"

Notwithstanding, the UCAS process is the official mechanism for university admissions, it is both time consuming and stressful for students especially at a particularly busy time in their academic studies. Two aspects of the process, the writing of the personal statement and the question of predicted grades, have traditionally been the areas of most concern. The four thousand characters of the personal statement which is often the product of much soul searching and many drafts, whilst a requirement, is viewed with some scepticism and questioning of its actual value to the process:

"I think a lot I found quite surprising that a lot of the uni's that I went to said they don't read your personal statement because everybody's personal statement applying to medicine is the same so they just wait until the interview to get a better understanding of who you are .. which I found quite annoying when I was sitting there spending hours over this personal statement that half of them weren't going to read Some of them said we haven't read through it so if you want to bring it up you need to bring it up where as one uni they said this will be about your personal statement"

Although such a response is based on unsubstantiated hearsay, thus making it both unwise and impossible to verify the accuracy of the observation, the implications of the observation are suggestive that the process of writing a personal statement is one of clearing hurdles and obstacles rather than serving any predictive purpose. Likewise, the value and use of predicted grades, which are seen as indicative of an applicant's university potential have been queried not only by teachers and students but also by research (Wyness, 2016). For the students at the centre, the requirement to secure certain grades whilst making an entry submission on predicted grades contributed to feelings of tension, not only was it the grades themselves:

"… it has been quite stressful; it is a lot of pressure to get the grades and I think that is felt by everyone across the sixth-form"

but concerns were expressed about both the timing and the practical implications of making an application when there was uncertainty about whether the required target grades would be achieved:

"..um I would say get your grades first and then apply to uni - it takes away the stress of it all I suppose because I have friends who have to get certain grades to get in to uni and they are quite high grades so they are working around the clock ridiculously to get them .. and if they already had their grades then it might be easier to choose universities that they want to go to instead of having disappointment on results day and having to go through the stress of clearing and all that jazz"

Predicted grades are no guarantee the grade awarded by the examination board will correspondent to the centre's prediction. During the two-year period when Covid restrictions were in operation, greater credence was given to centre predicted grades. Now that the restrictions have been lifted there may be disappointment for those students who fail to achieve the offer grades made by the university of their choice (Weale, 2022). The time spent and the potential for disappointment associated with applications before the results are known, must surely strengthen

the case for a post-qualification admission system. To what extent the respondents have considered and would be in favour of a post-qualification admission system would be worthy of further investigation.

Concerns about the number of unconditional offers made to students has generated media attention (Fazackerley, 2016, Fazackerley, 2017a, Sellgreen, 2018, Weale, 2019b), much of which seems to have focused on aspects related to overall standards and implications for student attitudes towards A-levels which remain to be completed and examined. It seems as though little consideration has been given to student perspectives (Burns, 2019).

"No - if you get an unconditional you still have to work hard because even if , say you get an unconditional and you don't work hard what is the point in doing your two years at sixth-form to just not just bother in the last few terms you have worked so hard for it and also if something does go wrong you have got good A-levels to back you up and also kind of just self-esteem - you want good - to have worked hard to know that you have worked the best you can or otherwise sitting back you might go Oh I probably could have done a little bit better"

"I am not sure that I would want an unconditional offer from a university that I wanted to go to because I feel that then if I got an unconditional offer then I wouldn't have that kind of goal of doing the best I possibly could do at my A-Levels - because I always have that to be like if I didn't do so well on that test I have an unconditional offer I can still go to that university, but if I don't have that and I need to apply to my universities I need to be constantly improving think how can I make myself better than all the other candidates how can I become the kind of person that they want to say yes to when I go for my interviews"

Perhaps a more realistic, cynical perspective, is that students are perhaps viewing the unconditional offer as a marketing and recruitment initiative:

"with like unconditional offers I know that everyone is hating them they say they are just like trying to get bums on seats and things like that"

"… they gave me a conditional and then a few weeks later kind of changed their minds and said unconditional - so - not sure what happened there!"

It has been suggested that in making an unconditional offer, the offer will remove the incentive to work diligently and complete A-levels, however, even when an unconditional offer has been made, there may be other factors involved which may act as a stimulus to achieve good grades, rather than merely accepting what can be seen as an easy pathway:

"Yeah I have got one (unconditional offer), but I still want looking for an apprenticeships so as well I need to get the grades to get into the apprenticeships"

"Yeah I have - yeah I was offered two and I took one of them"

However, with some irony, the unconditional offer is often conditional on making the institution making the unconditional offer the students' first choice. Such a weighted offer can be seen, as one respondent commented, as '*trying to get bums on seats'* in order to secure university funding for the coming academic year. Sometimes, however, the conditional unconditional offer matches the student's choice:

".. but it was going to be my first choice anyway"

Expanding university provision has created an investment business management regime in which institutions compete with one another to secure access to fee-paying students who have now become 'consumers' of education (Molesworth et al., 2011).[61] A student's place now being funded through additional loans and/or bursaries. Perhaps it is this aspect of going to university which has generated most concern amongst many students. To what extent did the idea of a loan and debt enter the considerations when thinking about university, was this a significant factor when deciding to go to university?

I have tried not too but obviously I have thought of that - I think I am kind of treating it as it happens to everyone this whole university debt thing and no one is every going to pay off …… - so I am kind of thinking I don't really need to right that at the moment cos it is going to happen but once I leave university obviously it is something to keep an eye on I suppose"

"… um I have, because my dad did himself ask me if I wanted to go to university and they said it would be OK to that and he would support me and things like that so I was starting on that aspect of things it was always a factor I think everyone thinks about they just think it is going to be debt and you can't get rid of it which is not actually true because it depends on how much money you earn and things like that so it wasn't really an influential factor I would say it was always there I think everyone thinks about it but it wasn't anything that put me off it as such I think - a lot of people do it and you just get past it"

[61] Interesting article by NORDENSVARD, J. 2011. The consumer metaphor versus the citizen metaphor: different sets of roles for students. *In:* MOLESWORTH, M., SCULLION, R. AND NIXON, E. (ed.) *Marketisation of higher education and the student as consumer.* Abingdon: Routledge. which looks at the idea of consumer within a wider context of Neoliberalism.

In general, there seemed to be a general acceptance, with little or no questioning, of the arrangements and the implications of taking out student loans:

"…percentage over twenty-five grand a year if you earn over that so and obviously it does affect any of your other say you wanted to get out a mortgage it wouldn't affect your credit ratings as such and I think it is one of the loans that I don't think it is one to worry about
I don't you can either cos after thirty years you don't have to pay it back or if you don't earn over a certain amount you don't have to pay it back so its one of those things that if you are doing well you are paying it back but then because you are doing well it's alright - so you don't have to worry about paying it back"

By contrast, however. financial resources associated with more affluent members of the community meant:

"that's not a particular worry at the moment my parents have invested and stuff for in the view that we go to university … not that I am forced down that path, but I don't feel like I can't go to university"

In many ways this response, more than any other, is indicative of the importance of social and cultural capital influencing and affecting a person's decision, as one more politically aware student commented:

"*um yeah it's a -- I am viewing more as a tax - which I disagree with nine and half grand it's a ridiculous lot of money so I will probably leave with 60 or 70 thousand in debt but it is what it is and its needed you have to go into that now if you want to get any decent career prospects and if it was up to me I mean - if it was up to me the whole education system needs reform but that particularly"*

Whilst traditionally sixth-form has been seen as a preparation for university, over the past few years a growing awareness and interest in the idea of an apprenticeship has been gaining ground within sixth form centres. For most A-level students, however, the university routeway which is better signposted and supported means that, as Lizzie Crowley (quoted in Kirton, 2018b) skills adviser at the CIPD[62] observed:

"many young people will opt to choose what, in their view, looks like the safest option"

A sentiment reinforced by Becci Newton, (Associate Director at the Institute for Employment Studies" (Kirton, 2018b) who commented that:

[62] *Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development*

"apprenticeships remain less well known, misunderstood in respect of the range and levels of occupations they cover, and the application process is not as straightforward for colleges to support"

Therefore, I wanted to know to what extent are young people were playing safe and going along with the university route? Are apprenticeships seen as a viable alternative? How readily available is information about apprenticeships, where is supplying the information and who is providing guidance and influence for those for whom the traditional book based academic approach to higher learning is less attractive? What factors were important when making a pathway choice and deciding between university or apprenticeship? For some, the idea of practical hands-on experience was an important consideration:

"Ahh when I was looking at accountancy, it can be viewed differently but I wanted to do the apprenticeship route just because you have also got the experience whereas I know you can take, so that if you went to university for three years you could do the fourth or third year as the work placement, but for me I thought having the experience while taking the first steps so like the foundation courses aids me more in understanding rather than just doing it mentally on paper you had that handle"

whilst another important and relevant fact was that:

"..you are getting paid and you are getting a degree or a qualification out of it instead of having to pay"

The financial reward of being paid whilst learning, rather than incurring debt, is a consideration of some importance, more especially perhaps for those who come from less affluent backgrounds where debt and loans are regarded with some misgiving. That said, just how easy was it to locate and obtain information about apprenticeships?

"Yeah I found government job websites they were quite good. UCAS, I didn't really like the UCAS apprenticeship part of it - cos there weren't many for engineering or product design"

Within the centre, the provision put in place to advise and support students, namely the college academic tutor and careers adviser, were mentioned several times as being both helpful when providing advice and access to resources and supportive when preparing applications for apprenticeships:

"I believe K again the academic tutor she did help me with a lot of things so she sent me through the links that I could find and also something else and other things and

then would help me prepare for interviews, prepare my cover letter and CV and things like that she was a lot of help"

Once again, however: notwithstanding the centre's support, it seems as though parents played an important, if not crucial, part when discussing possible options:

"My dad is more of an engineer so I would say that is where I got it from my mum has been pushing me to look and do my research so I would say my dad has given me the most useful help obviously with the experience he has had of apprenticeships"

Me "…parents are always giving you advice (but) things have changed so much**"**

"That's the thing I say to them obviously he thinks it is the same as when he was younger, but he sort of knows that it is a lot different, but he still thinks it might be the same."

The choice to stay on and enter the sixth form was made at the end of compulsory schooling after the GCSEs results had been obtained, now almost having completed their time in the sixth form, what did the students feel about their experiences and time spent in the sixth form?

"*Yeah It has been very enjoyable but hard work but definitely hard work I would say that jump from year eleven to year twelve wasn't that bad it was a lot harder but I could cope with it a lot more but I find from year twelve to year thirteen it stepped up a lot more I think so it has got harder from sixth-form lower to upper I think that has been the biggest step"*

The relationship with teaching and support staff changes in the sixth form environment and whilst A-levels and examination preparation take priority, there is time to think and reflect on the experience what the future has to offer:

"I think personally even though I got help with not going to university I think most people would say that it was very much as soon as you go to A-level then there is a straight road and there is no exit at all it was very much that to begin with and they do help you also with my cover letter and things like that, you are not forgotten about but there are a few people who are not going but it is still good to come here to get that level of qualification so that you have got it for future use if needed, but I would probably say it shouldn't be just based on university there should be a broader view on things"

In many ways it is this observation from someone who has decided not to go to university best illustrates the second role played by sixth forms in describing it as "*is a straight road and there is no exit at all"* and this perhaps more than anything else is at the heart of what this research is about, namely the acceptance, almost without

question, of a process which puts great store by ability and the achieving of targets under the promise of reward and the opportunity to become socially mobile. In consequence students are put under a lot of pressure to achieve. The issues associated with pressure and stress have been documented by official bodies (Stafford, 2019, Rudkin, 2019) and questions raised in the House of Commons (Crausby, 2018). The centre being aware of the stress factors which can have an impact on students has welfare support officers who are available to address and support vulnerable and distressed students in their times of need. The two years of A-levels, along with the preparation for and associated application to university and for apprenticeships can have an impact on individual's wellbeing which is not always easy to articulate:

"Yeah a lot of people would probably get lost in the process if they weren't sure it almost comes too much cos you want to think about your studies as well you just don't want to just think about where you want to go you need to get past this first bit so it might become a bit much but there is a lot of pressure as well"

There are several aspects which the students identified as having the potential to be more stressful:

"I don't think it is the case of having going from GCSEs to here is such a large jump going from GCSEs to A-levels cos, they said that is probably the largest jump wise for obviously from here to university is similar so that was one of the stress because you have to learn a different way of learning and how you express things for exams - so I would say there is some stress there because you have got so much, there is so much content on each thing so my history has got three different time periods and they will cover a vast amount of years so it is quite difficult to ...but its OK"

Even for those who perhaps feel more at ease, they too mentioned their sense of being stressed as the pressure came to the fore:

"Somewhat, yeah but I don't get too stressed about stuff but it has been quite stressful it is a lot of pressure to get the grades and I think that is felt by everyone across the sixth-form "

A valuable insight into the pressure under which staff and students operate as they process the demands of A-levels and university preparation was captured by one student when they reflected that:

"I think even though people don't always announce that they are putting pressure on you you can feel there is always pressure on you because you know these teachers are representing themselves as well as they can teach and what grades they can get and because a class has such diverse abilities in them you are all kind of under such a high pressure to do better than before it's just a lot to take on I think"

What then might be a remedy to alleviate the feeling of being pressurised and the associated feelings of stress and anxiety? Once again, an observation from a student seems to be particularly astute:

"Offer more support than pressure because pressure doesn't help any student even the A star ones are pressured, and the D grade ones are pressured to do higher than what they can do"

The willingness and openness of the student respondents helped to produce both informative and personally revealing observations which have provided a valuable database, albeit from one case study centre. The choice of GCSE subjects was, in the main, based on personal preference. A-level choices were dictated by GCSE examination results and guided by parents and teachers. Undoubtedly teacher encouragement to follow a subject in which the student showed some ability, or achieved examination success, may be linked to anticipated future examination success which would reflect positively on the teacher and department. EPQ as an option proved to be something of a mixed blessing, regarded as an additional call on student time was completed by those students who were better time managers and helped to develop their all-round learning and academic skills. Parental input was more often limited to support based on familial knowledge and trust developed over time.

Any decision requires information, not only to provide facts and figures, but also by providing an insight into what to expect. The traditional prospectus were more often than not used to keep parents abreast of developments in the search for a course and university. KIS data provided by the universities was not really valued. By far the most important source of information came by using the on-line facilities provided by universities. Most important of all, for all the students, was the extensive use of Unifrog as a personal profiling facility.

Concerns about predicted grades and unconditional offers made the stressful UCAS process even more uncertain. The issues surrounding financing future studies were, in most cases, accepted as the price to pay, there being no alternative unless family funding options were available. The possibility of funded apprenticeship schemes

was an attractive alternative, but the application process was no less fraught. In general, the sixth form experience, although pressurised and at times stressful, was generally regarded as a positive experience.

This valuable store of student data, when analysed teased out the salient factors and critical influences when making important choices about their future courses of action. In answering the original research question about the factors and influences on going to university, the research also raised more profound questions about the role of A-levels and the timing of the admissions system. On a more profound level, are the students embarking on a journey to fulfil a cherished dream, or have they simply been caught up in a political narrative with its promises of highly paid employment and social mobility which follow a university education? Is this unreasonable to expect sixth-form students to question the hegemonic role of education, or is it simply that they have accepted there is no alternative available?

Chapter Seven – Discussion and Analysis

In addition to providing generated data, the questionnaires and conversations proved to be thought provoking. Raising questions not only about sixth form provision and the preparation of students, but also asking about the roles played by schools and whether adherence to the tradition of A-levels is the best preparation for future citizens in a complex competitive global context. The research also raised questions about data generation, its production and how to keep the ongoing account relevant and accessible.

Case studies can be criticised for not being objective in that the researcher has become too integrally involved with the topic, centre, and personnel under investigation to be able to criticise. Whilst acknowledging such a claim, I would counter that the more integrated the researcher becomes into the institution under investigation, the more likely the whole story will be revealed.

This research into student perceptions for choosing to study A-levels and university uncovers the factors and influences which were important when deciding on a course of action. Each individual student's perceptions of reality will ultimately define their understanding of what is possible and thus determine any choices they may make. There are many factors involved, which when combined create a unique and holistic picture. Central to generating this data was the use of the interview/conversations to reveal and explore the factors which influenced their choice of university.

Being aware that interview generated data is not without limitations and critics, I was conscious of the need to address these limitations in both the interviews and the subsequent analysis. This awareness served as constant reminder that the respondents were interviewed as individuals within a somewhat idealistic situation, isolated from the larger complexity of societal activities. And that the spoken word used to generate and examine experiences and subsequent reflections and thoughts, were recorded, and transcribed into a written format. Both forms of communication have their own punctuation, syntax, and grammar and these

variations becomes more marked in the reflective stage of the analysis. In addition, conversations in creating dialogue generate their own non-verbal interactions which are often more emotionally charged and/or nuanced than the written word in the transcript would suggest. In the case of this research, the transcripts have not been subjected to detailed textural or linguistic analysis thus leaving the statements open to the charge that they have been simply accepted at face value. Nonetheless, this is not to say that attention was not paid to the words used by the respondents as they communicated their experiences and understanding. A detailed analysis of the texts and linguistic style would, I thought, have added little to the thoughtful responses and personal insights into the key concerns that students and staff have about the process of university admissions.

It could be suggested that by giving such credence to respondents' narratives that trivia has been given a value it does not warrant and that in consequence little new knowledge of any significance has been produced. An observation which can be compounded in the final reports if they are seen merely as a collection of boring interview transcripts rather than producing a convincing narrative. Undoubtedly there will be examples of not relevant data generated but these can be filtered out during the analysis and reporting stage. The suggestion that no new knowledge is produced would seem to suggest that what constitutes acceptable knowledge has a very prescriptive definition. By contrast, I would argue that each new development adds to the overall collective store of knowledge and in so doing enriches society.

Further justification for the use of a case study and conversation/interviews is that within a post-modern, even post-truth, environment where opinions and evidence are often supplied through a binary system of box ticking, the articulated and reflective comments of the respondents provides a much greater depth of information. Data generated in this way is much more informative and insightful and open to immediate clarification and correction.

It is with these thoughts and observations in mind that I approached the subsequent and ongoing reflective analysis. Initially the data was searched to identify

noteworthy themes and strands which could be coded and compared. From these preliminary assessments explanations emerged which lead to a greater awareness and understanding of the key concerns and issues. The coding categories changed and developed during this process. There are several commercially produced computer programs such as NVIVO which are designed to help with the coding process. Yet, after consideration I opted to use Microsoft Word for the initial transcribing write-up stage and then transferred the text to Excel which allows for filters to identify key labelled themes. The rationale behind this decision was that the NVIVO software was designed for much larger samples than my own and has accordingly a much longer and steeper learning curve than was available to me, by contrast I have some experience of the Microsoft suit of programs including OneNote which enabled the production of a themed overview and record of the research to be kept.

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of research is keeping all aspects together in a form which is easily accessible and does not itself become a chore. Linking the literature leads to the results and analysis from the data to bring clarity is quite important both throughout the research process, starting with the initial investigations, all the way through to the final write-up stages. The methods used, rather like the questions asked were the product of an iterative process. The initial stages of trying to manually record events and references in a notebook was soon abandoned as the ability to search quickly and cross-reference become increasingly problematic. Colour coding with post-it flags, whilst an improvement remained problematic when undertaking multiple cross-referencing. The use of MS Excel as a database which was capable of filtering key words seemed the way forward, so all books and articles, along with key words and brief summaries were recorded in this manner. Keeping separate databases for the bibliography from the data analysis files was somewhat limiting in that time was needed to cross reference articles with analysis reports. What was needed was a means of keeping all the documents accessible in one place. The solution for me was MS OneNote which has proved to be a very stable base for bringing together and linking all types of MS files, both directly through hyperlinks as well as through the carefully selected pages within the OneNote project (Appendices – Research Tracking OneNote). To collate information and data, which can then be used to reference and cross-reference all

aspects of the work undertaken proved to be invaluable and means that future and/or follow-up research will continue to use this program.

Apart from the need for, and the ease of collating and cross-referencing data, the recording of field notes, written up from scribbled jottings during interviews and as the questionnaire data was coming in, were quite valuable aide-memoires for recalling individual and perhaps unique participant's expressions or themes which could be followed up later. Whilst not wishing to underplay the importance of field notes, I was aware that writing during a conversation, even if clarified before the interview started that the participant had no objection, could perhaps been seen as recording in a way which may be seen as official and even threatening. This also had the potential to disrupt both the freedom and flow of the conversation. This was something I did not want to happen. In addition, the production of extensive field notes is more usually associated with ethnographer's mode of operation and apart from the ethical issues which such an approach would raise is the question to what extent the field notes had in themselves become the object of the research. Although critiquing and raising concerns about interviews Brinkman (Brinkman, 2015 : 332) could equally apply to the taking of field notes in that they could be viewed as being over theoretical (social science agendas), or merely rhetorical (leading to the mere collection of quotes) in their attempt to legitimise the process associated with their research, rather than in the production of new knowledge.

Although language was key, it was the content of the accounts which was important, rather than the style, vocabulary and/or grammatical structures. The texts were not subjected to an in-depth analysis of linguistic style, nor to any form of discourse analysis. Though much of the transcribed narratives contained similar content and themes, the challenge was to identify and follow up those aspects which advanced finding answers to the research questions. Inevitably, preconceived ideas about schooling and education were brought out. In trying to keep an open mind throughout the analysis a variety of methods were employed to try and find a logical and cohesive explanation. In the first stages of the analysis, time was spent looking for any patterns and/or themes which emerges from the transcripts. Secondly, the transcripts were examined to see if it was possible to identify connections between

statements and how they compared/contrasted with one another. At this stage I was not trying to validate their perceptions, but rather trying to gain insight and some understanding of how they viewed the prospects of preparing for and applying to university.

Checking the consistency and reliability of the findings was a key element. By cross-referencing the teaching staff and the priorities underpinning their approaches to teaching and preparing their students for examination with how the students perceived the provision, it was possible to establish and examine the strength and coherence of the respective statements.

Teacher: "*passing exams priority – prep for university second guessing"*

Student: *"A-levels perhaps seen as a production line – teaching for results"*

Head of Sixth: *"I think my concern is that the more prescriptive it gets, the more you feel like there are, there are tricks and secrets to getting good grades than actually just going back to focus on what it is all about"*

Throughout the work as it progressed, I was conscious of the moral imperative to be truthful and report honestly my findings. I was constantly reminded of Brinkmann's observation that:

"The quality of the product is determined by the competence of the craftsman who applies the tools."
(Brinkman, 2015 : 275)

In my search for answers, rather than trying to fit data into a preconceived structure, an approach evolved which was free from the constraints associated with a more conventional structure. Even assuming a more orthodox approach had been applied, there is no certainty they would have produced any greater validity or reliability.

All interview conversations were conducted in an open manner, yet the elephant in the room, namely inequality within the education system did not surface. The English education system has always been run on lines of class and

notwithstanding all the changes which have taken place still favours the privileged (Green, 2019, Shepherd, 2009a, Shepherd, 2009b). The first area of contention centres on A-levels which are now seventy years old. They are based on middle class culture, values and ideas which define taste so that middle class students, whether in state or independent schools, have an advantage in terms of their various Bordieuan capitals. The A-level results may record these advantages, and these results are then used as admissions criteria as an indicator of future performance. Annual examination results invariable show the independent sector schools achieving the best grades and therefore the entrance criteria for university, especially the Russell Group, however, good A-level grades do not always develop into top university results, as shown by the case studies of (Hoare, 2011) and Springford (Cited in Stuart, 2012). Secondly, there is an injustice in provision, as indicated in the (CSJ, 2020), where at Saint Pauls School (Independent) students are assigned advisers from year eleven. Such advisers guide the students the intricacies of university choice, application and career choice and access to the top professions. The school has eleven specialist advisers for two hundred students. By playing the game and accepting that the system is fair and open schools are actually perpetuating the myth that education in England is one where merit and potential will have the opportunity to be recognised and developed.

In both preliminary discussions, and in talks prior to, as well as the conversation recorded in the interview with the vice principal with responsibilities for the sixth form, the stated aim of the centre was to create an holistic experience for all the students; one where the academic and social skills were valued within a shared community of experience. The centre's agency to implement its philosophy for educational provision was, and continues to be, constrained by policies being imposed by central government in the form of A-level reforms, along with financial cuts and any number of other regulations. The centres approach was that these constraints were to be seen as challenges to be addressed and overcome. Despite changes to the curriculum imposed by both the financial cuts and the reduction in the number of A-Levels available for examination, the centre was committed to offering over thirty courses. The most recent ALPS (A Level Points System) score of two, which means that it is within the top ten percentage points for sixth forms in the country, in addition, the all-important A* - B exceeds the national average. These

returns would indicate the staff and students have risen to the challenge to raise standards and achieve outstanding results.

A-levels remain the main focus of the provision at the centre with the teachers giving priority to teaching their subject, to ensure their students were well prepared for the examinations and thus securing ‘good’ results. The teaching staff being also aware that examination results are part of the accountability process by which they are annually assessed. The strategies and emphasis at the centre are reflected in the results which showed consistently outcomes above national averages. These results being obviously important for both the student and the centre. Yet there seemed to be something of a conflict between wanting to encourage and develop responsibilities for independent learning, whilst at the same time needing to cover in greater depth an enlarged syllabus content which was to be examined synoptically using new skill sets. This ‘new rigour’, which requires the acquisition of subject specific skills, required, in some cases, the staff feeling obliged to teach in a formulaic way to give their students a basis for answering the questions - which in essence is teaching to the examination. Again, is there not something of a conflict between the narrative of encouraging independent thinking students, and the prescriptive need to acquire a variety of skill sets to answer the questions set at the end of the course?

The belief that education is a mechanism by which an individual can achieve their potential and thus ultimately through social mobility increase their social standing; was not questioned at the centre. Neither were questions raised in conversation about the of equality and/nor justice, yet they remain important factors in shaping both educational opportunity and outcomes. Whether the omission was due to misrecognition, or a case of TINA (There Is No Alternative) was difficult to ascertain. Yet the implications for their students remain, are they being prepared adequately for life at university? If the evidence from the annual National Satisfaction Surveys is be believed, then for some students there is evidence to suggest for some their experience may be less than satisfactory.

Taking decisions and making choices about A-level subjects to be taken requires considered thought, yet it would seem, that often decisions are guided by feelings of liking or disliking without too much attention being given to reason or rationality (Kahneman, 2012). There is a tendency to look for the least demanding course of action, which can be rather comforting in a world of uncertainty. There might be an expectation that a careful consideration of future university courses and careers would operate, especially considering the narrowness of post sixteen curriculum, yet for some students, the choice was simply made on the day the GCSE results were announced. For others, there is evidence of thought and discussions with other parties, namely their subject teachers and parents to identify the best course of action for the individual student. The case study returns substantiate the observations made by Burns and Hall (Burns, 2016, Hall, 2021) who claim that more information and advice would have been useful at this stage when making decisions. The transition from GCSE to A-level is a step change in terms of expectation and cognitive working patterns to respond to the new way of working. More information on syllabus content and working practises would help inform decisions. It was felt that decisions could be better informed if the potential students had the opportunity to talk with and question students already on the course, especially in terms of identifying the requirements and expectations regarding work patterns, outcomes, and workloads.

The tie-in between education and employment would suggest that it is important that whatever information is available is consulted and discussed, including the implications of subject and career choice. At this stage assistance from careers advisers would be helpful to plan and prepare a route through to university. Ideally these discussions should be personal rather than generic. There is, however, a potential problem in this employment guided routeway, in that because of the narrow range of subjects studied at A level, there is little scope for a change of mind over subject and/or future career. The lack of flexibility, especially in times of rapid change means that being locked into a specific course and career could perhaps be a little unwise. In consequence of this lack of width and flexibility in subjects taken in the final two years of schooling, is it time to consider the future of A-levels and GCSEs and replace them with a more rounded and inclusive curriculum-based

recognition of work undertaken at school and standards achieved during the students' time at school?

The decision to go into the sixth-form to study A-levels is, in many cases an acceptance that it is a preparation for university: it is, as one student at the centre commented: "*a straight road and there is no exit at all".* The returns, however, from the eleventh questionnaire question (Appendices Six-form Studies) shows, there can be variations on this narrative in that sixty percent identified university as their post A-level destination, whilst nineteen percent queried the possibility of apprenticeships. This pressure to go to university has been commented on (Hall, 2020) and what is significant in this report is that some of the sixth formers think that their parents would not countenance an alternative to this progression. This observation is significant for this research in showing a very strong impact parents can have over a student's decision. Quite how the students formulated those opinions is not stated; however, the fact that it is the students who are assigning a response to what they think may be their parents' response might be would seem to indicate that no matter how influence comes into being, it can nonetheless exert a powerful, even if unrecognised, influence. Therefore, if this perception of A-levels and sixth form, along with the acceptance of the narrative that A-levels equate with university and the securing of better employment is the only way forward then making relevant subject choices would appear to be an essential first step. The long shadow cast by subject choice at A-level will restrict to some extent subject choice at degree level.

Therefore, the key to making informed and rational choices is access to information, advice, guidance, and support all of which are important contributors in the decision-making process. Each of the four contributory factors are different in terms of what they bring to the process of decision making. Information is making available data which may be of immediate value to a potential student, or it may open the possibilities of courses and/or careers which hitherto had not been considered, or even on the horizon of possible options. This information is generic and produced by the universities and colleges with a view to presenting their respective institutions in the best possible light. Statistics are regarded as objective facts and therefore

thought to be useful consumer information. KIS (Key Information Sets) were introduced to provide data on what was thought to be useful information for a student to know about an institution. Whilst the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) classifications was designed to show how any institution was performing in terms of its teaching, as rated by external assessors, and therefore seen as being more objective guide to the academic expectations to be found in the university. Unistats and various league tables which are produced by several national newspapers allowed for a more ready comparison to be made between universities. Yet whilst this information was, and is, produced annually in vast amounts, the consensus amongst the students was that they tended to ignore such information having once glanced at the data. Could the students' reaction be a response to the overwhelming amounts of information, or could it be that perhaps because the information produced was meant to be objective, and therefore was regarded as generic and not seen as being personally relevant in that it was not speaking to the individual student directly. Interestingly, the ranking of universities in the various league tables reinforces the perception that education takes place within the context of a hierarchy of institutions and that if you secure the 'golden ticket' (Benn, 2018) your chances of success are the greater. It is equally possible that the status of a highly ranked institution could appeal to those for whom status was an important factor.[63]

Having identified possible destinations, the question of advice becomes important, in that the information is processed in ways which are of relevance to the student. Such advice can come from many different sources and aims to be more personally relevant than the generic data contained in prospectuses, online sources, and statistics. The advice within publications relating to university admissions provide, what in essence is still generic, but less impersonal in that it is targeting the data at a person with interest similar to those of the enquirer (Ellett, 2017, Gardner, 2018). Guidance by contrast usually involves a more focussed attention to the personal details and requirements of the individual. This attention to personal detail can be supplied by someone who has a knowledge of the individual acquired overtime, such as a tutor, or it could be from professional careers guidance. It was

[63] I was reminded by one young lady that the institution that she hoped to attend had a higher status than mine – so obviously that was important to her!

Callaghan's speech which stressed the connection between education and work requiring guidance when making choices. The 2000 Learning Skills Act established a governmental service about careers for young people, unfortunately the service was axed in 2011 and responsibilities were transferred to the school. The published House of Commons reports of (Stuart, 2013, Long, 2018) points out that there is a requirement on schools to provide careers guidance. The relevance of linking of A-level choice and future career pathways has been shown in research (Davies et al., 2017) yet provision of careers advice seems to be both patchy and not well regarded (Gatsby_Foundation, 2020). The students at the case study centre had access to teacher guidance, which was both offered and available. However, it was the guidance from the academic tutor working with the careers adviser which was most highly valued. Perhaps the value attached to this kind of advice and guidance was that it was both personally relevant and not seen as being judgemental. Equally, it could be because the tie-in between university education and employment has become both accepted and well-established, that to have the services of people who are employed to be available to respond to student concerns may have offered reassurance in a time of personal uncertainty.

Whilst information, advice, guidance, and support are available to students at the centre and the students do make use of what is available to varying degrees; it is perhaps, however the role played by influence which is the most significant. Influence can shape the development of an individual and modify both character and behaviour. There are a range of influences. For example, the status of the university, or the prospects associated with a future career may influence a certain course of action. Within the context of the case study centre, the two groups of people with most influence on the students, not surprisingly were teachers and parents. Centre staff influence through their professional knowledge. Quite how any given teacher can influence individual students is very much down to a combination of shared interest in a subject and the establishment of a rapport which may inspire further studies. Parental influence is a combination of respect and emotional support grounded in family trust, which has been built up over a lifetime. The sense of trust mentioned by some students would seem to indicate that it is the parents who are most influential, be this directly and overtly, or less directly and absorbed, especially with regards to the role and importance of education. This acquisition of social and cultural capital is reproduced within network of the family, not necessarily through

any consolidated policy, but more often is progressively acquired through cultural acclimatisation. A process which is reinforced through everyday language, values, and judgements within familial, as well societal hierarchies. The extent to which influence is based on trust or is merely deference to positionality with the family unit is not easily attributable. Each student will have their own narrative reflecting their personal journey and no two experiences will be the same. For one student, a father's lack of opportunity influenced her approach; obviously the subject of father's lack of university experience had been discussed, but how this was transmitted and in what form the influence was manifest was not clear from the interview:

"…..he didn't have the opportunity to go to university, …….he's done OK, he's done well but he would have got to where he is now quicker if he had gone and I think that is quite a big influence"

The extent to which the father's experiences influenced, or inspired, her to engage with university from the perspective of engaging with employment promotion opportunities later, is it difficult to assess. Nonetheless, the influence was such for the student in question to engage with the process of applying to university for the potential benefit it could bring. By contrast, another student was immersed in the family tradition which placed great store on education, such that going to university was expected and appeared to be almost a natural progression. This example in many ways substantiates Bourdieu's accounts of how social/cultural capitals are acquired and absorbed so that both the expectation of going to university and how to prepare for the admissions process were both accepted and assimilated with the confidence to approach the task without feeling alienated from the unfolding requirements associated with choosing a university and appropriate courses.

"*Perhaps it was more that that was the only option I had thought of because everyone in my family had been to university and gone through the whole process and so far I have followed them completely ……they all talk about their time at uni and memories from it.."*

In this context, the family played a significant part in shaping and forming the environment within which discussion lead to the creation of influence. Background expectations were transmitted along with the capitals possessed by the family. Whilst this may not always be recognised by the student as evidenced in the testimony of another student:

"……..my parents did not want to influence me in any way about a uni to go to"

The intricate complexities of parent child relationships means that parental influence can be directly or indirectly recognised and acknowledge or not, and will, to varying degrees, including being expressed as parental reservations and concerns about any decision taken and choices made. Within the case study narratives, it seemed that fathers were often the more influential. To what extent this was because modern education is now so closely tied to employment and careers and that traditionally it has been the male in the family who has usually been the person to engage with paid employment outside the home, and therefore is seen as being a person with valuable experience to pass on, is pure conjecture. Whether the influence was transmitted through direct conversation as with the student who went to Manchester, or indirectly through shared family discussions as with the would-be geographer who felt it was expected of him does not really matter, either way the parents have been influential in forming and shaping their expectations, opinions, and approaches.

Whilst acknowledging that the bonding between parent and child built upon trust can be influential, the other important aspect of family involvement at this stage is the emotional support offered to children. Whilst less easy to identify and quantify, the significance, or lack of, should not be overlooked. Adolescents are developing not only physically and academically, but also emotionally and the importance of a reliable and secure emotional base from which to take important decisions helps in the process of choosing subjects and universities.

Accompanying the increased pressure to achieve academic success in both school and university, along with the criticisms levelled by Burns and Hall (Burns, 2016), has been the increase in the provision of more academic and practical help for students (Shepherd, 2011, Stafford, 2019, Hall, 2020, Pascoe et al., 2020). The whole issue, and type, of pressure and anxiety caused by a stressful competitive schooling and examination circumstances is worthy of its own detailed investigation. Sufficient to say for the purposes of this research that students ‘felt’ pressure to achieve a variety of outcomes from several competing, and in some cases, conflicting sources. Pressure and stress are part of the daily routine of existence, where it becomes a problem is when factors believed to be creating the stress are

greater than the ability of the individual to handle and deal with such concerns. Stress inducing factors are the product of individual perceptions and subsequent response to such circumstances. What may be regarded as stress to provide the motivating drive to complete a task for one person, may for another be unbearable and harmful to their mental wellbeing. Therefore, being mindful of the raised concerns about student welfare, means that future interviews and questions need to be conducted with awareness of the potential to cause stress and the need to proceed with care.

In general, it was felt that the new courses were a good preparation for university. The criteria by which the subjective value of 'good/poor' were judged were not defined. Such an evaluation which, to a greater or lesser extent, was possibly based on their own limited first-hand experience of university and what they perhaps felt should constitute university education. Such observations need to be tempered by the observation that many of the staff admitted to being more than a little out of touch with university developments in their subjects. By the very nature of the teaching role and the importance attached to teacher accountability, there was little time to develop links with external agencies, no single teacher had regular links with any university department or personnel. When advice was sought by students such advice was tailored to the individual student based on the teacher's professional judgement and knowledge of the university in question and came with the proviso that it was not necessarily the most up to date. This observation again illustrates the advantage that pupils at St Pauls School have in that the advisers were also being well versed in university developments and having contacts with various university departments which had been established over many years.

The centre, along with other sixth form centres have opted to offer the recently introduced EPQ (Extended Project Qualification). Although an additional qualification and not required by university admissions, it is regarded as being an especially useful introduction for the student as a preparation for independent academic study and research of the kind that future university students will be expected to demonstrate. The decision to make the EPQ an elective option was in recognition that university admission is generally based on the results for three A-

levels and therefore to add to the burden and stress of an additional subject was viewed as being potentially counterproductive. Given that one of the stated objectives of the reformed A-levels was a more rigorous preparation for university, would it be a sound investment to help prepare students by introducing them to study skills which could include the EPQ? From the student accounts, where most of the students commented on the step change between GCSE and A-level, it would seem as though the provision for an introduction to study skills would be both helpful and useful and especially appreciated in the identified areas of time management, examination revision and 'smart learning'.

Post A-level intentions indicated that for most students the sixth form was regarded merely as a transitional stage in the education process. With one in five returns showing students were looking at apprenticeships rather than university is worthy of further investigation. Could this response be an acceptance of the new type of apprenticeship which aims to give parity with the university experience and/or qualification, or a financially aware response to concerns about fees, debt, and future employment prospects? Or was this a result of a more pro-active centre policy to cater for students of all ranges and abilities which has given equal status to apprenticeships. An external factor which may be linked, seems to be the reduction in the number of 3+1 university courses where one year was spent in a workplace setting. Such courses perhaps having become less popular because of the increase in funding high level and university apprenticeships. The additional work placement year requires to be self-funded thus making this type of degree that much more expensive. The fact that for many students the choice of course and university type continued to remain fluid has significance for the whole admissions process. For if the same principle of waiting until the exam results had been announced and confirmed were to be used before applying for a university place, then there is strong argument for moving the university admissions process to a post-results operation. Such a development would not only remove a source of stress caused by the uncertainty of achieving the required grades, but it would also free time during the all-important A-level preparation period.

The UCAS process is the routeway to university admission. The process, which is somewhat time consuming can become stressful for students, especially in terms of the timing of the process during A-Level studies and examination preparation time. The requirement of predicted grades on the UCAS submission and as previously commented on as being notoriously inaccurate and a poor indicator of future performance. This practice becoming more questionable in that they could form the basis for an unconditional offer. The motivation and value of unconditional offers has given rise to concerns over their use, apart from being viewed somewhat cynically as a 'numbers game – bums on seats' (Cassidy, 2016), they were considered less than favourably in that they had the potential to alter the student's approach and drive to achieve good results in their A-Level examination. Plus, it was felt, by some teachers, that the unconditional offer was a threat to the intrinsic value of study. A view not necessarily shared by the students. The concerns expressed over predicted grades and unconditional offers made, along with the timing of the UCAS/Apprenticeship application system was such as to renew interest in a post-qualification process.

Informed decisions before making any application through UCAS requires data and advice. Ideally, such advice should be discussed and shared with a trusted/valued person before such a choice can be made: but with whom? The variety of responses revealed a wide range of adult influences and whilst some would appear to be in a better position to advise, they were not necessarily the most accessible or those best placed to give the most appropriate advice. Ultimately, such choices, and the value placed on any advice, would to a greater or lesser extent reflect the sense of confidence placed in that person and the value placed on that person's contribution to the discussion. Sometimes it was felt important that the confidant should be someone known and/or close either by family or friendship. Whilst for others, a neutral with professional knowledge was thought to be better placed to offer up to-date guidance and therefore was more relevant. Putting faith in given careers advisers was thought by some to be a more important consideration when future occupations were under discussion. Within the rapidly changing world of work, it would be questionable whether any adult who was not a specialist adviser would be well placed to offer sound advice. Yet family friends and contacts, can provide access to valuable insider information and assist in securing valuable

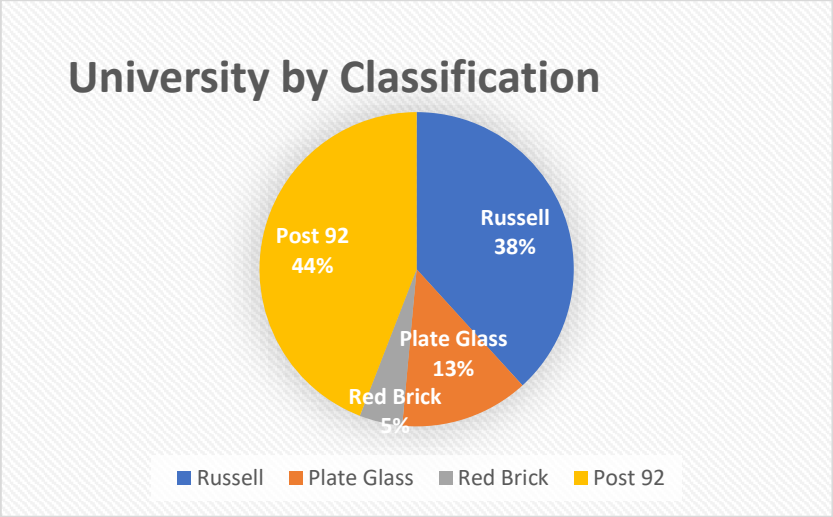
internships. Internships may not necessarily increase academic advantage (Binder et al., 2015),but they do provide opportunities to extend the range and number of important contacts and connections which could be invaluable in the post-university employment market place. The development of an internship profile can add to both the stress and the work load for students (Weale, 2018a); however, as with much else in education there is a hierarchy of institutions which serve merely to confer additional advantage on the already privileged (Cosslett, 2015, Gammon, 2019).

Confidence in preparation for the unknown is perhaps in many ways not the type of question to produce useful responses, for how confident can you feel about approaching unknown circumstances in unfamiliar settings? However, in justifying the inclusion of such questions it is argued that they had the potential to indicate levels of preparedness and the extent to which thought and considered reflection had been devoted to the process. With much of the information and advice having come from adults, and carefully prepared statistics by external agencies[64], a major rationale underpinning such questions was to try and discover what the students valued and why (along with what additional information that would have been helpful). And why such factors were able to build a level of confidence about making appropriate choices. Student opinions and views about what kind of information and in what format such information could be made available to them when applying would be both insightful for the research as well as being most helpful for planning future centre strategies. Again, the importance of talking to, and being involved, where possible, with others who have been through the process before them was felt to have the potential to be most beneficial - which perhaps should not really come as any big surprise in that education, in most aspects, is in essence a social experience based on the exchange of words and ideas.

Whilst not on a par with St Pauls School, the year academic tutors and part-time careers adviser have not only supported university applications but have also been

[64] Identifying the source and rationale for the claim, rather than trying to establish the veracity of a claim is perhaps a more valuable and realistic way to examine evidence ORIGGI, G. 2019. *Reputation: What It Is and Why It Matters* Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

active in developing soft skills and life skills, including finance and debt management in preparation for admission to university. The results from the previous year's university transfers show that almost one in four students obtained a place at a Russell Group University - which would seem to indicate that the centre has achieved a successful record of widening participation at the more prestigious universities:



The degree subjects at the Russell Group covering a range of subjects:

Aerospace Engineering
Biological Sciences
Biology
Biology and Marine Biology
Biomedical sciences
Business Management
Chemical engineering
Chemistry
Engineering and Physical Sciences + foundation
Geography
History
Linguistics and Sociology
Management
Mathematics
Mechanical engineering
Nursing with registration
Physics
Politics and International relations
Psychology with criminology
Scandinavian Studies
Spanish and Chinese
Urban Studies and planning

It would be interesting to follow these students through their university courses of study and into their employment to see how relevant their A-level subjects were in

preparing them for their university studies. Likewise, it would be interesting to learn what pay differentials and career prospects were open to graduates from different universities and social backgrounds and then compare with the findings of other social research projects (Ali, 2015, Anders, 2015, Green et al., 2017).

Assessing the factors which influence an individual's choice is not straightforward. The move to a system of mass university education through a programme of widening participation has resulted in the expansion of universities. The changes in the financial arrangements for universities to a market economy has changed the relationship with students. This meant that universities were now in competition to attract fee paying students (Haywood et al., 2011, Brown, 2011, Molesworth et al., 2011, Foskett, 2011). Such arrangements mean that universities instead of selecting are now recruiting students. These changes have made the process of selecting and applying to university more complicated. The transfer of cost centres from state funded public education to that of personal investment was not questioned by any of the students. For many students who as part of the target group of widening participation and would often be first-generation undergraduates from their family were faced with new funding arrangements which would require student debt to pay the fees and accommodation was an additional cause for concern to be factored in.

Technically, a young person should be eighteen to open a bank account in their own name. Therefore, the chances of either knowledge or experience of financial matters is likely to be somewhat limited, yet at this stage young people are expected to enter into financial transaction which will mean a long-term commitment and have potential implications for future financial transactions. The original Dearing proposals introduced the idea of paying a fee; however, subsequent governments have raised tuition fees which are now capped at £9,250:00 pa. In addition, maintenance grants have been scrapped and replaced with additional loans. Such a move favours the more affluent who may have paid considerably more in private school fees, whilst those students from financially less secure homes are penalised. At the end of a three-year degree a student could have debt in excess of £50,000. To what extent does the thought of debt influence a student's decision to go or not

to university (Callender and Jackson, 2008, Jones, 2016, Dorling, 2016)? Within the case study centre, the whole question of loans and debts, along with the repayment arrangements, seems to have been accepted without much questioning (Esson and Ertl, 2016). Only one student raised concerns in voicing the opinion that student fees were a tax on the young and education, but he too had to accept that his agency was constrained by external circumstances: *"… so I will probably leave with 60 or 70 thousand in debt, but it is what it is and its needed you have to go into that now if you want to get any decent career prospects"*

There is an acceptance that fees, debts, and loans are the only way students can finance their university studies:

"… *I think everyone thinks about it but it wasn't anything that put me off it as such I think - a lot of people do it and you just get past it"*

This approach being an example of Bourdieu's theory associated with misrecognition and doxa, The narrative having been repeated so many times that it has now become to be regarded as a self-evident truth. Likewise, in the same way that the debt has been accepted, so to as the narrative that most students will never actually pay off their loans. For some, family funding was/is available, thus adding economic capital to social and cultural capital and in so doing consolidating advantage on the advantaged.

Attempts to redress the imbalance between those with economic capital and those without by the awarding of bursaries, along with fee waivers, and the making of unconditional offers with bursaries to students is regarded more as a marketing strategy to secure the university's core funding by attracting as many students as possible (Cassidy, 2016, Robert, 2018, Weale, 2019b), rather than redressing the effects of social inequality. Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition is intriguingly complex, but can be applied in this situation, in that schools, students and parents are not entirely unaware of the reality of their actions but behave as if they trying to hide the truth from themselves. Yet by accepting this situation they are perpetuating the reproduction of inequality. Education in England has always been dominated by class (Tawney, 1964, Bernstein, 1971, Bernstein, 1973, Bernstein, 1975, Archer et al., 2003, Ball, 2003b, Bolton, 2010, Hill, 2010, Bathmaker et al., 2013) the current narrative about widening participation and describing fee paying students as

investors in their own education, deliberate fails to recognise the extent and impact on students with different capitals as they negotiate their way through the education 'field'.

The constant theme that widening participation is a reward for meritorious performance and that by investing in your future you will, by your own endeavours, achieve wealth and social mobility, would appear to be a myth for many students. Closer inspection suggests the older class-based narrative is a more consistent theme. Research into graduate salaries five years after graduation by Adzuna (Haynes, 2022) concluded that forty percent of courses (after five years) do not exceed the average salary. Their findings based on seventy-four degrees revealed that fourteen courses did not exceed the repayment threshold within that period. The high remuneration packages associated with the established industries and professions seem still to recruit from those candidates who were privately educated**.** The discrepancies in remuneration packages and access to the more traditional and highly regarded professions raises questions not only about the claims made for the acquisition of a university degree, but also the important role and influence exerted by class within the English education system.

Even for those students who obtain the 'golden ticket' and secure a place at a top university often find their final salaries are less than those who arrived at university with greater access to more and varied capitals (Walker, 2017, Reporter, 2018). Education in England is more associated with the maintenance and reproduction of inequalities. There is evidence to show that by the age of forty-two, privately educated males will be earning 35% more state educated males with corresponding figures of 21% for females (Green et al., 2017, Green, 2017). Often accompanying these larger salaries, privately educated personnel often exercise important leadership positions. The recruitment bias which favours the privately educated candidate, even when equally or even better qualified candidates from lower social class applicants are available, seems a little reminiscent of the 'old boys' network' operating in more subtle and nuanced ways within the context of modern professional recruitment. The extent to which this correlation between privately educated and recruitment to the professions may be attributable to a sense of

shared values inculcated in the private school, rather than any other cause, must remain as conjecture in the absence of any conclusive evidence. What is evident, is the strong correlation between privilege and education remains almost intact. Through the purchase of private education leading to a place at a prestigious university, before admission to one of the more lucrative and esteemed professions, would appear to confirm the importance of family money and connections as still being very relevant. Perhaps in many ways, the paying of fees and the incursion of financial debts at a cost to the individual ties the student evermore closely into the hierarchical structures which dominate English society.

Case study centre student respondents with either one or both parents who had experience of university were better placed to offer advice and financial support. Both this experience of university, along with the importance of class attitudes towards university education is visible not only in terms of making application to the more prestigious institutions, but also in the choice of subjects chosen. Following the expansion of universities and their need to recruit fee-paying students there has been an increase in the range of subjects available. A result of this expansion there has been complaints from more traditional academics, conservative politicians and media, identifying these degrees as ‘Mickey Mouse’ (Gifford, 2022). Surprisingly amongst this list of ‘Mickey Mouse’ subjects are English Literature and Architecture. The rationale for their appearance in the bottom ten list of subjects, is their lack of salary earning potential. Thus, quite clearly identifying the role of education as an investment in a future career and its potential to secure a high salary.

Notwithstanding Bourdieu’s observations about misrecognition, the move from an elite to a system of mass education has had a profound impact on the numbers of students going to university, and it has also changed the relationship between university and student, for as consumers education students are free to be wooed by institutions in order that the university can secure their long-term funding (Fazackerley, 2016, Fazackerley, 2017a, Fazackerley, 2018). It would perhaps be a mistake to assume that because students have become consumers with little experience in financial matters that they are naïve. Fees and debts are an area of concern for students, yet they, like all other consumers in the marketplace to

purchase a service have often undertaken extensive research before making a choice. Traditionally, all the schools in the county would descend on the county showground for the annual university fair where representatives of the universities would handout brochures and various other mementos to keep the university's name to the fore. Each student would come back with a bag full of colour brochures. Today however, the paper printed version, whilst still produced and used, has given way to the online digital version available on each university site. The more interactive the site which allows the prospective student to interrogate the data, the more highly regarded the site. The most used and most highly regarded site for course information was the commercially produced and supported – Unifrog. Every student to whom I spoke regarded the programme highly because it allowed them to drill down through the data, whilst also having links with employment prospects and thus gave them a comprehensive range of criteria for comparison before making a choice. Each student has their own perceptions of what represented a viable proposition.

Following the initial searches on Unifrog, the next stage in the choice process was, having compared and thought about and discussed the merits of each university, an Open Day visit. Without exception these visits were regarded highly. For all those students who went on the Open Day visit it was the ideal opportunity to get a 'feel' for the university in its own settings with a view to seeing if the university matched their expectations and to assess whether the university's claims were valid. One of the important aspects revealed in the data was the question of the accommodation and facilities. The Open Day visits provided an opportunity to assess whether they would be comfortable over the next three years. Each returned with very firm views, that they could, or could not, see themselves in that setting. In addition, for some subjects and universities there was the opportunity to attend a taster day, or even a preparatory course such as Medlink which provided additional and valuable data to help inform their decision. Occasionally, in some cases, this second visit reversed the first favourable impressions associated with the Open day visit, and these reversals included a potential Cambridge student who felt that not only were the buildings old, so was the subject content and style of teaching! Both kinds of university visit were enhanced when the potential students had the opportunity to meet and talk with current undergraduates and get the 'unofficial' university guide.

On the return to centre impressions and ideas were shared and discussed with the academic tutor. It was perhaps, in many ways, the students at the university who through their informal conversations proved to be most valuable and influential for the prospective student. Either by what they said or implied when talking to potential applicants about what the university was like for undergraduates.

UCAS (Universities and College Admissions Service) which was founded in 1992 as the definitive administrative and clearing centre for all would-be undergraduates. The basics of the admission process, originally on paper, but now electronically and online, still requires the same information. Apart from the personal details and the recording of earlier examination results, the students are required to summit a four-thousand-character personal statement. This has traditionally, and remains to be, an exceedingly difficult task for the students, research (Jones, 2013) suggests that students in some centres are being disadvantaged by both the advice they are given and the 'poor' quality of their written expression. The centre has various checking strategies in place to reduce the possibilities of errors and omissions. Some concern has been expressed regarding the value of the statement in that it has been called into question by rumours that universities do not bother to read the statements, and the only universities which are likely to have read them are those who require an interview before making an offer. The validity of such beliefs I cannot substantiate; however, such stories do make the task of writing the statement that much more difficult because there is a doubt as to the value of the exercise. This too can exert an influence on how the requirement is undertaken. The UCAS submission also requires a statement from the centre about the would-be student, this is completed by the academic tutor in conjunction with the head of year and the vice principal. Testimony from the Academic tutor, plus off the record conversations, show how seriously the centre regarded the completion of UCAS requirements. Time was allocated to ensuring the applications were supportive of the student's application to secure the best outcome for the student.

Perhaps the most contentious issue about the UCAS form has always revolved around the question of predicted grades. The rate of accuracy is notoriously low. The Business, Innovation and Skills Research Document No. 37 (Everett, 2011)

produced by personnel at UCAS identified mismatches between predicted grades and final exam grade result under a number of significant categories. Amongst the categories identified were gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, centre type, disability, and region, amongst others. The reason for the predicted grade being included on the UCAS form is that individual universities set grades as a tariff for admission to their courses. This sifting process has been regarded as predictors of future attainment. The aptly named report 'Predicted grades: accuracy and impact' (Wyness, 2016) highlights some of the issues associated with predicted grades that can have a detrimental effect on potential students from less traditional backgrounds. The scrapping of the AS/A2 route for A-levels under the Coalition Education reforms of 2010, was regarded by some universities (including Oxbridge) as a retrograde step because the AS exam was a recorded exam result, rather than a guess. In the absence of AS results some universities have opted to give greater weight to GCSE performance.

The importance of predicted grades to a student would be if they wished to apply to a given university, they would have to have predicted grades which match the tariff grade combinations required by that particular course and university. For some students and parents this posed a potential problem which adds to the stress already associated with making applications and completing A-level requirements in preparation for the terminal examination. Thus, there is the potential for conflict with the teacher and/or school to have a re-evaluation of the predicted grade assigned by the teacher in order to match the entrance criteria set by the university. In conversations with the head of centre and members of the teaching staff, the centre has always maintained that predicted grades are a professional judgement based on past performance, and whilst explanations and justifications can be offered this should not be regarded as a negotiating ploy leading to an enhanced grade.

Considering the inaccuracy of predicted grades, as mentioned above, the recent problems associated with the abandoning of the public examinations in 2020 because of the outbreak of Covid has resulted in some confusion and dismay with the algorithm used to predict results. The decision in addition to proving to be

controversial[65] also proved to be problematic. In response to the concerns expressed from several quarters, it was decided at ministerial level to use centre estimated grades to produce results. A consequence, which was not entirely unexpected, resulted in problems of having too many students with the required grades for the places available (Fazackerley, 2021). Perhaps this anachronistic system should be abandoned in favour of a post qualification admission system. A system which might go some way to address some of the inequalities which were again highlighted where the private and independent schools, which have traditionally secured an advantage, obtained better pass rates based on historical precedence. The whole issue surrounding predicted grades and their use as predictors and indicators of future success are stressful for the student. and have the potential to be an area of conflict between staff and student. The removal of such a requirement would help to remove one area of stress. Recent indications would seem to suggest that the whole issue of predicted grades may soon be phased out because they have been demonstrated to be not suitable for the purpose for which they have been used. The question of predicted grades at the centre were generally accept by the students as part of the process, whereas several teachers were aware of the importance of grades for course acceptance maintained that professional judgements were ultimately in the best interest of the student.

The introduction by some universities of unconditional offers to candidates was a concern with implications for choice. Concerns around this initiative were identified by both staff and students. In theory universities can reject an application or make an offer. If they make an offer, it has traditionally been conditional on securing the tariff grades set by the university. In more recent times the use if the unconditional offer has become more commonplace. Whether the motivation behind the offers was to remove one of the stresses from sixth formers as they prepared for their exams, or more cynically regarded as a marketing strategy to get fee-paying students in place to offset funding issues is open discussion. Perceptions, reported in the media, favour the latter explanation (Fazackerley, 2016, Fazackerley, 2017a,

[65] The algorithm was flawed in that it was based on historical precedents which gave advantage to the establish schools and downgraded potentially more able from less prestigious backgrounds – again another example of the class bias in English education.

Fazackerley, 2018, Sellgreen, 2018). For those students who got unconditional offers they were viewed as a relieve so that they could now concentrate on their A-levels, but they were also regarded with a degree of cynicism in that often the unconditional offers were made on condition the university making the unconditional offer was selected as the student's first-choice university. By contrast the views of the teaching staff tended to be more unanimously opposed to unconditional offers using the analogy of taking 'the foot off the gas' as far as their A-level studies were concerned. The making of the unconditional is seen as taking away the motivation to achieve. The implications being perhaps more acute for those A-level subjects which are third subject choices or not directly involved in the proposed university course. To contrast the views from the teaching staff, responses from students have acknowledged that the offer will reduce one source of pressure, but they would still want to achieve the best grade result possible in their subjects.

The research has shown several factors are influential to varying degrees for individual students when making decisions about subject and university choices. Each student assesses and interprets the important factors when making an application to go to university. Some of these factors which are considered are statistical, for example KIS data, whilst some of the information is presented in a written format such as a prospectus including online versions. Information is also provided by interactive programmes such as Unifrog. For some students, choice is curtailed by results obtained in subjects from previous choices. Making sense from all the information contained within the plethora of material can be helped by professional guidance personnel. When all these factors are brought together it is often the influence of others which gives a more personal perspective to the wealth of advice and information. Influence can come from other students, both at the centre and at potential universities, but the greatest source of influence comes from those who have a deeper personal knowledge of the student. Contrary to popular myth, teachers played a less significant role than parents, even if the parents have little or no knowledge about universities and the UCAS process, when it comes to having an influence on final decisions. These findings are not suggesting a linear causal relationship, for any one student's choice will be the product of any number of competing inputs of which the student mayor may not be aware.

Amongst the contributory factors which exert an influence are the school, its policies and ethos. At the centre, the executive have established an environment which aims to be open and supportive, in accordance with centre's philosophical principles of justice and providing support for each student's needs. The ideas of capability are embedded within the wider college community's programme of different qualifications and extracurricular activities, as illustrated by the encouragement given to the introduction of the EPQ programme which provides a demonstrable opportunity for students to show their capabilities beyond the normal routine of A-levels. The centre make their very best endeavours to ensure the students are prepared for both the examinations and to take their place in the post sixth form world. They have responded to the challenges imposed by changing examination and syllabus requirements, along with changes to the school environment when they relocated to a separate site. All these changes were undertaken whilst still trying to maintain core principles and ensure the students have a positive experience of school. Changes necessitated by reduced funding have been met through careful timetabling. The school would appear to be doing very well in achieving good examination results and in securing university places. Although the school may have agency to manage its day-to-day routines, it is still constrained by the inequalities and injustices which are part of the class-based education system in England. Thus, schools can be seen to be acting as both conduits for processing students through the education system, whilst also performing the role of honest broker; yet could this role of broker be seen as a mere defensive positioning of the school's status in that the responsibility for the final choice of university and course seemingly rests with the student?

On the wider stage the seemingly positive results and successes at the centre, which are of great significance to the individual, can actually serve to reinforce the myth that the system is fair, and that anyone can achieve. The other myth which is being reinforced is that education is a pre-requisite for career success, whilst it may be true for some, the reality for other students is graduate unemployment and under employment. This alternative narrative to the accepted adherence to hard work within a meritocratic framework, seems to be less well voiced. The other side of the drive to go university is seldom raised. Is going to university worth it, does it give value for money? A recent YouGov poll would appear to raise concerns about the

numbers who felt the university experience did not represent value for money (Adams, 2022). In this rush to widen participation in higher education and its conflation with future employment, have we perhaps lost sight of the real purpose of education, which should be to develop and reward enquiring minds, rather than generate career opportunities?

The structure of the A-levels is deeply embedded in cultural capital which reinforces socio-cultural divides. The A-level qualification which was introduced in 1951 as a school leaving certificate to demonstrate a standard of education achieved. Since its introduction, the assessment format may have changed from the original Mandarin/ Civil Service exercise in narrative writing to include synoptic elements and the application of knowledge within the context of a terminal examination. The A-level structure and terminal examination format continue to confer an advantage on those who already of the advantage of social and cultural capital as illustrated within the case study centre for those students whose parents had degrees, professional occupations, and some experience of how the education game is played. They were able to offer informed help with subject choice and in supplying the language and knowledge which would assist an application. In addition, such families provided supporting home environments whose philosophy matched that of the school (Bernstein, 1971, Bernstein, 1973, Bernstein, 1975, Atkinson and Atkinson, 1985, Donnelly, 2015b).

It is not only that A-level subjects with their social-culturally approved content that confers advantage and disadvantage, but also it is the availability and choice of subjects which serve to discriminate. Historically, the development of grammar schools and universities were based on a knowledge of the classics including Greek and Latin. This adherence to subject tradition was incorporated into public and private schools and thus helped to continue the exclusive links between privileged schools and elite universities. The studying classical subjects remains absent from most state school curricula. Yet, if Greek and Latin are the basis upon which our western civilisation is based, then this is surely a shared cultural history and not one which should be the exclusive preserve of the rich; a preserve which continues to confer advantage on those who already have an advantage. The claims that Greek

and Latin are elitist is perhaps to miss the point, in that identifying them as such they are then accepted as being beyond the aspirations of ordinary students. The campaigning work of Edith Hall in trying to get classical studies and languages available in more mainstream provision can be seen both as an attempt to remove the exclusivity label associated with elite institutions, whilst also demonstrating that state school students are both interested in and are capable of achieving worthwhile results. Hall, along with Natalie Haynes in their activism to make classics available and accessible to a wider audience has an interesting historical parallel in the early developments of working class educational aspiration and development (Stead, 2015). Not surprisingly, because of the shortage of classically qualified personnel there is a shortfall of teachers available to teach the subject.[66]

The whole question of A-Levels and their periodic reforms, serves in many ways to reinforce the sieving process which reinforces advantage by using A-levels as an indicator of potential. The exams were never designed for this purpose. At best they can be seen as a record of previous achievement, which is not the same as identifying potential. Yet as the data shows, there is an association between independent schools and A-Level results which merely serve to illustrate the social divides along which English education operates (Weale, 2020) yet which, because the A-Levels are open to everyone are regarded as being fair.

Within the case study centre, the would-be students were free to select any combination of A-level subjects, subject to availability and timetabling restrictions. Yet, despite the amount of information available in connection with possible further study and career routes, choice for some students seemed little more than a personally subjective choice based on prevailing emotions at the time the choice was made. By contrast, when making a university choice the students seemed to be more focussed on a potential career pathway. What was discernible throughout the data generation was the impact parents, and to a lesser extent siblings had on decisions taken by sixth form students. No one single model was discernible, nor

[66] Interestingly, before the latest reforms which removed the A/S in Classical Studies, there was a tentative suggestion that the subject may have been offered as a potential elective along with IGCSE Latin.

was there any perceptible pattern to the shape that influence took. The issue of trust in parents was expressed more than once. In accepting the assumption that parents knew their child best and would want the best for their child, whatever that might be, does not really explain why parents were so influential. Could this be explained simply, in that during a time of uncertainty, a known and trusted source of support was the most reassuring way to face the uncertainty of the unknown?

Chapter Eight – Conclusions

In conclusion to this small single case study, a particularistic rather than universal approach was taken. The data generation process took an unconventional approach by allowing the participants to engage with many of the key themes associated with A-level study choice and preparation for university in an unfettered and unconstrained manner and one which was devoid of prescriptive questioning to produce a rich store house of data. The generated data, along with the subsequent analysis, have provided a valuable insight into some of the thoughts, concerns and processes which operate behind the scenes to influence decisions. Often the thoughts and concerns of the students about university admissions do not form part of the narrative and go unrecorded. The choice to use to the writings of Bourdieu provides some reflective explanations within a wider socio-cultural context for the research, proved to be invaluable for understanding many of the wider implications associated with culture and choice investigated in this the study. To understand the decision-making process from an individual perspective, Kahneman's research and findings provided very important and useful explanations which influence individual choice.

This pairing of two such different authorities may initially have seemed to be a little unusual, but as the incoming generated data arrived and was analysed, their ideas and explanations came together to provide a deeper understanding of key and important contributory factors influencing student choice.

Education within society is regarded in positive terms for both the individual and society, in that it has the potential to provide access to both social and economic advancement. Private provision operates side by side with state supported establishments. The former is more highly regarded than the latter which is felt to be

in need of closer scrutiny to ensure the required outcomes are achieved. This distinction confers advantage on students at private schools and has been a constant theme running throughout English education. In attempting to explain the different experiences and expectations associated with education, Bourdieu's analysis revolves around differential experiences in the acquisition and deployment of various forms of capital and cultures that have been acquired through a combination of access to power, wealth, social position along with the social contacts and connections to maintain the status quo. Bourdieu's ideas of misrecognition go some way to explain the acceptance by the disadvantaged of the unequal provision and rewards associated with education so that they are both accepted and regarded as just and fair. This interpretation can be regarded as being both deterministic and pessimistic. Yet, notwithstanding the restrictions placed on state school provision and students, there were indications from the centre that the students were not oblivious to these limitations under which the game was played, but for the lack of any alternative were obliged to accept the terms on offer. Thus, the degree of agency exercised by any one student is a product of the interplay between several interconnected capitals. This combination of societal factors greatly influences their habitus operating within the constraints imposed and exercised by the school, central government, and society.

Periodically, for a variety of reasons, attitudes about the role to be played by education and the way it is to be organised are changed. In adhering to the philosophies of market economics, both schools and universities are increasingly being held accountable against constantly changing targets. These targets have been introduced to help prepare young people to take their place in society at some future date. This research looked at just one aspect of educational policy, namely, widening participation and what factors were important for students when making decisions. The case study centre in achieving 'good' results for both its students and itself and appears to have met the externally imposed challenges. The findings from the generated data indicates that the students made choices which were both rational and pertinent for them. Although the sample was small and limited to one centre, there is sufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that the influence of parents, directly or indirectly, are the most significant players influencing decisions. However, quite how influence is defined, qualified or quantified is very difficult to

ascertain, but in so far as the students were concerned the help and support offered was felt to be of significance, even if as (Smith and Zhang, 2009) suggest the degree of helpfulness may have been inflated. Notwithstanding Smith and Zhang's qualification, the cultural and social capitals operational within the family, whether recognised or not by the students have, to a greater or lesser extent, been influential in the decision-making process.

The setting of the case study centre within a rural environment has added an extra factor which could influence decisions. Within the rural environment, local familial ties are significant factors in the socio-cultural environment and identified as locational capital (Holdsworth, 2009) which could influence choice. Historically, this 'County Bubble' may have acted as a restraint on students going outside the immediate location to further their studies. This does not seem to be as relevant today judging by the list of successful applications identified in the centre's returns for university destinations located throughout the country:

Aberystwyth, Anglia Ruskin, Bath, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, Chester, Coventry, Durham, East Anglia, Edinburgh, Essex, Falmouth, Gloucester, Huddersfield, Keele, Kings College London, Queen Mary London, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, Lincoln, Liverpool, Manchester, Northampton, Nottingham, Oxford (Brookes) Portsmouth, Sheffield, Solent, Southampton, Staffordshire, Suffolk, Surrey, Sussex, Teesside, and Warwick.

The county was very late in actually acquiring a university and in some ways correlates with Mangan's (Mangan et al., 2010) observation about an academic presence having an impact on the intellectual aspirations of the locality. Whilst for many respondents who expressed a wish to get away from the narrow restrictions associated with living in a rural area, it is significant that a sizeable number of students opted to study within a limited distance from home. From the student returns, there remains a strong proportion, one in eight, who have stayed within fifty-mile radius of the centre and home. Apportioning weightings to whether familial or locational capitals were the more important would not be easy, but are not both capitals to a greater or lesser extent inextricably interconnected? The ethos and ambience, plus the support procedures, operational within the centre, were in the main greatly appreciated and this also exerted an influence.

Thus, the key findings indicate, that whilst there may be many influences on an individual when making a choice, the most important has been the influence of the parents. Therefore, perhaps rather than looking at students as though they were individualist consumers exercising a utilitarian rationale which ties decisions and choice into economic rationality, perhaps more attention should be given to social and emotional considerations. The bond between parent and child, characterised by trust and wanting the best for their child which is based on a more intricate knowledge of the child, may offer a more telling explanation of the influences underpinning choice.

On reflection, the importance of influence, especially parental, whilst being mindful of the work and conclusions drawn by (Smith and Zhang, 2009) would seem to indicate that perhaps future research into what is understood and meant by influence would be an important development. Influence can have a powerful effect, both on individuals and circumstances. Such influence can be directly intentional or unintentional and can come from inanimate objects (university buildings and settings) as well as people (tutors, teachers, parents). What it requires is an openness to an influence and ultimately a consent to be influenced. In the case of parental influence an important context would be that of authority where there is an acceptance of greater knowledge of those with more experience. Which, when combined with a sense of wanting to agree with and be liked by those who we in turn like and respect. It is from these tentative developments that the influences are examined in a social context to confirm that the proposed action is appropriate.

The whole issue of influence is very subjective. What may be regarded as a positive influence for one person, may have the opposite impact on another person. In the end, however, these decisions and choices which were made by the students were based on their perceptions and understanding of parameters within which they were able to operate. Whilst accepting Roberts (Cited in White, 2007 : 3) observations that the idea of individual agency may have been somewhat overstated, nonetheless, for the students concerned, decisions and choices made were personally very important and were based on an acceptance of the undertakings

given by the school and universities that going to university was the next stage in their development.

A key finding was an acceptance of the externally imposed constraints which are concealed within the narrative that accompanies meritocracy and widening participation. Confusion can arise when the ideas of meritocracy and widening participation are conjoined. The assumption is that widening participation within a meritocratic society will be based on fairness and equality where intelligence and diligence will be rewarded with a university place. The resulting degree will provide entry to secure employment and a healthier and more prosperous lifestyle. This, as a societal ambition seems to be in keeping with the aspiration to make a fairer and more just society. With these improvements in education, qualification and occupation, social mobility will surely follow. Unfortunately, it is here that the narrative begins to fall apart. No doubt there will be some individuals can improve their social standing, but the idea that social mobility will follow for everyone is a not realistically possible. This transition would not take place for the vested interest of those in the group to be replaced would optimise their capitals to maintain their status (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Thus, this idea of social mobility within a wider political context is false, because in England, societal structures are based on hierarchical capitalism, which accepts degrees of inequality as an operational requirement. The believe that mobility and positional advancement in a highly competitive society is achievable through individual efforts and talent is the mechanism by which existing social hierarchies are maintained. This promise of movement acts to ensure the continuation of society by defusing challenges from the less advantaged whilst continuing to maintain the interest and status of the more socially advantaged. Traditionally, sponsored mobility would have allowed a small number of carefully selected individuals access to the upper echelons within society and thus address perceived shortfalls in occupational provision. When a shortage of qualified personnel was identified, recruitment from other ranks would be promoted to supply the required personnel. Thus, the idea of meritocracy and widening participation have cast the net wider to secure additional talents to meet the new challenges of a very competitive global world. Therefore, the idea of widening participation to fulfil labour shortages, especially based on merit, would seem to be a logical way forward.

It is necessary, perhaps at this stage, to clarify that the idea of widening participation which is to increase the opportunities for fairness and is not grounded in the ideas of equality. Yet the narrative that widening participation based on fairness of opportunity which leads to rewarding ability have become established as fact and is consolidated each time it is repeated.

'….the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 : xii)

It is Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition which goes some way to explain the continuation and acceptance of the narrative about meritocracy and social mobility through widening participation. Does this mean that schools contribute to social inequality whilst hiding their role in maintaining the status quo? Schools replicate cultural power by adopting the mores associated with the dominant group and power is exercised through rigid hierarchical structures. The history of English education has been and continues to be dominated by class and attitudes towards class.

When examining the concept of fairness, a little more closely, fairness should be seen in terms of fairness of opportunity to apply to university, rather fairness in outcomes. But when applying to university the disparity in fairness becomes more apparent in the application process where the lack of inherited cultural and social capitals makes its presence felt. The suggestion that admission to university is fair and open does not stand up to close scrutiny (Boliver, 2007, Boliver, 2011, Boliver, 2013, Boliver, 2015a, Boliver, 2015b, Boliver et al., 2015, Boliver, 2017) with the last referenced work identifying misplaced optimism being a result of accepting the narrative that the system is open and fair. Bourdieu and Passeron are of the view that schools are responsible for unsuspectingly reinforcing the status quo, by trying to protect their own interests as players in the hierarchy of educational provision. During the Interviews and conversations with staff, it was obvious that they took pleasure in the good results of their students which would enable progress to university, but at the same time they were also concerned that the good results would reflect well on them and thus ensure their position and the survival of the institution by remaining viable as a centre which delivers good results. Such an outcome being especially important in these times of increasing competition

between centres. Thus, schools can be seen as a processing unit which takes a raw material (the student) and then through several processes delivers potential university candidates. But rather than drawing the same conclusions as Bourdieu and Passeron's who attribute blame on the schools, I would suggest that although complicit, their agency is curtailed by the restrictions imposed by central government. Perhaps a more charitable definition of the role played by schools is that of Pajak (Pajak and Green, 2003) who suggested schools are rather like brokers:

" which provide information and advice in the form of recommendations based on experience and informed hunches about how clients should invest their money, but which cannot predict the specific outcomes with certainty because of the volatility of the marketplace and the fact that investment decisions are ultimately made by the client" (Pajak and Green, 2003).

Whilst the analogy is not strictly true, in that schools are tied in terms of accountability to the institutions of which they are members, whereas brokers are usually, but not always, independent, subject to the declaration of any involvement with the product advise they are offering; it does serve to illustrate that in preparing and advising the client (student), ultimate responsibility for the decision rests with the consumer and therefore they are distancing themselves, to some extent, if the final product does not quite match up to expectations.

For some students, the experience of applying and going into higher education, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds and lower socio-economic groups has proved to be both stressful and a less than satisfactory (Bhardwa, 2018). This research shows, that in an area which perhaps may have been seen as under-represented in the numbers traditionally going on to higher education, the narrative as expressed in the Browne Report (Browne, 2010) about the advantages of higher education has been accepted. The centre has worked professionally and imaginatively to support its students in their transition to higher education. Higher education institutions have responded to meet the challenges of widening participation as the universities have become consumerist units to attract and cater for fee-paying students. These changes in university provision have far reaching consequences, some of which have been critiqued by academics (Holmwood, 2011,

McGettigan, 2013, Collini, 2011, Collini, 2012, Collini, 2018, Collini, 2020). Apart from the fundamental shift from publicly funded universities to one where provision in the private sector has increased. In response to these changes university education is seen as a means securing a career (Hedges, 2010, Malik, 2022). Such developments were highlighted in The Browne Report which not only extolled higher education as the means to securing better employment prospects along with higher remuneration and job satisfaction, but also the associated benefits of increased health and opportunities for social mobility. These proffered benefits have become increasingly consolidated into the belief that students are consumers investing in their future. For many potential students, universities have become instrumental and are seen as the means of securing career, societal, and status rewards. This progression is a major driver for both parents and students, especially if access to a traditional and prestigious university can be achieved. Not only does access to a top university secure ‘a good all-round education’, but also provides an entree into the professions. By contrast, newer universities, lacking kudos and standing are desperate to recruit students onto their courses. The emphasis of these courses has increasingly become centred on offering work-based career courses to survive, In consequence, these developments at the newer universities are at the expense of the humanities. (Roehampton University intends to close anthropology, philosophy, classics, creating writing, and several other programmes to concentrate on practical skills and industry/employer requirements.) Is this reduction of university education to ‘training’ programmes doing nothing more than confirming the social standing of the students and the status of newer universities? There is some evidence to support the view that the Post-92 institutions are held in lower esteem (Yorke, 1998, Drennan and Beck, 2001, Read, 2003, Boliver, 2015a, Karran and Mallinson, 2019). Thus, access to higher education institutions reflects the class divide both within society and between providers, whilst at the same time hiding the realities of the narrative that open access leads to aspirational fulfilment and social mobility.

As the research developed and further readings and reflection followed, the long shadow cast by class over education in this country became more evident. With two systems running in parallel, and a pervasive narrative that private provision is better in every aspect, militates against students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In failing to acknowledge that the competition is unfairly matched even before the

child is born does not seem to enter the narrative. Further theorising and research by Bourdieu, and subsequently by several other educational researchers have referred to his ideas of misrecognition and doxa. In many ways, this research is the end of the beginning; for the next research ought to consider how in the field of education the game is played and how misrecognition continues to hold such a dominant role in education. Do people really accept the narrative that through widening participation the transition to university is based on merit and open competition in a fair and open manner, or are they merely taking advantage of what is on offer because there is no alternative within such a socially divided society?

The message about university education has been communicated clearly. The case study centre has risen to the challenge and secured high numbers of students going on to prestigious institutions, but is it now time to reflect on that message and what it really means for all those involved? Whilst universities aim to broaden the mind and develop intellectual and academic subject knowledge to secure employment, should they not also be looking to develop wisdom (Maxwell, 2009)? Schools have concentrated on gaining access to universities for their students without really knowing what qualities would make for an ideal student (Wong et al., 2023).Whilst there are a number of sources to highlight the criteria universities are looking for (Lewis, 2017, Stade, 2022), but perhaps schools and prospective students would benefit from the writings of several academics who provide a critique of some of the narratives accompanying the drive to get more students into deregulated higher education (Tight, 2009, Tight, 2012, Holmwood, 2011, Boliver, 2013, Boliver et al., 2015, Boliver, 2015b, Boliver, 2017, Collini, 2011, Collini, 2012, Collini, 2018, Collini, 2020). Schools are charged with the responsibility to get students into university, whether the schools would have the opportunity in a busy schedule to discuss the more theoretical and abstract aspects of going to university rather than just the practicalities of advising students on which university and how to complete the UCAS application, is perhaps a shortfall in the preparation stages. Yet such a policy of looking at the development and roles played by universities may reduce, if not totally prevent student dissatisfaction (Bhardwa, 2018, Bhardwa, 2020) which year-on-year averages at just under ten percent. Dropout rates, most commonly at some stage during the second year are averaging six point one percent (Roberts, 2018).

8.1 Observation

Case studies can be viewed as a microcosm of society, and whilst not exactly replicating the larger picture, they do provide an opportunity to hold up a mirror to the bigger societal picture and thus highlight key features. From features identified in the case study recommendations could be made and which, if enacted, could lead to improvements for students at this centre and other sixth forms.

This case study has confirmed that the process of applying to university is stressful and time consuming. From the data generated at the centre, the evidence reveals the dedication of the staff. The procedural and administrative system for processing the applications successfully met the expectations of the students and secured placement offers from a variety of institutions. The thesis question which set out to identify the greatest influence on young people when making decisions and deciding on an after school routeways, has been identified to reveal the important role played by parents.

8.2 Recommendations

Whilst recognising the impossibility of changing the education system itself and the futility of opposing so many powers and vested interest in the way education is currently viewed and provided, there are, two initiatives which have come through from the research. Neither initiative will overcome the problems of class-based inequality. Nor will the recommendations make the process any fairer, but they will hopefully make the application process less stressful for students and staff in schools and in consequence ease the transition into university.

Based on this research there is a case to answer with A-levels themselves and the role they play in deciding suitability for university and as a key element in the admissions process. Support is growing for the idea that A-levels are not really suited for the modern world, nor are they reliable indicators of academic potential. The longstanding social injustice associated with the prioritisation of academic over technical and vocational education could, it is argued be resolved with the introduction of a three-year baccalaureate which would also broaden, what currently is a narrow and restrictive curriculum (Carr, 2021, Hazell, 2021, Smith, 2021).

Adherence to the current system which merely records the advantages associated with socio-cultural capitals seems to be insufficiently flexible to meet the challenges of tomorrow. The independent think tank EDSK makes some thirteen recommendations for an all-embracing baccalaureate (Richmond, 2021) which will go some way to address the limitations associated with the present A-level system.

Notwithstanding the claim that the new A-levels would be more rigorous and designed to smooth the transition to higher studies, there has been an increase in the number of university courses which include an additional foundation year to off-set the perceived student shortfalls in the knowledge required for degree courses. Is this a recognition that A-levels are failing, in terms of their academic content and as a preparation for university level study? If they are falling short on content and skills for university then can they realistically be used as reliable predictors and component in the selection process for undergraduate admission? Widening participation aimed to make access to university fairer, and with many more students securing the A-level grades allowing them to apply to university more university places were constructed. University expansion can be seen partly in terms of accommodating the greater number of A-level qualified students, but they can also be viewed as means to secure significant contributions to university finances. One of the provisions made by universities in response to allegations that private schools were overrepresented was to adopt the idea of contextual evidence to provide opportunities to include those students, who for a variety of reasons had not achieved the tariff grades. The additional year for the students admitted on contextual evidence could be viewed as an opportunity to make good any gaps in their knowledge and understanding. By reaching out to those students who might traditionally been denied the opportunity to study at a higher, could this be seen as a positive contribution to widen participation and thereby address some of the inequalities associated with fair access to higher education[67]? Or again, could it be

[67] Questions of fairness are philosophically difficult to answer – is there more injustice done by treating equals unequally than there is by treating unequals equally? Concern has been expressed by private education providers who are now of the opinion that their students are at a disadvantage when applying to UK universities and some of the higher fee-paying schools are actively promoting applications to overseas universities, in particular North America
PATON, G. 2013. More private school pupils applying to foreign universities. *The Telegraph* [Online]. Available: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10308834/More-private-school-pupils-applying-to-foreign-universities.html.

that in times of economic hardship, a feepaying student with an extra year is to be welcomed as a supply of additional income?

Secondly, again based on discussions in the research case study centre, there is support for the idea that a post qualification admission system would be fairer for students. By removing the stress and uncertainty associated with the current system, which occurs during the students busy academic and examination preparation time, the students at this centre, felt a post qualifications process would enable them concentrate on their academic studies (Parr, 2020). Armed with their grades, students in a post qualification application process would be able to more accurately target universities which best match their results. In defence of the current system, responses made in the EDSK consultation document (EDSK, 2021), whilst welcoming in principle a post qualification admission system, highlights the potential chaos that would ensue in trying to get the admissions sorted and in place for an October start at university. Whilst the observations are noted, could this be another example of UCAS acting as a behemoth protecting its own position and interests? If answers are framed in the same context in which the questions were posed, then it is unlikely there will be anything other than a compromise of dubious value. Perhaps there may be some merit in delaying the university start date until January with the seventh term of school being devoted to preparation for university and/or apprenticeships.

In conversations with the senior management team prior to starting the research, the centre has engaged the services of two former teaching colleagues to help prepare students for university. Ideas expressed in this research which identified the value of speaking to and with someone who has experience and knowledge of how universities operate, and function was regarded as a positive step. It was felt that better informed guidance would be of great assistance to the students and teachers at the centre. The research findings at the centre would seem to indicate that the kind of support identified in the work undertaken by CSJ (CSJ, 2020) would benefit students enormously. The appointment and services of a dedicated personal

WOOLCOCK, N. 2022. Private school pupils turn backs on Oxbridge to chase Ivy League places. *The Times* [Online]. Available: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/private-school-pupils-turn-backs-on-oxbridge-to-chase-ivy-league-places-zdk83cs7r.

adviser, appointed as a non-teaching member of staff, who would have responsibility to keep abreast of developments and changes at university and keeping staff and students fully informed about university developments, would be a very positive and welcome addition to the centre.

8.3 Limitations

This study based on a single centre and a small number of respondents is open to several criticisms, not least for its lack of statistical relevance. Yet the aim and purpose of the research was not to identify correlations or associations, but rather to provide a snapshot of a working sixth form preparing students for university within the wider context of English educational provision. The main thrust of the research was to identify the most important factors influencing any one individual's decisions. I am not convinced that greater numbers would have increased the range and scope of responses to alter the confirmation of the thesis. Confined to one example of what turned out to be a successful centre was certainly a limiting factor, and whilst a running dialogue with other centres, if not a complete comparison, would have been helpful in terms of expanding the reservoir of experiences to draw on. Considering the findings which showed the importance of parental influence it would have been particularly useful to have had the opportunity to interview parents both separately and with their children. The resultant familial intergenerational conversations would have provided evidence of first-hand experiences rather simply student recollection and accounts. This last limitation is perhaps the most important. Unfortunately, the logistics of arranging such meetings would have imposed severe limitations on the research. It would also have required some adjustment, if not redesign, of the research methodologies and approach.

8.4 Impact on my own thinking

A combination of background reading and the opportunity to talk formally and informally to staff and students, has provided an opportunity to re-assess my perceptions of both the role I played and the value of educational provision for young people. Considering the difficulty many students faced when selecting A-levels having studied a much wider range of GCSE subjects, raises the question whether it is time to abandon A-levels and replace them with a baccalaureate

matriculation diploma? The re-thinking of the curriculum, its purpose, construction, delivery, and assessment would, I feel, be a timely response to the many changes which are taking place economically, socially as well in terms of knowledge creation. Such ideas are not new and have been voiced by others (Carr, 2021, Hazell, 2021, Smith, 2021, Richmond, 2021), but would go some way to address issues associated with the integration and provision for the 14-19 curriculum to include a community component along with a broader range of subjects and assessment levels. The new qualification to include the arts, humanities, MFL, maths and science which would be a move away from early subject specialisation, and thus help to create a more rounded confident and self-aware young person.

The research revealed strong support for taking the university applications process out of the academic schooling year and using the following autumn term, prior to starting their university studies or apprenticeships in January. Rather in keeping with my own observations, a post qualification application process would reduce one of the main sources of pressure on the university application process (Parr, 2020).

The guidance offered to the students at St Pauls, if extended to all students, not just university preparation but also to include careers advice based on an individual and personal level, would have enormous benefits to all concerned parties. The value of the role played by a mentor would, as identified in similar research, which looked into the key factors influencing university choice in Malaysia (Connie et al., 2022), have the potential to be helpful.

8.4 Further Research

This current research has been both thought provoking and humbling at the same time. In many ways this research represents the first stage in what ideally would be a series of follow-up research programmes looking into the relevance and impact of the sixth form and its provision on subsequent experiences as a graduate and later in their employment. Findings and conclusions from such a longitudinal study would provide an opportunity to reflect on the centre's provision, and in so doing identify ways to improve the service offered by the centre.

Another development for future research would be to investigate how parents view the system of educational provision along with the factors shaping that provision with particular attention to how fairness and appropriateness of the provision is understood and assessed, and how such knowledge can influence and have an impact on their children's futures.

The final area for further research suggested by these findings would be to undertake a more in-depth study of what we mean and understand by 'influence'. Influence is both difficult to explain how it operates and how it functions. Influence can have an important effect on a person's beliefs, understandings, and resultant actions, either directly or indirectly, towards a goal. Influence may not always be intentional, nor necessarily positive, and can be seen as a form of compliance in terms of getting someone to do what you want them to do. Ascertaining and measuring the effect of influence would present a major problem for future research. Earlier research which used proxy indicators of GPA and father influence seems both a little crude and somewhat tenuous; however, because influence is so subjective, any objective evaluation is going to be that much more difficult to isolate, record and measure.

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Appendices

My notes on Options 2014 The Student Room Online Survey Geall J. Aug 2014

4 & 5 Executive Summary –

Not go to university:
– debt 65,
earn money 42,
go back at later stage 40,
don't want to study anymore 28
not relevant to career 25

Go to university
Improve career 85
Interest in chosen sub 82
gaining independence 28

Expectations
Strong expectation 77
parents 45
teachers 19
social network 8

Sources of information
Most useful info
uni open days 54
uni websites 51
prospectuses 41
UCAS website 30

Family background
Neither parent to uni 49
family income below 25K 37

First Questionnaire

1. Motivation for applying
   What are the key reasons you decided to go to university?
   Please select the 3 most important reasons
   - Improved long-term career prospects
   - Interest in chosen subject
   - Gain independence from home
   - Mental stimulation
   - Make new friends
   - Have a good time
   - Improved short-term career prospects (e.g) getting your first permanent job)

Socialising
Access to another course

What are the key reasons you decided not to go to university?
Select the 3 most important

Too expensive / don't want to be saddled with debt
Want to get on and start earning
Can go back to university later if I need it
Don't want to study any more
Not very relevant to my future career
I will study part-time
Couldn't find a course I wanted to study
Don't have the grades / qualifications to do the course I wanted
Advice from parents / friends

2. Careers jobs

What has been most effective in convincing you to pursue a particular career?
Select one response

Talking to people in the industry
Performing work experience / internships
Talking to careers advisors / tutors
Talking to students or recent graduates
Reading professional body websites / trade press
Reading employer websites
Television documentaries
Job recruitment adverts

How confident are you that your chosen course will help you secure a job?

3. Information

Do you feel you had enough information, or advice on how your choice of subjects in
A2, BTEC, etc. might affect your future options?

What are the most useful sources of information / advice when researching university
choices? Select up to 3
University open days
University websites
Prospectus / Prospectuses
The Student Room
UCAS website
School advisors / teachers
Guardian University Guide
Other published league tables
The Times Good University Guide
Family
Friend

Do you think youI had enough information on alternatives to university?

Do you feel you had enough information, or advice on how your choice of subjects in A2, BTEC, etc. might affect your future options?

4. Influences on Choice

Who made the strongest impression on you are to what you should do after school / college? Select 1 response
Parents
Subject Teacher
Friends
Website s/ social networking
Head of Year / 6th Form
Employers / Potential Employers
Careers Advisor
Head Teachers
Other

If you have used university-related social media channels please indicate their usefulness
The Student Room (any pages)
The Student Room (University Official
Representative Service)
Youtube
University Facebook pages
University Twitter feeds
Instagram
Google+
Tumblr
Flickr

5. Fees

How do you feel about university tuition fees? Please select 1 statement
I'll just deal with repaying them once I start earning
I'm not looking forward to having the debt hanging over my head for years
I'm not bothered by tuition fees at all
I'm seriously worried about whether I can afford to go to / remain at university
It's simply the price you pay for having a good time
I made sure I chose a university with low tuition fees
I won't be going to / remaining at university because of tuition fees

6. Widening experiences

Which of the following factors apply to you?
Neither of your parents went to university
Your household income is less than £25,000pa
You are from a minority ethnic background
Have you received any of the following types of university access support?
I attended an 'Aim higher' workshop, or another event, organised by a university to give an idea of what studying at university would be like
A university encourages me to apply for a bursary /scholarship

A university offered me a bursary, scholarship or fee waiver
I attended a study event, or summer school at a university to help achieve the grades to apply for a university course
A university guaranteed me an interview or made a reduced entry grade offer
A university offered me a preparation course or additional tution

Which, if any, of these activities made a difference to your decision of whether to go to university
Aim Higher or another university taster event
Bursary / Fee waiver
Preparation / Tuition
Study Event / Summer School to improve grades
Guaranteed interview
Compact arrangements regarding special arrangements for accepting lower grades

7. Overseas study
   Did you consider, or would you consider, studying abroad?
   If so where and why?

Questionnaire - Sixth-form Studies (6.1)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/184XMQp-KpP8ExzUQHz0kDTIxv0HIjdC3KBw3nszColY/edit

Questionnaire - After A-Levels (6.2)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1m1gcvcmRZhN_OG0IpRyiDNMJK6R0Vp7hP_Uak1jybIw/edit

Questionnaire - Going to university (6.3)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1IASbDDr6iqwAxzatobNp0IBW0xsMFTUdETn6aoh_oFo/edit

Sixth-form Studies

Dear Student,

The choice of subjects at A level and their possible impact on future university and career choices can be very significant. Currently I am undertaking some research which looks at the impact of the changes to university admissions from the point of view of students' understanding and perceptions of what it means to go to university I am also interested in your views on the entire UCAS experience. Your responses will provide the necessary data for a research project into sixth-form experiences, your preparation for university application and the transition to university are important

Please record your thoughts in the boxes which ask for more details. All such information will be kept confidential and your anonymity will be respected under BERA and BSA codes of practice and the rules and regulations of the university which underpin all research.

Your contributions will be very much appreciated.

This research is conducted under the auspices of the University of East Anglia and is supervised by Emeritus Professor John Elliott and Dr. Spyros Themelis. The work will be undertaken by Stephen Hilditch (Postgraduate researcher) to whom any questions about the research should be addressed.

Thank you for your support and assistance.

Regards,

Stephen Hilditch

* Required

1. Current studies *

Please indicate why you decided to go into the sixth-form.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] To improve my qualifications
- [ ] Wanted to learn more about my subjects
- [ ] It was expected that I should stay on at school
- [ ] All my friends were staying on to take A levels
- [ ] Other: _____

2. A level subject choices *

Please indicate the reasons for choosing your A level subjects.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Interested in the subject
- [ ] I liked the teacher
- [ ] Qualification needed for future career
- [ ] Qualification needed for university admission
- [ ] Other: _____

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/184XMQp-KpP8ExzUQHz0kDTIxv0HIjdC3KBw3nszColY/edit

3. Influences *

Please indicate the influences behind your subject choices.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] GCSE results
- [ ] Family (Immediate)
- [ ] Family (Relations)
- [ ] Friends (School)
- [ ] Friends (Outside School)
- [ ] Teacher (Subject)
- [ ] Careers staff
- [ ] Social media
- [ ] Other: _____

4. Making Choices *

What, if any, additional help and support do you think would have been helpful when choosing your A level subjects?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Current motivation and experiences *

On the scales below please indicate by selecting one of the values which best reflects your position. Value 1 indicates you strongly agree with the first statement on the left, whilst 5 at the other end of the scale means you strongly disagree with the opening statement.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
I am enjoying my sixth-form studies Strongly agree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Strongly disagree

6. Subject choices *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
I am pleased with my A level choices	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I think I made a mistake

7. Work expectations *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
The amount of work required are what I expected	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Not what I expected at all

8. Standard of work *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
The standard of A level work is harder than I expected	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	The standard of A level work is easier than I expected

9. Pressure *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel under too much pressure to complete work and get the grades	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I am thriving on the experience

10. Additional information

For any of the four scaled responses above, you have the opportunity to record any additional thoughts and/or concerns.

11. After A levels *

Please indicate where you intend to go after the sixth-form.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Employment
- ◯ Gap year
- ◯ Apprenticeship
- ◯ FE - college
- ◯ HE - university
- ◯ Other

12. After A levels *

This is your opportunity to give more details for your choice in the previous question.

13. Influences on your after A level choices *

It is possible that more than one of the following influences, to varying degrees, are applicable. Please select all those which are applicable. There is space to provide a more detailed response below.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Adult family members
- [ ] Siblings
- [ ] Other family members
- [ ] Friends in school
- [ ] Friends outside school
- [ ] Teachers
- [ ] Careers guidance
- [ ] Future employers
- [ ] University/college staff
- [ ] Other: _____

14. Influences on your after A level choices

Please give details of the way that some/any or all of the above influenced your decision.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

15. How prepared do you feel to take up the challenges after the sixth-form? *

Please indicate on the scale and then use the following space to give details.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel very confident to meet the challenges	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I feel very apprehensive

16. How prepared do you feel to take up the challenges after the sixth-form? *

This is your opportunity to give more details.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

17. What kind of information and advice would be most helpful when making a decision about what to do after the sixth-form and A levels? *

Whilst your choice is restricted in the grid below, please indicate your priorities and then use the space below the grid to expand on your choice.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Teacher	Tutor	Careers	Employers	Universities
Information	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Advice	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Support	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

18. Information and advice - your response *

This is your opportunity to outline the kind of assistance which would be most valuable to you:

After A levels and the sixth-form

Thank you for completing the first questionnaire and agreeing to complete this second request for data

* Required

1. Future pathways *

Please indicate in the table below which pathway you will be following and then give further details in the appropriate text box.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Employment
- ◯ Gap year
- ◯ Apprenticeship
- ◯ FE college
- ◯ HE university
- ◯ Other: _____

2. Employment

Please give details of the kind of employment you are about to enter, what kind of work you will be doing and whether there will be any training and recognised qualifications to go with your training.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Gap year

Please give details of what you intend to do and whether it is your intention to return to education.

4. Apprenticeship

Please give details about your scheme and how you found out about the opportunity.

5. FE college

Please give details of the course for which you have applied/been accepted, including course outline and qualifications.

6. HE university

Please give details of the course for which you have applied/been accepted, including course outline and qualifications.

7. Other

Please give details of your alternative to the above pathways.

Going to University

This questionnaire requests more detailed reasons for wanting to go to university and how the sixth-form provision can be improved and developed. The more detail you can provide the more the support can be offered.

* Required

1. Reasons for wanting to go to University *

Please complete the grid by making sure each row contains an entry.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Very Important	Not that important	Unimportant
It will improve my employment prospects	◯	◯	◯
It is required for my chosen career	◯	◯	◯
It will improve my earning capacity	◯	◯	◯
It will be stimulating and interesting	◯	◯	◯
It is something I have always wanted to do	◯	◯	◯
I want to carry on studying	◯	◯	◯
It is expected of me	◯	◯	◯
I want to put off working for as long as possible	◯	◯	◯
For the social life	◯	◯	◯
To become independent	◯	◯	◯

2. Choosing a course *

Please select the aspects which are most important for you when selecting a course of study.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Subject coverage
- [ ] Reputation of the university
- [ ] Reputation of the lecturers
- [ ] Assessment criteria
- [ ] Further study at the same institution
- [ ] Other: _____

3. Choosing a course

Please expand on your answer(s) to the previous question.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Choosing the university *

Please indicate those factors which are important.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Distance from home
- [ ] Campus university
- [ ] Urban University
- [ ] Geographical location
- [ ] Traditional
- [ ] New
- [ ] Student accommodation
- [ ] Student facilities
- [ ] Student support
- [ ] Reputation
- [ ] Other: _____

5. Choosing the university *

For each of the items ticked above, please explain why those aspects are important for you.

6. Helping you to choose..... *

Please indicate those areas which you think would be most helpful when making a decision.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] University prospectus
- [ ] University websites
- [ ] Social media
- [ ] Sixth-form staff
- [ ] Teachers
- [ ] University Open Days
- [ ] University visits
- [ ] Other:

7. Helping you to choose....

Please comment on the strengths and weaknesses for each item ticked above.

8. Worries and concerns about going to university *

Please identify any areas where additional support and guidance would be helpful.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ What if I do not get the grades?
- ◯ Is this the right course for me
- ◯ Will I be able to cope with the demands of the course
- ◯ Will I be able to fit in to university living
- ◯ What if I don't like my course
- ◯ Other: _____

9. Worries and concerns about going to university

Please give details for each item ticked in the list above.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

10. Financial worries and concerns

Please indicate concerns about the financial implications of going to university.

Check all that apply.

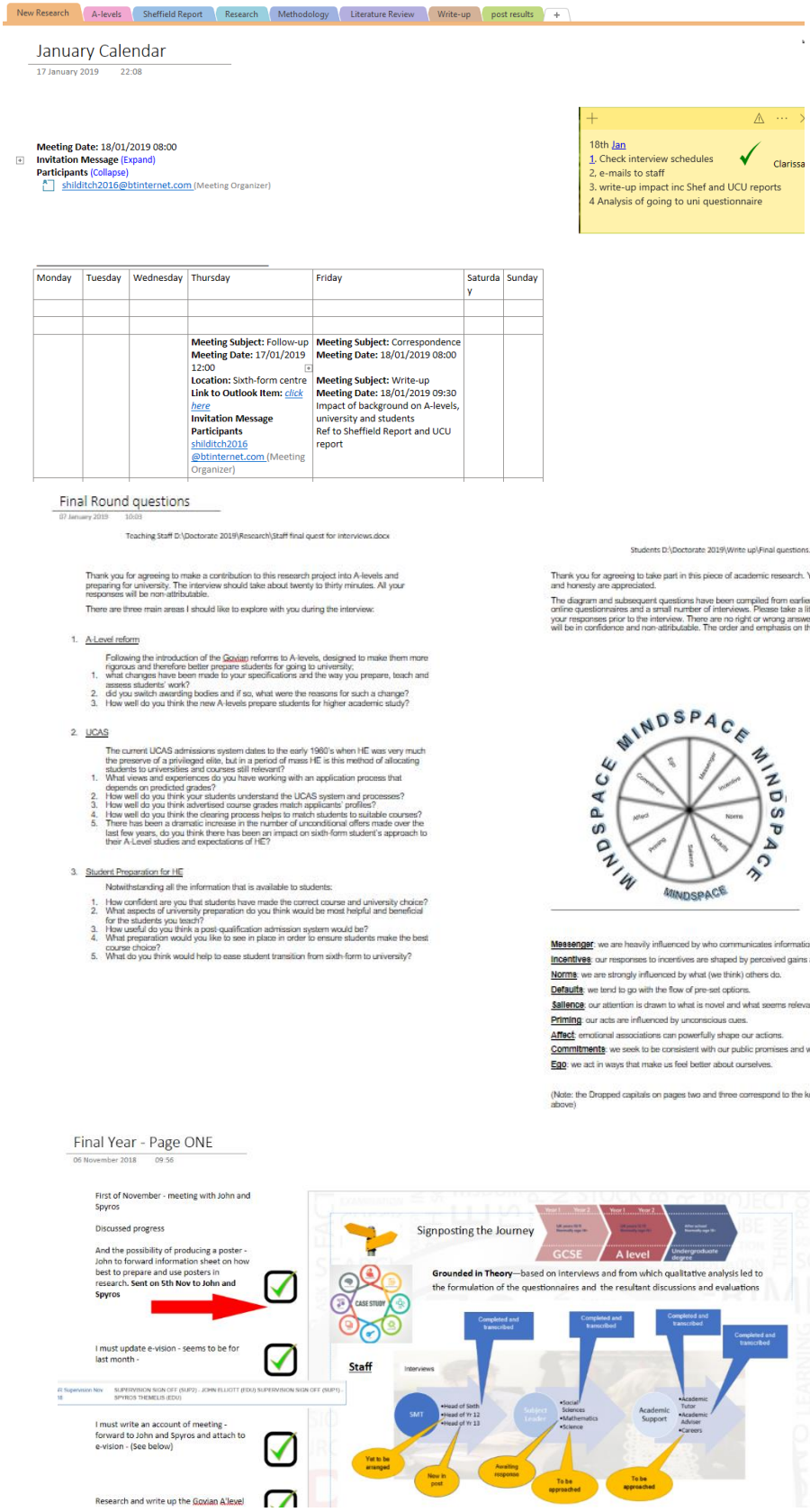
- ☐ Fees
- ☐ Loans
- ☐ Bursaries
- ☐ Additional and unexpected costs
- ☐ Debt
- ☐ Part-time work
- ☐ Other: _____

11. Financial worries and concerns

Please give more details for each of the items ticked above.

Research Tracking - OneNote

The following sample of screen shots are taken from the research record:



New Research | A-levels | Sheffield Report | Research | Methodology | Literature Review | Write-up | post results | +

January Calendar

17 January 2019 22:08

Meeting Date: 18/01/2019 08:00
Invitation Message (Expand)
Participants (Collapse)
shilditch2016@btinternet.com (Meeting Organizer)

18th Jan
1. Check interview schedules
2. e-mails to staff
3. write-up impact inc Shef and UCU reports
4 Analysis of going to uni questionnaire

Clarissa

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
			Meeting Subject: Follow-up **Meeting Date:** 17/01/2019 12:00 **Location:** Sixth-form centre **Link to Outlook Item:** *click here* **Invitation Message** **Participants** shilditch2016 @btinternet.com (Meeting Organizer)	**Meeting Subject:** Correspondence **Meeting Date:** 18/01/2019 08:00 **Meeting Subject:** Write-up **Meeting Date:** 18/01/2019 09:30 Impact of background on A-levels, university and students Ref to Sheffield Report and UCU report		

Final Round questions

07 January 2019 10:03

Teaching Staff D:\Doctorate 2019\Research\Staff final quest for interviews.docx

Thank you for agreeing to make a contribution to this research project into A-levels and preparing for university. The interview should take about twenty to thirty minutes. All your responses will be non-attributable.

There are three main areas I should like to explore with you during the interview:

1. A-Level reform

   Following the introduction of the Govian reforms to A-levels, designed to make them more rigorous and therefore better prepare students for going to university:
   1. what changes have been made to your specifications and the way you prepare, teach and assess students' work?
   2. did you switch awarding bodies and if so, what were the reasons for such a change?
   3. How well do you think the new A-levels prepare students for higher academic study?

2. UCAS

   The current UCAS admissions system dates to the early 1960's when HE was very much the preserve of a privileged elite, but in a period of mass HE is this method of allocating students to universities and courses still relevant?
   1. What views and experiences do you have working with an application process that depends on predicted grades?
   2. How well do you think your students understand the UCAS system and processes?
   3. How well do you think advertised course grades match applicants' profiles?
   4. How well do you think the clearing process helps to match students to suitable courses?
   5. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of unconditional offers made over the last few years, do you think there has been an impact on sixth-form student's approach to their A-Level studies and expectations of HE?

3. Student Preparation for HE

   Notwithstanding all the information that is available to students:
   1. How confident are you that students have made the correct course and university choice?
   2. What aspects of university preparation do you think would be most helpful and beneficial for the students you teach?
   3. How useful do you think a post-qualification admission system would be?
   4. What preparation would you like to see in place in order to ensure students make the best course choice?
   5. What do you think would help to ease student transition from sixth-form to university?

Students D:\Doctorate 2019\Write up\Final questions.docx Pre release I

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this piece of academic research. Your time, commitment and honesty are appreciated.

The diagram and subsequent questions have been compiled from earlier responses to the online questionnaires and a small number of interviews. Please take a little time to reflect on your responses prior to the interview. There are no right or wrong answers. Everything you say will be in confidence and non-attributable. The order and emphasis on the topics are not set.

Messenger: we are heavily influenced by who communicates information.
Incentives: our responses to incentives are shaped by perceived gains and losses.
Norms: we are strongly influenced by what (we think) others do.
Defaults: we tend to go with the flow of pre-set options.
Salience: our attention is drawn to what is novel and what seems relevant to us.
Priming: our acts are influenced by unconscious cues.
Affect: emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions.
Commitments: we seek to be consistent with our public promises and we reciprocate acts.
Ego: we act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves.

(Note: the Dropped capitals on pages two and three correspond to the key themes identified above)

Final Year - Page ONE

06 November 2018 09:56

First of November - meeting with John and Spyros

Discussed progress

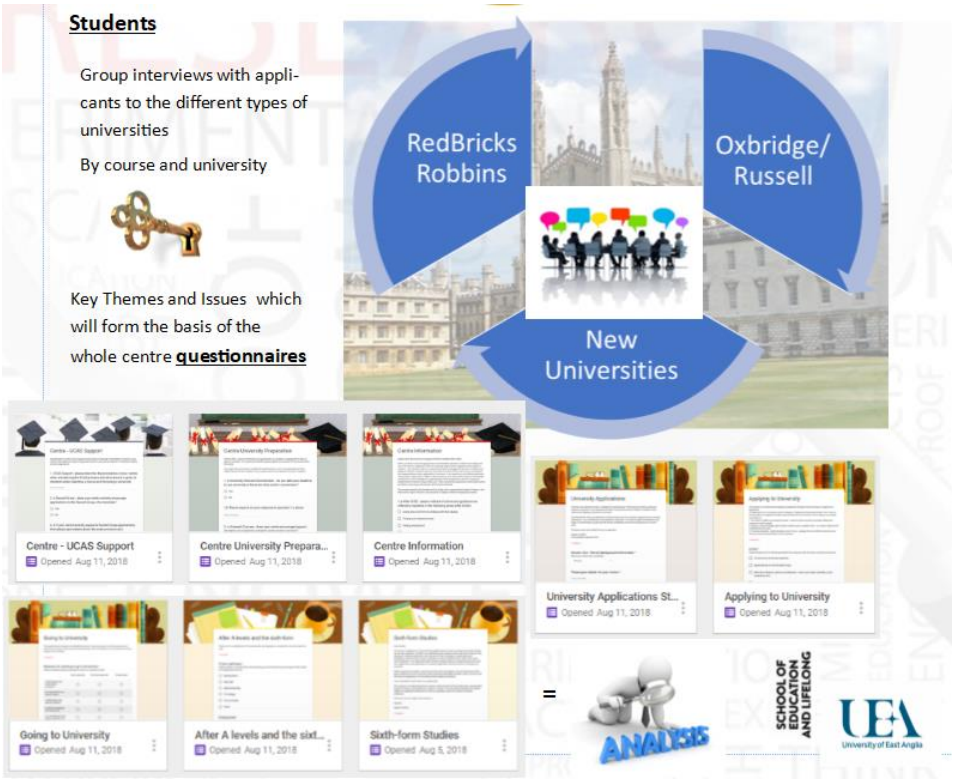
And the possibility of producing a poster - John to forward information sheet on how best to prepare and use posters in research. **Sent on 5th Nov to John and Spyros**

I must update e-vision - seems to be for last month -

I must write an account of meeting - forward to John and Spyros and attach to e-vision - (See below)

Research and write up the Govian A'level

Grounded in Theory—based on interviews and from which qualitative analysis led to the formulation of the questionnaires and the resultant discussions and evaluations



Going to university exercised many column inches in a variety of newspapers

Increasing numbers of young people are seeking help due to exam results stress.

www.independent.co.uk

A-level results day 2018: University uptake for STEM subjects flat despite more A-level entries

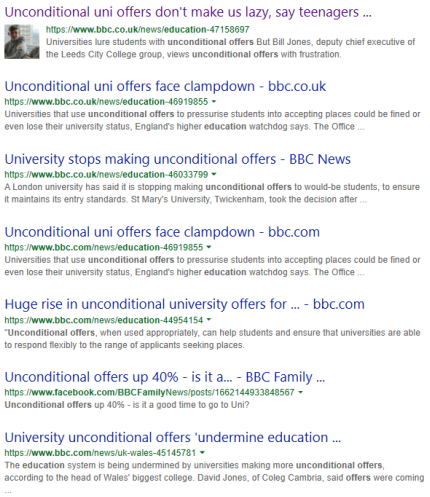
www.itpro.co.uk

The narrow sixth-form focus has served the universities, because they operate a three-year degree course model. For this to work, universities need students to arrive already fairly advanced in their chosen study. A levels were introduced precisely for the purpose of qualifying school students for admission to undergraduate study. They were not intended to be a national school leaving exam; they were designed as an admission ticket to higher education. But for want of something better (or an alternative with parity of esteem), they have become the national school leaving qualification.

So, our sixth form curriculum model exists simply because it can (given the existence of GCSE) and because it works for higher education, not because it necessarily makes educational sense. The reduction of the sixth form curriculum to a narrow set of academic specialisms represents a form of educational mortmain *(is the perpetual, inalienable ownership of real estate by a corporation or legal institution; the term is usually used in the context of its prohibition.)*

From <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortmain>

And featured quite prominently in the broadcast media:



And was the subject of research:

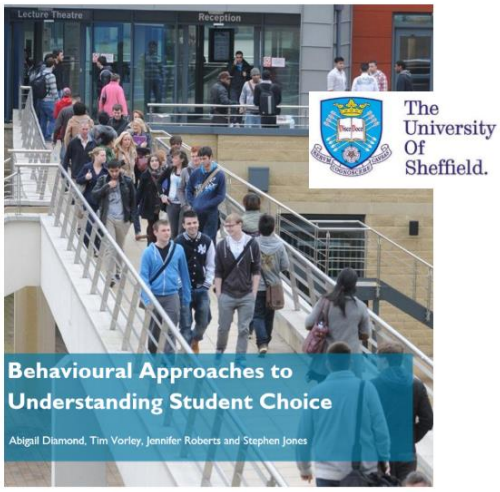
The link between secondary school characteristics and university participation and outcomes

CAYT Research Report

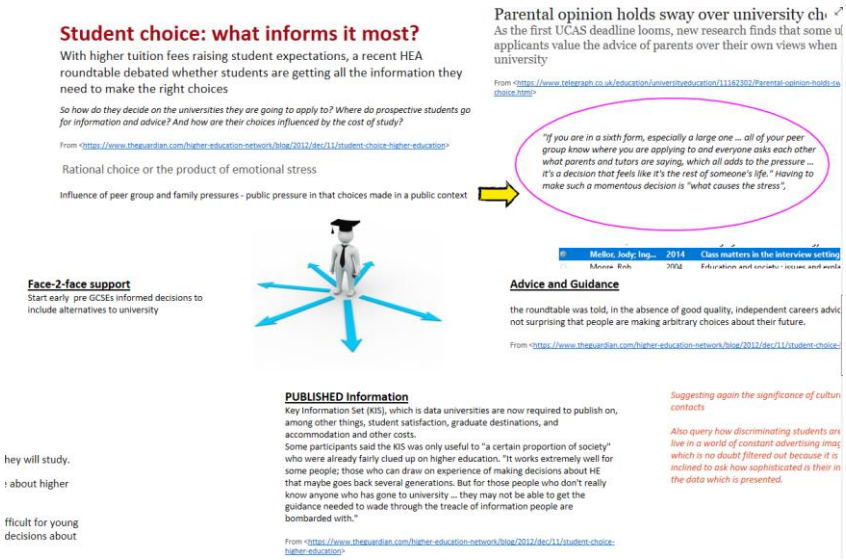
June 2014

Claire Crawford – Institute for Fiscal Studies and University of Warwick

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/student_choice.pdf



Planning an overview which incorporated key issues raised in the media and literature:



Using colour coded Excel to track, map and develop follow-up strategies:

Time	Interviewer	Respondent	Key elements	Implications	Follow-up	Followed-up
00.06	*let's get straight on with this and how much change has there been to all the syllabuses that you are involved with because you are responsible for several subjects aren't you*	Ok I'll go through each subject there has been quite a lot of change in all of the subjects except for I think Economics which changed before I arrived here and so that actually has been a new teacher rather than a new syllabus and we are introducing it for the first time so there would have been no change Business we have moved to an applied general course	A-level and general applied course	Recognition that sixth-form is not just traditional academic subjects but also catering for those who are not necessarily thinking about university	Check with academic tutor about the kind of support available to these students	there is a difference between INFORMATION which is freely av sources and ADVICE which is much more specific and person ce Which sources of information are re sought and valued? Who provides the advice and in what context? How do students value and regard information and advice?
00.52	*Why?*	Where I was at my last school we found that if you offered economics and business studies you got really the brighter ones tended to opt for economics and then you got this kind of broad cross section of business A-level candidates but they tended to be lower in ability and in motivation to the A-level and the applied course is more... well it is coursework element and it is assessed, more modular and more about studying business, a business, one at a time rather than sort of generic theories that no business really uses so they I think they relate to it more so then introduced it. Applied business was just more relevant to study specific businesses rather than... the abstract theories and um... the results were good in my last school so introduced that here and so again a new teacher so again a new experience change because he wanted to do it and he was into it and...	Course level differentiation with reference to student and assessment regimes PLUS teacher input	What information and advice is given and by whom –	Information at Open evening with more specific advice being offered to student when selecting courses	
02.03		Sociology, had, ...this will be their first year of a whole spec change through because they had their changes in 2015 and I don't think in terms of content Sociology there is massive change, it is more in terms of the focus on ..more difficult questions really... and more synoptic questions umm so that their kind of major issues.	"More difficult questions - more synoptic questions"	Teaching methods and teaching to the new type of exam – synoptic questions are often presented in a less structured format than modular type of questions – a removal of the scaffolding which frames the question in stages – therefore in addition to relational knowledge and how it all fits together, there is a greater need to understand and use the vocabulary	Check with other departments to see if they have similar experiences with the new assessment format	Information from maths informal discussion tends support the idea and fear was expressed they may not have the vocabulary to interpret the question, but they can do the questions it is just that they find it easier when it is broken down into stages.

Analysis:

Questionnaire - rationale and design

The responses were configured in such a way that respondent could indicate a number of influences on their decisions to study in the sixth-form and their choice of subjects. Then there was an opportunity for individuals to elaborate on their choices.

Some indication that the choice of subjects reflected an awareness of the role that A-levels could play when applying to university and/or the requirements for certain subjects when a particular career pathway was being followed

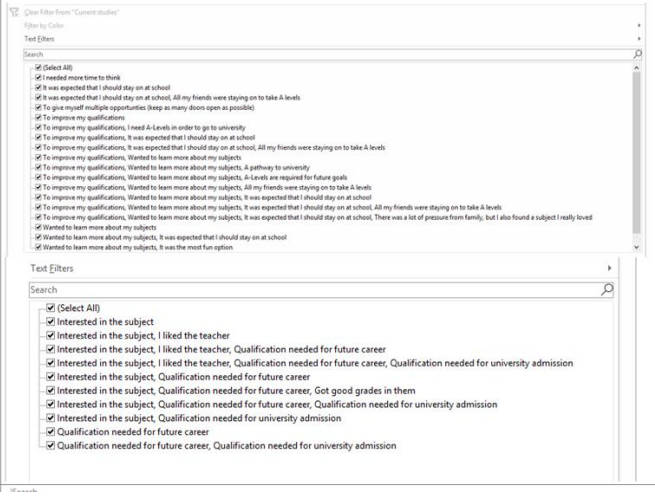
The first trawl through the returns are based on 74 returns

25 Interest in subject
16 Interested in subject and Qualifications needed for future career
15 Interested in subject Qualification needed for future career Qualification needed for University admission
04 Interest in subject and Qualification for university

Findings and comments

For some respondents the answer was straightforward and clear cut with slightly more emphasis being placed on subject interest, rather than the purely instrumental improving qualifications.

Of note were the combination of choices with two and three reasons being given. Whether such responses reflect deeper individua considerations of the those factors they thought had been contributary, or merely reflective of uncertainty and an inability to make choice is not within the scope of this research.
The filter shows the combination of responses



Time	Interviewer	Respondent	Key elements	Implications	Follow-up	Followed-up
	Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed into this topic which is of some concern tome and has been for a long time what I am basically interested in is how students are prepared for university and whether we ought to think about changing the way they are applying to and admitted to university Ok so following the recent changes Mr Gove has announced to A-levels what has been your experience in your subject as far as the syllabus changes are concerned?	mmmmm There is a different approach to some maths questions umm so for example in maths we now have a modelling component and there is more emphasis on proof so there are changes to the way I teach in that I alw ays make sure I do some modelling questions and we do some proof questions um	1. More practical 2. Teaching tow ards the syllabus	Is there full depth and understanding?		
01:08						
	How does that differ from what went before then?	There was less emphasis on modelling questions so mm we just didn't do so many of them... they came up every now and again...				
	So what does modelling mean, what does it entail?	So it is applying what applying a mathematical procedure that you learn in the abstract really not without understanding you learn with understanding of why it w orks numerically and algebraically perhaps and then its its setting up a real v orld situation which is alv ays very ... what it the word I am looking for ..... I don't like them because in	Less academic more practical			
	They are artificial	yes that's the word I am looking for so an artificial situation in which someone w ants to investigate something or has decided that the time rises and falls according to this trigonometric function can you find the maximum height, what time does it occur bladde blahde blah so... so umm yes so they are contrived that is the word I am looking for..				
		but quite useful to see how of course at this stage the modelling has to be very simplified because the mathematics they know is more simplified so that is where the contivedness comes in a bit I think, but it is useful for them to see how what they are learning could be applied to real v orld problems but because it is now a sort of defined assessment target in the new A-level it means we can know that five out of every fifteen questions will be modelling questions where as in the old A-level modelling questions v ould turn up in that sort of topic where you would expect them to turn up like looking at exponential growth yes you are going to get something about profit or about bacteria growing in that but you are not going to get a modelling question in other areas of the syllabus now you might				
	One of the ideas behind Gove's changes w as that this would prepare students better for university do you think that is the case?	..... mmmm I think that .... um prepare them better for university maths or university in general?				
	Yes university maths in the first instance	I don't think it prepares them any better or any worse for university maths				

With additional Post-it notes as aide-memoirs as the work developed:

Changes - more information
Advice from subject teachers - not linked to career - general all round educated person
UCAS changed merely a process
Strength of tutor was also weakness
Open days - window on university life selective - call for esablishing links and contacts with university and student bodies
Prospectues - info
Relevance of A-Level subjects to uni - no preparation - different working expectations - harsher reality
Contribution - getting behind the facade
Process jumping through hoops
Lot more focus on getting through UCAS process
Going to university become more important

Calling into question the current admissions systems, which if it was ever appropriate would appear to be less relevant today, but is being increasingly justified because an alternative cannot be found, or the existing system has had too much time and money invested in the system to contemplate change
Questioning value and changing hierarchies of university status - degree devalued - **x-ref Wakeling York Uni**
Credential inflation
Funding - are universities being fair to students moving from elite to mass to universal ed? *everybody sensed the emotions I encountered, the treadmill of being in education....*
Question of choice with everything now structured and geared towards uiversity
Sixth-form support - contradiction responsible for own learning whilst *mollycoddling that is now prevalent in sixth-form is far beyond anything I think I ever experienced at sixth-form*
Student dissatisfaction - repports maybe the hype or information at fault or student preparation and expectation wide of the mark
Experience different - mass ed and fees and expectations

Colour-coded

F Oxb to Man
Gcse enjoyed
A-levels dependent on results
Oxbridge guidance - first opportunity for self annalysis and eflection
Influence of parents
Suffolk Bubble
Importance of university visits
perceptions of socia-economic status class feelings about suitability
Parental tertiary ed
Links with university - imortant after offers made
A-Levels perhaps seen as a production line - teaching for the results
Expectations and prepartion for outcome
Stress related to expectations
Looking forward to moving on

Thoughts and follow-up cross-references and indications of further reading:

Reality, and what we understand by reality, is linked to the degree of importance we attach to our perceptions of events as they unfold within a spacial and temporal context. Does this mean perception is the new reality?

importance of studying experience and meaning as part of a larger whole: the participants' life-world. - deeper understanding of participant's perspective - how meaning is built

down playing - data decomposition - simplified according to researcher's perspective - may ignore/overlook material that does not fit - take for granted occupying same social world - gathering knowledge different from everyday experiences --- , *hermeneutics stresses how people construct meanings based on their already-lived, past experiences in order to understand their world, others, and themselves. This constructive, hermeneutic process plays a significant role within the social sciences, and particularly within qualitative research*
For Jerome BRUNER (1990), this implies considering what people do in their world and what people say about it. In other words, doing does not refer to behavior, but rather to culturally-located, goal-oriented actions.
GADAMER states that each language game (in the sense of WITTGENSTEIN, 1988 [1953]) refers to a certain way of life; therefore, as life and experience change, new linguistic forms and new meanings emerge. The construction of meaning occurs when a common interpretation of the world emerges from the intersubjective encounter (GADAMER, 2006 [1975]).

qualitative research should be accessed through the participants' experiences and meanings - through holistic impressions and thick descriptions - mechanizing QA therefore seeking to foster a comprehensive analysis of phenomena with an indepth approach into how participants make their lives and their environment to avoid reductionism an abstraction - process shoud be seen as open ended on going however mindful may lead to trivialization, excessive fragmentation - this is different from epistemology associated with analytical logic that seeks to construct clear and precise representations, detached from the experience that originates them - either looking for methods that focus on abstractive separation and methods which focus ob articulation of experience and meaning ECT (encounter context themes) towards participant's experiences and meanings rather researcher's preconception of them taking into account the context where that encounter takes place, observing the interactions itself and its personal and historical setting, and understanding the various themes of the participants as different aspects of a common—and unique—core: the participants' life