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# **Studying for a Higher Education qualification without going to university: An insight into students' decisions to study in post-16 colleges.**

## **Abstract:**

Around 8-10% of the English undergraduate population study in Further Education colleges. Colleges in the post-compulsory sector have offered a variety of Higher Education (HE) programmes for decades, some as articulated 'top-up' courses, others as full degrees or vocational programmes such as the Higher National Diploma. Reports from both the press (Murray, 2010) and academic research (Parry et al, 2012; King et al. 2013) have reported on those who decide to study for a Higher Education (HE) qualification at a local college rather than attending a university. These reports appear to coalesce around a number of common issues: the convenience of combining part-time study with work and familial responsibilities; lower costs and greater responsiveness to students' needs; and a distinctive learning culture, with a perception of more support from lecturers and smaller classes. It is within the research context that this study was undertaken. The liberalisation of the HE market not only threatens the established position of colleges but also impinges on students as they make their choice of study, whether this is campus-based, college-based or distance learning. This study investigated the reasons why 75 students at three colleges decided to study for a Higher Education qualification in a Further Education College in preference to a university. The findings contribute to the corpus of knowledge and, in doing so, calls for more innovative ways to cater for those future students who would benefit from studying a HE qualification at a college.

**Key words:** Student choice; Further Education College; Higher Education; Undergraduate study.

## **Introduction:**

The purpose of this paper is to report on why students enrolled on a range of Level 4 study programmes at three General Further Education Colleges (GFECs) in the North East of England decided to study at a college rather than university. According to King et al. (2013) 'Previous work has [an]... overall purpose is to paint a picture of what is currently happening in college-based HE, rather than to analyse the views of HE students. The student experience of HE in FE, therefore, remains comparatively under-researched'. In doing so, the research aimed to elicit students' perceptions of university and the perceived benefits of college-based study. Superficially, the issue of why some 8-10% of the undergraduate population choose to study in a GFEC appears somewhat surprising. Universities are generally regarded as the obvious place to gain high level specialist knowledge and expertise, and in which to study degree-level qualifications. Universities are the established provider of degree-level qualifications and are popularly regarded as the prime socialisation agency, and access point, for entry to the professions. Further Education (FE) in contrast, has been regarded as concerned with the development of vocational skills rather than high level knowledge, and concerned with preparing the skilled working class and lower middle class for lower status work roles. There is, however, a growing body of work (Parry et al., 2012; King et al., 2013) that provides insights into the priorities of these 'hybrid' students. This paper sought to

explore the motives of studying 'HE in FE' for students and offers some thoughts on how to develop this learning opportunity further.

### **Students' choice and the developing Higher Education market: a brief policy review**

Central Government appears to prefer to preserve the differentiated education system that separates levels and domains of knowledge into hierarchies of educational institution- but where does this leave potential students? Is the HE market and its options clear to all? The implied role for the GFCE sector is to provide 'locally-relevant, vocational higher level skills' (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011: 46). Central Government has historically recognised the particular niche that GFEC appear to possess:

FE [further education] is particularly effective in providing HE [higher education] for learners from disadvantaged groups, backgrounds and communities. Many FE colleges offer flexible, local opportunities which make HE accessible to people who might otherwise face significant barriers to participation. The sector is well placed to promote wider participation in HE. (DfES 2006, 30)

The changes to the HE system that have taken place since the publication of the Browne Report (2010) have been presented by subsequent policy documentation as offering students more choice in a liberalised HE market. The White Paper of 2011, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, together with a second White Paper in 2011 *New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan* sought to open-up the supply of HE programmes to a wider range of providers, including private companies. A second aim of the White Papers was to raise the profile of Higher Level Apprenticeships to equate with other HE provision. This opening-up of the HE market to new providers has important implications for prospective students. For students, it offers the prospect of an alternative to the £9,000 fee structure to that has been in place in recent years at universities, with significantly lower fees. For example, one private provider with links to a number of English universities, markets degrees in Computing, Business, and, Criminology and Psychology at an annual fee of £4074 (RDI, 2015). In comparison, the largest GFEC in the North East offers a variety of 181 courses ranging from foundation degrees to MA/MSC/MBA degrees, with one year top-up degrees priced at £6,900 and part-time degree study at £4000 per annum (Newcastle College, 2015). The potential for new types of providers to enter the market exists, and with this new modes of delivery and cost structures for students.

### **Students' choice: competing perspectives**

The restructuring of the HE market impacts directly on potential students in terms of the curriculum offer available and their associated fees structure. In simple terms, the root issue is how students perceive the HE market and the possible benefits for them in studying for a HE qualification. According to Parry et al. (2012: 116), 'students' motivation for participating in HE was primarily instrumental. They were concerned with improving their life opportunities (71%), getting a good job (62%), pursuing HE as part of a long-term career plan (62%'. For those who chose to study

at college rather than university, there were a much more diverse set of motivational factors than for the general cohort. Parry et al. (2012: 117) report that five principal factors were influential in students' choice of study pathway: the course being available at college (34%); having already studied at the college (33%); contact with staff (29%); lower tuition fees at college (28%); feeling comfortable at college (27%). Importantly, though, Parry et al. (2012: 118) report that 'most often, students' decision to opt for a college was driven by their perception that the courses they wanted to take were only available at a college'.

The instrumentalist approach reported by Parry et al. (2012) is reflected to some degree in the work of Rational Action Theory (RAT) that who offered a view of students' decision-making based on a cost-benefit analysis of their position and prospects. RAT also highlights the importance of familial support in students' decision-making processes. The fundamental premise of RAT is that 'parents' prime motive when facing educational transition is to avoid downward social mobility, what they denote as relative risk aversion' (Boone and van Houtte, 2013: 552). In advising their offspring, middle-class parents are better able to provide what Appadurai calls 'navigational capacity' (Appadurai, 2013). For Gale and Parker (2015: 89), 'the poorer members [of society] precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practise the use of this navigational capacity, have a more brittle horizon of aspirations'. Such an analysis echoes de Certeau's (1984) work on 'tour' and 'map' knowledges and that of Ball and Vincent (1998) on 'hot' and 'cold' forms of social knowledge. The value of RAT may be in generating renewed discourse on class-based choice in education, and highlighting the importance of parental actions. For Gale and Parker (2015: 91): 'this spatial turn in theorising aspiration gives greater prominence to agency- albeit within existing conditions'. RAT is, however, open to criticism from both a theoretical and methodological perspective. In focusing on familial and personal agency, there is the potential to lose sight of the structural context within which social activity takes place- these are the actions of a distinct social group, the middle class. From a methodological viewpoint, as Hatcher (1998) argues, it may be difficult to establish that families act rationally at all times, and that RAT may underestimate the complexity of social choice.

A third perspective is drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (with Passeron, 1977, and 1986). Bourdieu emphasised the importance of the class context to understanding individual positioning in society. The concepts of identity, social capital and institutional field are central to Bourdieu's analysis of how people perceive their position in society and their degree of manoeuvre. Identity can be seen in terms of how individuals interpret their position in the social order, particularly in socio-economic and cultural terms. Research has identified how education may interact positively with identity. For example, Webber (2015) reported on the transformative impact of Higher Education for mature females, not simply in terms of their 'window on the world' but in terms of their familial relationships with their spouse and children, and their wider self-confidence and self-image. For Webber (2015), 'identity can be seen as a collective approach, created alongside others, rather than as an individual process'. As such, from a structuralist perspective, identity is the outcome of social interaction and constructed within a socio-economic context. It can though also have a negative impact and restrain working-class aspirations. Although postmodernist thought may challenge the primacy of structure over personal agency, the importance of background should not be understated. For Archer, De Witt and Wong (2014: 73): 'Family habitus, a framework of dispositions, developed through a family's sense of its collective identity, that play an important role in guiding action, shaping members' perceptions of choices and providing family members with a practical feel for the world'. This 'feel' for the world generates a set of possible dispositions, that

Zipin et al. (2013) describes as 'habituated aspirations' that young people consider as they consider their range of options. Taken together, habitus and identity do provide a conceptual insight into why it may be that some working class students decide to avoid certain HE pathways and engage with others.

The data generated by UCAS (2014) shows and an increase from 11.3% to 18.2% in the poorest socio-economic group between 2006-07 and 2014-15 attending university. Together with the comments from OFFA / HECFE (2014), the issue of class and educational attainment would appear to be a diminishing concern. In reality, class remains a significant determinant of life chances. For the notion of choice that underpins much of the discourse on marketisation is flawed. Young people do have choice, but exercise this 'choice within predetermined limits' (Reay and Ball, 1998: 439). The value of Bourdieu's work is that it provides a conceptual 'road-map' of how dominant groups navigate their social position through social resources, such as knowledge of the system or contacts. However, Bourdieu's ideas are not without their critics. Firstly, Bourdieu can be criticised as ignoring the potential for personal agency in making an informed choice of study programme (Tooley and Darby, 1998). The case levied against Bourdieu is that his position is too deterministic and predicated on simple class rules of behaviour. A second criticism of Bourdieu is that his methodology is too superficial and that his work is imbalanced in favour of assertion rather than empirical evidence. Finally, a third criticism of Bourdieu is that his development of key concepts are flawed. For Sullivan (2002) 'Bourdieu's project is extremely ambitious, and ... many elements of Bourdieu's theoretical work are empirically unhelpful. For example, habitus is a concept with some intuitive plausibility, but is at once too all-inclusive and too vacuous to be of any use to empirical researchers'. However, the notion of choice should be clarified: it is the outcome of a series of conditioning societal factors, such as schooling, careers advice, peer group and familial groups, as well as individual agency. As such, choice should be viewed for what it is- the consequence of where an individual perceives their position in the wider social complexions of peer group, family, and society.

### **Research methodology:**

The research exercise was undertaken in three stages, eliciting information from a variety of sources. The first stage involved desk research that gathered information from Government, HECFE and OFFA, and other interested parties including the Mixed Economy Group of GFECs. A number of colleges in the North East of England were subsequently identified for follow-up investigation. There is an important issue that should be acknowledged at this point, however. The State enjoys a privileged position in the process of creating knowledge, as well as claiming a particular claim to legitimacy. Although desk research provides an invaluable insight into policy and useful statistical data, such knowledge is not entirely neutral, as has been recognised by a range of researchers (Young, 1971; Skeggs, 1997; Griffiths, 1998; Gunter, 2002). As such, we should bear in mind the 'representational' context to such documentation, as well as the more overtly commercial literature produced by educational institutions.

The second stage of the research involved meeting HE managers in a number of GFCEs in the North East of England. These preliminary discussions about the context of HE provision in GFCEs were followed by the distribution of a questionnaire to students enrolled on HE programmes at colleges. This eight item semi-structured questionnaire was concerned with exploring issues raised during the literature review and enabled students to make extensive comments. Questions 1 and 2 asked whether either of the student's parents had attended university and whether they had attended a school in the independent sector. Question 3 asked the student to identify their parental occupation(s) with a selection that corresponded to skilled manual, lower and professional middle classes. Question 4 asked the student if they thought that there was a difference in experience between studying at a college rather than at an university. The issue of choice was followed up further by Question 5 which asked students why that had chosen to study at a college. Questions 6 and 7 sought to elicit the students' ideas on self-identity and 'fitting-in' at university, and whether these had been factors in their choice of study. The final Question asked whether they thought that there was a difference in the value of a qualification obtained at college rather than university. The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1. There were two principal goals for the questionnaire. Firstly, to establish some empirical data on whether the clientele for HE programmes in the PCE sector are indeed drawn from disadvantaged groups, as suggested in much of the literature associated with Bourdieu. Secondly, the questionnaire sought to explore the issue of self-exclusion and the alternative of the hybrid FE/HE student. There are, of course, limitations with this approach. The most obvious limitation was the relatively small size of responses generated. The responses were generated by four cohorts: one being 12 students enrolled on a Foundation Degree, and two others 21 students enrolled on HND, and a further 14 studying on a top-up degree in Business and IT related programmes, with another 28 students undeclared. Although purposive in nature, the sample was determined by a mixture of convenience and theoretical sampling (Denscombe, 2002: 15) that aimed to test the class context to the issue of HE study in GFCEs. Given the restricted nature of the research to a small number of colleges in the North of England, the data cannot claim to represent the nation as a whole but only a partial segment of it. This is, nevertheless, an important area for future research and much useful work could be undertaken in researching the life histories, career trajectories and identity formations of those who decide to study for a HE programme in a college setting.

### **Findings and discussion:**

The findings are discussed in terms of those factors that influenced students' choices of study programme, identified above in the literature and research methodology. The findings represent the key findings derived from 75 students enrolled at three GFCEs in the North of England.

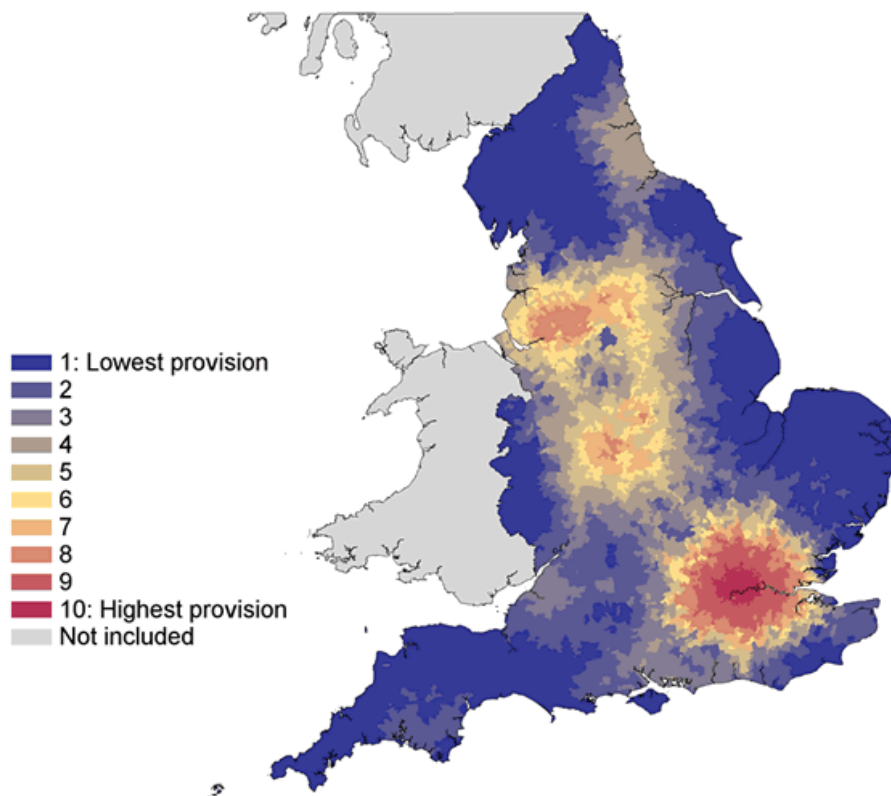
The process of analysing the data generated through the students' responses to the questionnaire involved a stage approach in data reduction. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have recommended that data reduction take three stages: 'open coding', where data is allocated to defined units of coding, 'axial coding', where relationships are clarified, and 'selective coding' where emergent categories are developed into theory. A similar process of data reduction and interpretation was adopted. The initial stage involved a simple listing of points generated by the students. This was followed by the clustering of similar points, such as travel and 'live locally' together. A third stage involved the

identification of a suitable theme to represent the cluster of points, such as 'logistical constraints on study'. In this fashion, an initial list of 16 points was reduced by this process to an intermediate group of 10 clusters, and, finally, to four key themes. The final four themes related to: logistical constraints to study, with 48 references by students; College provision, with 39 references from students; personal and familial context, with 13 references from students, and cost with 13 references.

The findings suggest that there are very clear reasons why people decide to study for an HE qualification at a GFEC rather than at a university. In simple terms, no significant distinction is made by the students between the place of study, or the perceived value of their qualification. Only 19 from 75 responses indicated that where they studied was important. Once the issue of value is dispensed with, students appear to adopt a pragmatic approach that matches their aspirations with their personal context. There is a clear class context to the data, with very few students having studied at an independent school (8 from 75 responses) or having a parent who possessed a degree (15 from 75 responses). Almost half of those respondents who chose to self-identify originate from a working-class background (36 from 75), with those from a lower middle class background (26 from 46) and a professional middle class family (13 from 75) less numerous. Despite this socio-economic context, no student identified class-consciousness as a reason not to attend university. Instead, students raised practical constraints on attending university, such as child care or work responsibilities, rather than some form of inhibition. In this sense, HE provision can be viewed in positive terms as enabling degree level study for those who for a variety of reasons are unable to attend university. These findings echo the research of Parry et al. (2012) and King et al. (2013) that highlighted an instrumentalist approach to studying HE programmes in GFECs.

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from this research. Firstly, the mode of delivery is an important factor for many students. Indeed, it may well, be just as important for those who are not able to study and for whom this issue is equally important but are not represented in research such as this. The map below illustrates the levels of participation across England. It is clear that participation levels are higher in London, the west midlands and Greater Manchester where transport systems are more developed than rural areas. This evidence would infer that more outreach work should be devoted to disadvantaged rural communities- this is not simply an urban working class issue. One area that should be explored further is the development of distance learning provision, with universities working in collaboration with GFECs to offer innovative study programmes at Level 4 and above. Compared to degree-level provision there is relatively little distance learning opportunities to study a HNC or HND. As most GFECs lack the resources or expertise to develop this suite of qualifications, new networks of local universities and colleges could be developed to engage in this curriculum innovation. In 2015, the North East of England was identified by HECFE as one region that possessed 'cold spots' in the delivery of HE programmes. In particular, the region has a lower proportion of its population qualified to Level 4 than any other part of mainland Britain. Compared to the South East of England that has 38.3% of its working population qualified to at least Level 4, and Scotland with 39.4%, the North East has 28.1% qualified to Level 4 (North East Consortium, 2015: 8). The inter-collegial initiative '*Higher Learning, Higher Earning*' aims to close this gap between the region and the UK average in terms of the proportion of the population who possess a qualification at Level 4 or above through developing links and rethinking how institutions deliver programmes of study. Such an approach has the potential to address 'cold spots' and widen participation.

A second major finding of this research has been the emphasis placed by students on high levels of support and small class sizes in GFECs. There were a number of very positive comments made by respondents on the questionnaire about the quality of support experienced at college, such as 'FE Colleges are generally smaller, more personal and as a result support the student more', 'more support and more relaxed at college', 'The environment of study is different... Further Education colleges are generally smaller, with less people- better for those who do not cope well in new crowded places', and 'better the devil you know'. There is clearly a perception that there is more support available in colleges than at university. Many of the respondents highlighted their experience of support at a GFCE and questioned whether that would be the case in a large university. This may be an issue that universities should address more explicitly when marketing their courses. Finally, the issue of cost was one of the least important factors in students' decision-making process. Only 12 from 75 respondents identified cost as an issue- why this was so could be the subject of future research.



Source: HESA and ILR data 2012/13

Map 1. A geographic representation of participation in HE across England. Source: HEFCE (2014).

### Conclusion:

This research set out to investigate why a significant number of students decide to study at a GFCE rather than at university. The findings suggest that the most immediate factors that impinge of students' decision-making process relate to their day-to-day context: familial responsibility, location and convenience, as well as the perceived nature of teaching at GFECs. The findings also highlight



the benefits of part-time study for those who have missed-out or wish to return to Level 4 study. Such an observation, however, should not dismiss the importance of Bourdieu to the wider debate on access to HE and the part played by social conditioning.

The role and scope of our education system has been altered as a result of an ideological shift in Government policy in recent decades. The social democratic model of educational policy that characterised much of the period of 1945-1979 has been replaced by an approach that is redolent of economic instrumentalism and the idea of the market as the supreme arbiter of society. This shift in policy is no more conspicuous than in the changing nature of student finances; initially, with the near abolition of grants and the student loan scheme, and more recently the payment of tuition fees. In doing so, the State has off-loaded part of the funding for HE onto students themselves. This approach does not appear to have dissuaded applications to university, if we are to believe the raw data generated by Government that shows an increase in entry to university. However, it would be myopic merely to judge Government success on the basis of a short-term quantitative analysis. In order to evaluate the impact of policy, we need to consider the socio-economic and cultural context to applications. For example, future research could explore- why is it that so few applications are received from the independent sector to study for HE programmes at GFECs? These and associated questions raise fundamental issues about the nature of British society and how it values its education system. Future research could also usefully explore the subject mix at degree level available in GFECs and its implications for student choice.

In terms of the discourse on participation in HE, the key issues revolves around how people arrive at decisions and the factors that condition a particular choice. Recent research is dominated by the importance of family and social networks in the decision-making of 16-18 year olds. In a sense, participation is informed by class advantage and the wider insights derived from being linked to the world of the professional classes. Although RAT offers a rationale for these students' choices, it fails to acknowledge the importance of class context as a conditioning factor in many students' decisions. The evidence generated in this study showed that those who study a HE qualification in a GFCE tend to come from the lower middle class or skilled manual strata of society. This research echoes the broader literature on HE in FE that suggests that HE provision in GFECs caters for those who choose part-time study that fits into their established lifestyle (King et al., 2013). Whereas the discourse on participation in HE for 18 year olds is dominated by 'classed choices' (Reay and Ball, 1998) the discourse on the choice to study at a GFEC is more complex. For some students, the choice to study at a GFEC is indeed an attempt to address earlier disadvantage. For others, the decision is conditioned by the desire to improve their employability, or because of employer inducement. For a third significant group there is also a positive choice in terms of the perceived support and care available at a GFEC compared with university.

The GFEC sector should aim to develop its variety of HE programmes not only in terms of subject breadth but more particularly with reference to alternative modes of delivery, such as distance learning. It is within this context that innovative partnerships between college networks and local universities should be established with universities supporting curriculum innovation creatively. Such an approach would help universities engage more with sections of their local community and support colleges. The example of the North East '*Higher Learning, Higher Earning*' Consortium cited above could serve as a model for closer collaboration and an improved curriculum offer. Ultimately, such projects are dependent on an institution's sense of purpose.

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## Appendix 1: The questionnaire issued to students

### Questionnaire for students on Higher Education Programmes within post-16 colleges

Please note that you may withdraw at any point in the research exercise. Your responses will be securely stored at the Business School at Northumbria University and destroyed at the end of the project. Your identity will not be disclosed and your responses coded so that these will remain anonymous. Please ask should you have any questions.

#### Instructions:

Please circle or tick any response that you agree with. Please comment in the space indicated.

Response code:.....

1. Did your parent(s) / Guardian(s) attend University?

a. Yes, if so which university/universities?

i. Father

ii. Mother

iii. Other

b. No.

2. Did you go to an independent / private / fee-paying school?

a. Yes.

b. No.

3. Which of the occupational groups listed below best describes that of your parent(s) / Guardian(s)? Circle the closest occupational group.

**Group Yellow**

**Group Green**

**Group Blue**

Office worker

Unemployed

Manager

Teacher

Retired

Accountant

Social worker

Cleaner

Solicitor

Nurse

Factory worker

Entrepreneur

4. Do you think there is any difference between studying for a university qualification at a Further Education College or at a University?

a. Yes, if so why?

b. No.

5. Explain why you decided to study at college for your qualification rather than university.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Do you think that those students who are studying for a university qualification see themselves as a separate group compared with those who are not studying for a university degree?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. I feel that I would fit in more here than at a University?
  - a. Yes, if so how?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. No.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Do you think there is any difference between studying for a university qualification at a Further Education College or a University? If so what?