Introduction

This paper reports on research from a British Academy funded project 'Making Choices: an investigation into the factors which affect young peoples' decisions not to progress to Higher Education after following a vocational pathway in upper secondary education. The project, which ran between April and October 2008, was designed as a pilot study and will form the precursor to a longer, more extensive longitudinal study.

In this paper we will:
- Outline our methodological approach
- Present some initial findings
- Conclude with some ideas for future research

Methodology

The methodology for this project included an analysis of relevant literature and research projects; a paper based questionnaire; interviews with students and discussions with key college personnel about the development of the research instruments and about the interpretations of findings.

A total of 80 questionnaires were returned from 7 different courses from two college campuses. Respondents who were not applying to HE and who volunteered for interview were interviewed with the aim to illuminate as diverse a range of perspectives and issues as possible. Telephone interviews took place in mid July with eight respondents (4 male and 4 female) from six different courses. The first research interviews took place therefore close to the time in respondents' lives that they completed their college education. A second interview was conducted at the end of September with seven respondents, following up on the evolution of their careers since the first interview.

Factors affecting HE Choices

(i) Financial considerations: debt aversion

The interviews confirmed the importance of costs and concerns about student debt as key factors affecting students' attitudes to applying for HE. Debt aversion has been shown to be particularly strong in groups that are targeted by WP initiatives - working class, ethnic and religious minorities (Callender 2003). Students in this study spoke spontaneously about financial considerations. Respondents' views were informed by the experiences of people that they knew personally, as well as perceptions gleaned through the media. One
respondent, who felt he ‘just didn’t want to be in debt’, described his disbelief when hearing that his college tutor, who had a degree, was still in debt:

"my tutor had been to university and she must be about 28, but she said to me she’s still paying out her university loan. So I thought ‘Oh what! There’s no point in that if she’s still paying it when she’s been at this college for about 5 years and she’s finished university and she’s still paying out her debts. It’s just stupid, you know, I thought it was ridiculous still at that age." (Harry)

Although aware of student loan possibilities, this was not attractive to any of the respondents – all preferred to pay their own way. The need to live away from home to attend most HE courses that had been considered by respondents also added to costs. Traveling and moving away from the family home was not itself the issue – several respondents were pursuing work that involved travel abroad, such as with holiday operators of different kinds or in the oil industry, but this was paid employment which would not leave the respondent with debts. Recent research into student loan repayments also suggests gender differences in the graduate premium, where a much higher percentage of females than males (21% as opposed to 2%) are projected to have their student debt written off (Dearden et al 2008).

(ii) Costs and trajectory complexities

In addition to the costs of participating in HE, from the age of eighteen onwards cost factors were implicated in respondents’ attempts to secure the necessary qualifications to advance to HE. Respondents’ date of birth had major implications for their future options, with some able to undertake a further two years’ full-time education after completing a Level 3 course, but others having come to the end of state-paid education. This seemed critical for one who had successfully completed their Level 3 course, but did not have key entry qualifications required for HE (e.g. C grade in Mathematics GCSE), partly because re-doing GCSEs did not fit with the timetabling of vocational qualifications.

Although only a small group, respondent’s accounts of their choice of college course often reflected hesitation and uncertainties rather than a strong conviction about a career pathway, although given that some were only 15 years old when making these choices this is not surprising. Of the 8 interview respondents, two were opting to do another Level 3 course. Respondents’ stories about what underpinned their course choices suggested the influence of peers, of family, of college advisors, and of relatively serendipitous events (see also Heath et al, 2008).

(iii) Qualification recognition

Recognition of some level 3 courses seemed problematic, both in the workplace and in HE. One respondent had undertaken an Engineering qualification that was neither a BTEC nor NVQ. The qualification seemed to have little recognition from employers:

"when you apply for the job they don’t really know what that is, they’d never heard of it sort of thing. [...] they go like “what is it, like an NVQ?” and you say “well no…”" (David)

Nor was the qualification proving useful for progressing to HE. The courses that were interesting to students from the course were reported as requesting that students do a further Level 3 course, and effectively ‘drop back down a level’. This meant that he would be facing five years of being a student, before completing a degree. This was not attractive; he preferred to be gaining experience and to be earning.
(iv) ‘Education’ versus experience

Issues of cost were compounded by doubts about the usefulness of HE, which seemed to be constructed in a binary opposition with the ‘real’ world of employment and possibly repeating what had been learned at Level 3. For example one respondent felt that a new degree (e.g. for those pursuing careers in the police) might repeat much of the course just done, leading them to pursue employment that would build useful experience, rather than applying for HE.

Respondents often stressed the importance of gaining experience, rather than continuing in education and gaining qualifications that might not in the end secure any advantages in employment markets:

I did actually think of going into higher education, but the reason why I didn’t go for higher education was because I needed the experience. A lot of people seem to be, nowadays, I see a lot of people seem to be over-qualified for a job but no experience, and it’s really hard to put all that time and effort into getting the qualifications and not getting a job out of it and just working on something else. To me it just seems like a waste of time. (Charles)

Some respondents clearly felt that there was a risk of spending time and money on pursuing a higher education programme, but in the end coming out with not much benefit in terms of employment: This intersected with the specialised nature of some programmes, and whether the job market had openings ‘at that particular time in that certain whatever you just learnt in university’ (Harry). So higher education was linked by some to being ‘over-qualified’ and possibly not leading to improved job prospects or financial rewards.

It seemed that some respondents’ experiences in the job market were confirming such views. Charles had secured a part-time job during his college years (partly through good college connections with the industry), providing him relevant experience that meant that when he finished his course he was immediately offered a full-time job. However David, an engineering student, felt his course was not well connected to industry, expressed regret about his choice of course and the advice he had been given about it, and was struggling to find interesting work. He described applying to around 30 companies, but receiving only one response, although had just had an interview. However, he felt that he was seen as lacking in experience:

the manager sort of didn’t really seem too bothered about me working there and sort of “Oh well we get a lot of people like you coming out of college” [...] it was more like you have the award, but you probably can’t do much. He didn’t say it but that’s what you could tell. (David)

He criticized the connections his particular course had to the workplace, aware that other courses seemed to have many more links and interactions with employers. Nor did the companies he was applying to offer work experience. After similar experiences, a respondent from Beauty Therapy was now considering working free-lance, using her car to do home visits. The employment market at this particular time was not favourable to the respondents, forcing some to accept part-time, flexible work that in some cases seemed badly paid – although still rejecting higher education.

(v) Future engagement with higher education

Even if open to considering this, all expressed a preference for combining any involvement in HE with paid employment. Employers might contribute to the costs, while what was studied would be relevant to work needs and interests at the point of doing the degree. As one respondent from Engineering put it:

rather than wasting my time I’d rather do it step by step as I need to do it, rather than do it all in one bulk and then try and try and find a job and not actually have a job for two or three years.
At this particular time in their lives however, several respondents felt it was time to move out of education. This was reflected at two different stages of education within the respondent group. For example Elly spoke of ‘doing education for 12 years’ and now wanting to move on after having done GCSEs and her Level 3, while Anna, who had taken her Level 3 course after successfully completing two A Level years, saw the ‘extra’ years after her sixth form as something akin to her university degree. A strong compartmentalization of the learning that was appropriate for different stages of one’s life, interacting with the binary of ‘education’ versus ‘experience’, contributed to respondents’ sense that they should be leaving education at this point.

(vi) School Versus College Learning

Some respondents recounted ‘contrastive stories’ about schooling in comparison to their college experience. These stories turned around differences in the social and more collaborative aspects of learning, relationships with teachers/tutors, respondents’ engagement with learning and the relevance of their courses. Some respondents described the greater social bonding that arose from studying a programme together, rather than at school, where everyone was studying different subjects. This could make learning more supportive. Charles (from a SE Asian ethnic background) described his college environment as being ‘open’, allowing him to develop more as a person, with a sense of wider responsibilities. He described his college experience as a ‘big social bonding’. Starting afresh in one’s relationships with tutors was also important:

> there were no memories of when you were a little school kid and being told off or whenever someone did something wrong. And all the teachers didn’t know you either so they had to kind of take you for face value and like get to know you … whereas before they all kind of have their opinions of everyone when they went into 6th form. (Anna)

This allowed a ‘fresh start’, where this respondent described being ‘a kind of anew person that now knew what they wanted to do with their career’ – although he was an exception in reflecting such certainties about his career trajectory. For some students, the mix of the practical and the theoretical allowed them to make sense of both together, and to find new interests in subjects in ways that surprised them. So for example Bob, a student in Engineering described his surprise at the amount of Maths in his course, but suggested that although he had found this hard, he had enjoyed it, while a student in Beauty Therapy described finding science topics in her course interesting, and being something she might like to return to in the future. Some contrasted the experiential nature of their courses, including visits to workplace settings and contacts with those directly involved in the workplace, which brought a subject alive, as opposed to the learning of school subjects:

> the teachers were doing it because it was something to do after they’d finished their career, and then they went on to teach us the experiences they’d had to kind of help us. Whereas if you do A levels, it’s normally like a teacher who’s studied the subject and then is just teaching it back to you

Hayward et al (2006, p.180) also call for more attention to be given to the disjuncture between teaching cultures in compulsory and post-16 education and those of HEIs.

(vii) Anxieties and uncertainties about higher ‘education’ learning

The contrastive stories that respondents constructed between college and school learning also raise the issue of how higher education learning might be perceived. Doubts about higher education seemed linked to concerns about the culture and the educational processes that higher education might entail. In relation to culture, questionnaire analysis suggested that those who identified with working class backgrounds were half as likely to apply to HE as those who identified with middle class backgrounds. Images of student life from the media alienated a respondent in Engineering. Student life for him was associated with drunkenness
and partying. Living on a campus was not appealing; campus was described as a ‘confined’ environment, a world of its own that he did not want to be part of. As in Reay et al (2005), higher education was not for him.

Both questionnaire and interview respondents gave reasons for not pursuing HE often raised stress and workload fears. For example, Gilly had considered HE to become a primary school teacher, but had been ‘warned’ about university workloads (I knew college was quite a lot of workload and they said it would be worse in uni), so provoking hesitation. Doing well at Level 3 did not necessarily encourage respondents to think that they could continue this success into HE:

I did think about (applying to HE) but then I thought “hmmm, you know, I’ve had enough now”. And because I’d done so well in my course, I knew that I probably wouldn’t be able to do better, but then I thought it was a good time to finish because I’d done so well, so I could finish on a really good note that I’d finished my BTEC in the best way that I could. (Anna)

Literature on assessment careers and assessment cultures seems relevant to such fears, possibly involving fear of failure and a reluctance to face challenges that has been developed through negative experiences in schooling (Torrance, 2007).

**Concluding thoughts:**

Participation in HE is constructed as without question the desirable option for all. In a recent study of non-participants, Watts and Bridges (2006) question such assumptions however, suggesting that their respondents’ aspirations were not ‘low’, but ‘different’, reflecting respondents’ ‘own personally valued ambitions and aspirations that were embedded in their communities, even though their realization did not, and was not seen to, demand routes through higher education (p.287). The authors query therefore the current drive of policy makers which foregrounds the removal of ‘barriers’ to HE participation. As others have noted however, this underpinning metaphor is appealing:

The metaphor of barriers is an attractive one that apparently explains differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups, and also contains its own solution – removal of the barriers. (Gorard et al, 2006, p. 9)

They also caution about considering widening participation in HE from such a perspective and argue instead for a ‘fuller consideration of the personal, social and economic determinants of participation and non-participation in education’ (p.13).

This pilot project has highlighted several areas for future research. These include:

- what student expectations are of higher education learning, and the extent to which this is shaped by prior and often negative experiences in different educational contexts.
- What are the impacts of different assessment regimes on these understandings?
- Comparative research on the impact of different educational fee regimes across the UK

Vignoles et al (2008) find that women remain more likely to participate in HE than males, and that this is true after allowing for girls’ higher attainment in secondary school. They conclude that ‘the pattern of the relationship between socio-economic background, achievement in secondary school and higher education participation is very similar for both genders’ (2008, p.3)

**Bibliography**


