

*'What with your grades?': Students  
motivation for and experience of  
vocational courses in further education*

Article

Accepted Version

Fuller, C. and MacFadyen, T. (2012) 'What with your grades?': Students motivation for and experience of vocational courses in further education. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 64 (1). pp. 87-101. ISSN 1747-5090 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2011.622447> Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/24002/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2011.622447>

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

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*“What with your grades?” Students’ Motivation for and Experiences of Vocational Courses in Further Education*

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## **Introduction**

Increased funding for vocational qualifications (BIS, 2010) as well as vocational qualifications that are understood and valued by employers underpins one of the new coalition government’s key aims of better vocational training for teenagers [Cabinet Office, 2010]. Whilst the future of the Diplomas may be in doubt, a commitment to vocational courses emphasises the overall recognition that the UK needs to both develop its vocationally trained workforce as well as provide alternative post-16 educational routes for young people, including those most at risk of becoming NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training]. However, despite increasing success in both the quality and completion rates of the plethora of vocational courses now offered as well as significant rises in the numbers of students opting to undertake vocational training<sup>1</sup>[report to Parliament, 2010], diversity remains in the range and content of courses meaning that vocational education still largely have much lower status than more traditional and academic routes. A report by Civitas (2010) suggests that many vocational courses are rarely connected to the world of work, have little academic content and tend to be offered to low attaining, lower-income students. Also many of these do not lead to work or opportunities for study in higher education (Wolf Report, 2011). In light of a lack of parity around various educational routes the Education Secretary announced in

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<sup>1</sup> 22,500 in 2003-04 to 540,000 in 2008-09

August 2010 the need for an independent review of vocational qualifications for students aged 14-19 in England. Given the breadth of post-16 choice now available, alongside differences in terms of the status of various routes, the question of why some students undertake vocational courses is an interesting one. If the prestige and status of alternative, non-traditional academic routes is to rise, it is important to understand why some students choose to undertake a vocational pathway. In particular, the role of Information, Advice and Guidance in the decision making process as well as a student's understanding of their academic identity is also of particular relevance and will go some way in exploring the link between a student's sense of educational 'self' and the assumed status of the choices they make. In this paper we consider the motivations of young people for undertaking a vocational course, exploring student's retrospective and reflective understanding of their decision making and their perceptions of the support they received alongside their experiences of their FE courses.

### ***Post-16 decision making***

Young people now face a wealth of choice when it comes to deciding what educational route to take when they reach age 16 years. Personalised Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) that enables young people to make appropriate post-16 choices relevant to their interests and abilities is therefore considered as a crucial part of this process and was central to the 14-19 education reform. IAG is an umbrella term used to cover a range of ways that young people are encouraged and supported in planning for their future. The particular aim is that by offering targeted and personalised support to particular groups, persisting social inequalities, particularly in relationship to educational attainment and participation, can be tackled. As a wealth of research demonstrates, young people from more socially disadvantaged

backgrounds do not always have appropriate support structures outside of school to help guide and encourage them to take full advantage of the various educational opportunities available to them (Fuller, 2009; Ball, 2000; 2003; Devine, 2004). As parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to be involved in their children's education () and as the choice making process can be experienced as a stressful and difficult time, some young people decide simply to 'opt out' of decision making completely (Du-Bois Raymond, 1998; Fuller, 2009). By offering targeted and personalised support to enable young people to make the 'right' choices, the idea is that more students will remain in post-compulsory education and training and student attainment and course completion rates will improve (IAG Workforce, accessed 2009). IAG provision could therefore be considered, in one sense, as a compensatory model and one that is now firmly fixed within the curriculum framework.

From 2001 IAG has been delivered by the Connexions partnerships: a government funded organisation offering careers information, advice and guidance to 14 – 19 years olds in England. Despite the clear need to support students in their decision making, research by The Sutton Trust (2008) found that almost half the IAG given was inadequate, poorly timed and partial and that the specialist guidance required to help young people navigate the very many different post-16 pathways was absent. Even more damning was a recent report to government (Cabinet Office, 2009) which described current careers provision as 'failing' and called for the complete abolition of Connexions. A report by the National Audit Office (2004) found that the Connexions service was not reaching all the young people it was designed to assist and did not cater well for those young people not at risk of 'dropping out'.

However, research by Colley (2010) has found that whilst high quality guidance is extremely useful in guiding young people through the labyrinth of choices now available, a lack of appropriate resources to support the service providers means that organisations such as Connexions are left struggling to deliver. With Connexions now an all age guidance service that no longer resembles the career advice of old, it is inevitable that tension and incoherence with service provision result (Mulvey, 2006). With a policy landscape in constant flux and increasing demands forcing a widening of the scope of the service provision, inevitable challenges result in terms of ability to deliver effectively (McGowan, A.; Watts, A.G. and Andrews, D., 2009; Watts, A.G. and McGowan, A., 2007).

The guidance picture is further complicated, as Hodgson and Spours (2008) point out, because the competitive nature of education means that institutional self interest compromises any ability to offer impartial IAG. In addition, some schools clearly place a much greater emphasis on particular post-16 routes than others. Foskett et al. (2008) discuss how schools with high socio-economic status (SES) catchment areas tended to deliver careers guidance that encouraged traditional academic careers, whilst schools with low SES catchment areas had a much stronger commitment to vocational pathways. Research by Girl Guiding UK (2007) also found that careers advice in schools was also very often highly gendered. In addition, a changing labour market which has seen a decline in employment opportunities for young people (Blanchflower, D. and Freeman, R., (1999) alongside much greater demand for post 16 education have further complicated the guidance landscape putting additional pressure of providers and resulting in a lack of available courses, as demand outweighs availability (Barclays, 2011).

IAG provision in school however, is only one aspect of the complex process involved in student decision making processes. Young people draw on a number of frameworks when making their post-16 choices, not least an understanding of a changing and competitive labour market in which education and skills are central. For some this creates stress and anxiety (Du-Bois Reymond, 1998) and for a number, particularly in terms of future employment security, some educational choices are perceived as involving much greater risk than others (Beck, 1992). Whilst students do not necessarily have clear goals or perfect information as to how to achieve the goals they do have, the 'likelihood of success' is an important feature of their decision making (Fuller, 2009; Goldthorpe, 1996) and significantly influential when weighing up the costs and benefits of the various educational routes available to them. In a theoretical sense, students are understood to be risk adverse when making choices because they weigh up the choices available and evaluate their options based on an understanding of their likelihood of succeeding (Boudon, 1974; Goldthorpe, 1996; Goldthorpe & Breen, 2000).

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) discuss how career decision making should also be understood as the result of a series of turning points in an individuals' life, turning points that are pragmatic and rational and situated within an individual's culturally determined horizon. They address the relationship between structure and agency in individual choice and use these ideas to posit the idea of 'careership'; that young people will follow careers, and thus associated educational choices, based on what is perceived to fit within their current social and occupational structure (Hodkinson, 2008). Therefore, as Hodkinson (2008) also note, it matters little how good information and guidance is; unless in synergy with the student, there will be 'other factors and forces ...that exert a greater influence' (2008:14).

Whilst emphasis differs, the majority of theorists agree that the choices young people are structurally determined. However, whilst academics concur that there is marked difference in the educational choices for different members of society, not all theorists agree that socio-economic status or 'class' is the best way to understand this. Lucey et al. (2003) for example, note that in trying to understand students' choice making processes, neither liberal discourse that focus on the pedagogy and practise of teachers and parents, nor theories concerned with social reproduction, can adequately explore the issue. They advocate that understanding the psycho-social processes involved in the shaping of educational aspirations and therefore choices is what is of fundamental importance; how individuals make educational choices based on their own reflexive understanding of themselves and of the choices available.

Research by Fuller (2009) in to the educational choices and aspirations of a group of working class girls clearly demonstrated the importance of a student's sense of personal educational identity in terms of the educational choices subsequently made. Building on Cooley's (1922) concept of the looking-glass self, the study illustrated how practices within school, such as advice from teachers; work experience placements and particularly with respect to the benchmark criteria for academic success of five A-C at GCSE, was also relevant. Explicit and implicit messages received in school were perceived by students as a reflection of peoples' opinions of them and these had important consequences in terms of a student's sense of their educational identity. How students' situated themselves within the educational system impacted in important ways on the future educational choices students then felt were available to them. Research by Archer and Hutchings (2000) found that amongst working class non-participants of higher education, the view of university as 'an unattractive or uncertain option for people like them' (2000:570) was offered as an explanation for non-



attendance. Additional research (Hutchings and Archer, 2001) also found that non-attendance was often a consequence of a lack of encouragement from teaching staff and, that to achieve the necessary entry requirements, required academic skills that were ‘higher than Einstein’ (2001:77). Whilst the authors use class as the explanatory variable, a sense of what is and is not a suitable choice, in terms of how these young people understand and situate themselves educationally, was clearly inherent within their findings.

Why some young people choose to pursue a vocational course whilst others do not is clearly dependent on a number of important factors. Educational decision making is a complex process which is strongly influenced by social, institutional and individual factors, which all inter-connect in important ways to provide a framework on which to make choices. Research by Conlon (2002) demonstrates that there is an important link between early attainment (as measured by maths and reading scores at age 7) and undertaking higher educational qualifications post 16, yet the research also found that ability had no explanatory power in understanding why some young people opted to undertake vocational courses. In this paper we seek to explore the motivations for studying a vocational qualification of 40 students currently in further education. We consider their decision making, in terms of the support and guidance received, and examine the value these students place on their training, particularly with respect to their future employment.

## **Methods**

Data were collected between January and June 2009 from forty students attending two further education establishments in the South East of England. Following the identification by FE staff of appropriate courses, , ten focus groups were then carried out with student volunteers on a variety of courses including: Hairdressing, Public Services, E-media, Computer Gaming, Music and Musical Theatre at both sites. As the research was dependent on student willingness to participate, no selection criteria was adopted aside from the need to be enrolled on a vocational course. Two thirds of students included were on one year courses and one third on two year courses; students on the two year courses were from both the first and second year, but mainly the latter. In terms of prior attainment, from student self report, only 3 had achieved the bench mark of 5 A – C grades at GCSE.

Data were collected on students' attitudes to, and experiences of, their current course; why they had opted to undertake a vocational pathway; and who they had spoken to in terms of their decision making process. Focus groups also explored students' experiences of school and their plans for the future. Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and then analysed deductively, using a long hand content analysis. Whilst there are undoubtedly issues in using focus groups in terms of their potential impact on the ability of young people to talk openly and freely, focus groups in this instance were extremely useful because they encouraged the sharing of experiences and facilitated some lively debate. On a practical level, focus groups also enabled us to speak to more young people than would have been possible otherwise. The process of analysis involved an initial coding of the data via identifying and then clustering the data in terms of the key areas of interest. Subsequent re-coding was also carried out when new areas of interest became apparent, for example, in relation to student identity. The accuracy of the key areas identified were checked via inter-coder reliability testing, with the analysis of the data carried out by two coders and then compared. Emergent

themes identified related broadly to: *Motivations, Experience* and *Future*. Prior to commencing this study ethical clearance was sought from The University's Ethics Committee and all ethical guidelines were complied with in carrying out this research.

## **Results**

This section is organised in relation to the careers guidance and information received within the post-16 decision making process, in terms of decision making; motivations for undertaking a vocational course and educational identity. How vocational courses are experienced in social and academic terms is also explored.

### *Choosing the course*

The vast majority of students found out about their current courses under their own steam: by searching the internet, attending open days or by looking through college prospectuses:

*I got no advice. I figured it out my self and just came down here to find out about it– I saw it on line and it caught my eye*

Most appeared to find their current courses almost by chance:

*I found this by accident...I was dead against coming to this college...but I had a look at the Open Day and literally as I was going to walk home I came across [this course] so I went and had a look and thought “this is really interesting” and so I enrolled.*

When asked specifically about the provision of career guidance at school, there was almost unanimous consensus in students' views that they had received little that had been helpful to them:

*Mine was kind of like... "this is what Uni you can go to". I was like, "what if I don't want to go to Uni", "oh well then we can't really help you"...its not really careers advice it's kind of like this is your opportunity, like this is where you can go so..., but no, no careers advice that was any use any way.*

*...yeah, all you get at school is advice on brick laying, carpentry and that – you don't get told about these sorts of courses nor about colleges.*

*...mostly they say 'stay on at sixth form or get a job' – nothing about colleges all they wanted was everyone to go to sixth form ...whenever I mentioned college they just ignored it although, they didn't really give anyone help any way to go outside. It was just 'school, school, school' and anything else and you're on your own type of thing...*

Many students expressed the view that career guidance provision in school is largely geared towards a school's own sixth form and was therefore biased. This finding resonates with that of Foskett (2004) who, in a review of IAG provision, concluded that the needs of institutions to compete for young people's choices in the education and training market place had an important impact on IAG provision in terms of the challenge it posed to offer impartiality. This view is also supported by Pring et al (2009). Alongside a sense of a lack of personalised support and direction in their post-16 choices, some students also felt that their previous

school stratified choices, with non A levels routes implicitly seen as being non-traditional and for the academically less able:

*My Head of Year asked me at the end of the year what we were all going to do. That's the only time they ever mentioned careers at our school. He said "what are you going to do", I said "Hair & Beauty" and he said "what with your grades, why are you going to do that" and I felt like I was perceived as stupid because I wanted to go and do hair and beauty.*

*...my issue was that I went to a school where if you didn't get full A\*s at GCSE you were not good... when I told my friends I wanted to go to college they just assumed it was because I wasn't expecting to pass my GCSEs and I was like 'no, I will pass them just fine and get good grades but I WANT to go to college' ...I guess it's 'cause 'college' itself has a really bad ring compared to sixth form. People think 'college – you obviously didn't get the grades!'*

In choosing to undertake a vocational course, students report little support in the decision making process either from their school or the Connexions service. In one or two cases, Connexions provided the prospectus although as a whole students were largely critical of this service. Just as Hibbert (2010) found, many of the young people felt let down by their IAG with some students feeling that the IAG available from Connexions was not tailored enough to their personal circumstances, interests or needs. A few students cited individual staff

within a school as somewhat helpful, but the good practice was haphazard and sporadic from the students' perspective:

*Some of the teachers were positive about what we were doing good on so people like Head of Years were, they probably looked into what we were passing at and they were saying maybe you could follow this or that ...*

*I found Connexions useless. They are supposed to help you find a job but they didn't help me. I was like 'I thought you was supposed to help me'!*

In a few cases mothers were instrumental in the first instance, by searching for courses they thought appropriate and finding out course specific information. However, as Ball (2000;2003) and Devine (2004) note, this was not true for all students:

*My mum was a hairdresser and it's something I have always wanted to do [so that's why I did this course. She helped me, by finding out stuff about the course and that*

*My mum really wanted me to do sixth form, she wanted me to do the academic route first. My mum and dad both felt that going to do musical theatre first would be like cutting off all other options. They are not happy that I am doing this*

*course so I have to support myself. I pay all my own bus fares...and they have never been to see me perform: I really hope they do one day*

For many, the support that was given was experienced as merely tokenism because it had little relevancy and the range of available options were not explored. Aside from a few instances of parental guidance or ad hoc encouragement from an individual teacher, IAG was experienced as impersonal and very much geared towards what the student's own school could offer. A sense that one route was more preferable to another in terms of academic credibility was also apparent. However it is worth noting that frustration appeared to be greatest amongst those students who were less sure as to what course to undertake. In most cases therefore, students report finding out about their current course using their own initiative.

### *Educational Identity*

A student's decision to attend a Further Education (FE) college as opposed to their school's sixth form resulted largely from their beliefs that they would neither enjoy nor be suitable for A level study. For the students we spoke to, A levels were seen as being as prescribed as GCSEs, which for the large part were not enjoyed. Opting to attend college was strongly associated with the view that college would offer a learning experience that would be in stark

contrast to that of school. For the large part, college courses were seen to offer a more relaxed and collaborative approach to learning, were considered as being better suited to a different type of learner and, most importantly, were viewed as having more relevance to later life.

Typical responses included:

*I definitely prefer it to school. It's just because I don't really like a structured lesson, like here we are told to get on with it and the teachers are here to help us and that's why I like it*

*...at school you have to live under quite a few rules. You don't really feel as much yourself, as independent. At school you are still treated like a child whereas when you go to college you make a way for your self and you are not spoon fed everything.*

The idea that some courses were more desirable than others appeared to resonate with other ideas, which may be linked to a young person's sense of their educational identity: the way young people situate themselves in terms of the criteria of academic success and failure.

From the focus group discussions, a student's educational identity appeared to be an implicit yet important factor in understanding both the motivation for undertaking a vocational course as well as their experience of it. Many students discussed how they had not achieved well at school and this seemed to lead to a lack of confidence

*I think what I am trying to say is that I thought I would be behind a lot, like when I was at school, but I'm not, I am still alright*

For some students this lack of achievement at school meant that they were unable to stay on in the sixth form of their school despite a sense that they perhaps would have liked to:



*I went to a Catholic school and to get into the sixth form you had to get a B in English, Maths and Science...so I did apply to sixth form thinking I'll go there and do my A levels and then go from there but, now I am kinda glad I applied here as well because I didn't get any of the other grades I needed either...but I am glad I failed them...*

Many students discussed how hard they had found studying for their GCSEs, how for many being in a low 'set' in school had been a negative experience and how learning had been experienced as isolated and impersonal:

*I blended into the background so well it was unbelievable*

*There wasn't any plan B's; there wasn't any like second options. I mean the school was, I think the school did do some great teaching, I mean don't get me wrong, but I think there is more or less – if you didn't learn what was there to be learnt there wasn't any plan B – there wasn't like any helpful ways to catch up or anything – it was more or less you had to do it then or you were just going to fail.*

With the exception of two, most students did not enjoy school, with comments such as it was 'not great' and 'it was rubbish' being typical. To illustrate:

*...school was a pain in the arse really. The teachers ... they just boss you around at times, you don't have so much freedom to do what you want.'*

*I think at the time I hated school but now I look back and think “oh I wish I enjoyed it a little bit more” because it was so very much easier then - You have so much to think about now.*

The consequence of this lack of enjoyment was students often losing confidence and simply ‘disengaging’:

*I had a really bad attendance, I hated going to school.*

*It was too embarrassing to talk to your teachers because you always felt like the odd one out all my teachers hated me and I didn’t talk to none of them...unless they were shouting at me I didn’t like talking to teachers so I didn’t talk to them*

For the large part however, these same students were mostly positive about their current educational experience:

*“I feel motivated and it makes me want to do well”*

*“I feel like I have to try my best ‘cause I am the one who chose to do it, no one made me”*

*In school you are put into the lower sets which really gets people down because you know you are in the lower sets. At college though, you feel like everyone is equal.*

A large part of the positive attitudes towards current study was explained by the fact that students had chosen the course for themselves, that is: they had opted to do it which appeared linked to a student's sense of being able to achieve:

*I have finally found something I am quite good at!*

*It's great to be doing something well, to have confidence*

As already illustrated, students were positive about their college experience and were, in the main, enjoying the courses they were undertaking. However, when asked to elaborate on the factors that made college a good place to be, interestingly students placed emphasis on their relationships both with tutors and fellow students as opposed to their specific courses. Tutors are respected, not only for their credibility in terms of their 'hands on' experience (of the work place) that they bring to the subject but also because students feel they are treated very differently to school: as an equal, and as a consequence, they feel respected leading to a real feeling of a partnership

*At school they treat you like kids, they're [teachers] power crazy and give you detentions...At college the classes are much smaller so the lecturer has got time for you and treats you like an adult so, ...better than at school!!*

*I love the teaching style, I mean I never really made friends with the teachers in my old school but this, in this course it was instant. Within a week I loved my tutors, I loved coming to college because it was fun.*

Relationships with fellow students are also very important and are seen to be positive. Students' discussions highlighted the important sense of camaraderie they felt. Ideas of 'commonality' appeared to create a sense of unity and shared experience for students and this contributed positively to the college experience:

*We all have the same aims so we support each other*

*...at school none of you had anything in common, you would have like a couple of you in the year group, whereas here everyone in your group has got the same thing in common with you because you all do the same thing. So I find it just a more relaxed atmosphere than school.*

How students understand themselves in terms of the academic ability appears to be an important factor in opting to undertake a vocational course. Students clearly articulate a retrospective view of themselves as 'failing underachievers' who were located in the lower sets and who did not enjoy school. Whilst not true for at least two of the students included, this view was confirmed in the general lack of success in their GCSE examinations. Students were keen to emphasise a view of themselves as a 'different type of learner'; a learner much better suited to college and the courses they have chosen is perhaps revealing.

### *Experience of the Course*

In the main students felt their vocational courses were what they had expected them to be. However, in some cases students felt they had been a little misled in the amount of practical, hands –on work they would experience:

*I am happy with the course but obviously I would have preferred more hands on things but we are doing that more in the second year,*

*There is loads of stuff that has gone straight over my head and like I have chosen to pretty much ignore it because I find it irrelevant to what I want to do ... a lot of it is not helpful*

Whilst the academic experience of various courses did vary amongst students, there was some consensus that the challenge is harder than they had initially anticipated. Students were also keen to emphasise the academic credibility of their courses and frequently pointed out that they believed the demands of their study were far more intense than for other, more traditional routes.

*I thought it would be a lot less hard than it actually is. I wasn't expecting it to be kind of as intense – it's kind of like we have got this much to do, this amount of time to do it, if you don't get it done then there is no way of like proceeding on I didn't think it was going to be that fast...it's been quite stressful at the end.*

*There was a lot more as soon as you get into it, it is a lot more complicated than you think it would be because of the things that you have to learn.*

*All the relevant information its sticking... because when you learn things that you think you are never going to use this again you don't retain it but I learn about something and I think 'oh that will come in helpful'.*

Paradoxically however, the one aspect of a vocational course that students are most positive about: that the experience was very different to school, was also the aspect of the college experience that students were most critical of. To illustrate, whilst students enjoy what they perceive as a more relaxed approach to learning and a greater sense of independence, some students criticised a perceived lack of organisation and referred to differences in teachers' approaches as being problematic:

*I think the college is really unorganised ... it's like they will say "oh we're doing this" or "oh we're doing that" but we won't have any notice about it. It's like work experience was done three days before we had to actually go...*

*...it's just that they give you loads of assignments in one go and they expect you to get them all done in a month and you're like 'but I've got this one to do and that one and that one!*

*My biggest gripe with the whole of this course has been that not everybody's talking off the same hymn sheet I think, you know. You get some teacher or lecturer wise, you getting told one thing one week and a different thing another week off different people. It's almost like the lecturers are in competition with each other as to who is like top dog sort of thing.*

A lack of work experience was also cited as a source of disappointment for many, except notably not for Hair and Beauty, with students being led to believe that much more would be available than there actually was:

*The one key thing that I think is really missing out from what they said on the prospectus was the two weeks of work placement ... that was the one thing I was really looking forward to and I had no work placement ... so that is one big disappointment that I found.*

However almost universally, it is the knowledge that tutors bring to their role that is seen as the biggest bonus to students' experiences of their vocational courses. As many tutors have real life experience of the sector in which they teach, they are seen as credible and students therefore value their guidance and advice:

*...they can tell you what worked for them and what didn't work for them and they can give you advice on where to go.*

Students were asked about their future plans once their current course had finished; whether they intended further study, planned to go to University and how well they felt their current vocational courses were preparing them for future work. Overall, students were very committed to their current vocation with many wanting to stay in the same area. In terms of immediate plans, responses were mixed. Some students planned to take the second year of their current course, a few to take a completely different course whilst many planned to leave and find work. Most, however, had no plans at all to go to University. When asked why students had not considered University, most were adamant that it was not ‘for them’:

*It's not for me, dunno why; it's just not*

*I thought about going to university for about a week and then decided not to go;  
the cost put me off and then the age that I would be going and leaving*

Strikingly many students had little knowledge of University itself and did not view progression into higher education as a natural step. There was a clear lack of information about possible courses they could do, student loans, and available grants. However, key to the experience of their current courses was the perceived sense of content relevancy for the future world of work. Students were mainly ‘hopeful’ about their future job prospects with most expressing a clear confidence that their current courses were preparing them well for the future work place; providing skills that were both important and desirable to employers.

Where anxiety did exist, it was in relation to students’ concern as to their actual ability to secure work, particularly in the current economic climate. Given that current unemployment



rates are highest for young people, with these figures continuing to rise since the start of the global recession (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2010), these fears would seem reasonable:

*I think the kind of area I want to go into could be quite hard and it's just trying to find an opening*

*I am not very confident at all [about getting a job].*

Whilst some students discuss disappointment that their courses did not have the amount of 'hands on' practical experience they had expected, there was almost unanimous agreement that their courses were academically challenging, were therefore credible and were courses in which students were experiencing a sense of accomplishment and achievement.

Overwhelmingly, students discuss the real life relevancy both of the quality of the teaching and tutors as well as in terms of the value of what they are learning for the future workplace.

What is striking however is that further study at university features only in the future plans of two young people. That higher education was positioned as highly academic and, as Archer and Hutchings (2000) found, something highly unsuitable, suggests some contradiction. How much of this is the result of a lack of IAG on higher education is not clear. What is clear however is that a university education is not considered as being relevant to the future life course plans of the young people who participated in this study.

## **Discussion**

In considering educational choices in relation to vocational study it is perhaps self-identification that appears to be the key to understanding why a student opts to undertake a

vocational course as opposed to an alternative route. Whilst students explicitly discuss autonomy in ‘choosing’ a vocational course, as Archer and Hutchings (2000) and Fuller (2009) found, how students identify themselves in terms of academic success or failure matters in relationship to the educational choices they then go on to make. Students included in this study for the large part perceived themselves as academic failures. They felt that they were unable to achieve at more traditional and academic levels of study. Of course, there are always difficulties and challenges within research when asking people to look back. Retrospective reflections can distort and not necessarily capture the real and lived reality. However, one could argue perhaps that it is a student’s understanding of their experience, real or not, that has the biggest influence on how they feel and what they then choose to do. Therefore, whilst choosing to undertake a vocational training programme is framed as an independent decision, clearly implicit in comments was the notion that for most students, there was no sense of any real alternative option available and practices within school appeared significant. Messages students receive within school, particularly those transmitted through academic setting and low educational attainment, appear to be reflected upon and rationalised in relationship to the broader labour market context. Within these choices, vocational education is implicitly positioned as non-academic and a route that is less valued by schools, peers and careers advisers based on an understanding of their academic abilities and the academic ‘value’ of these different routes, students then appeared to evaluate their suitability for the different options available likelihood of success.

A sense of lack of support and guidance was also significant in understanding some students’ decision to undertake vocational pathways at the end of their compulsory education. Many of the students spoken to talked of feeling abandoned and adrift in the sea of post-16 decision

making. Good IAG is therefore crucial if students are, as the previous government intended, to make choices that are the 'right ones'. Reports to the Cabinet Office (2009) which described careers provision as failing and the Connexions service as ineffective (National Audit Office, 2004) is sadly borne out in the experiences of the young people included here. However, clearly services such as these face an impossible task in terms of tackling the figures for young people Not in Education, Employment or Training. If young people themselves have little sense of what route they would like to take them it is a challenge to then guide and direct, whilst also accounting for what is actually available. Perceptions of a lack of support, direction and guidance did leave some students feeling they were dependent on themselves to find an appropriate further educational course. In many respects this sense of abandonment reiterates students' sense of having less relevance to those whose post-16 options comply with the usual linear routes of academic study. Whilst the students in this study demonstrate both agency and commitment to continuing education, this may not be true for other, more vulnerable young people. Without good and wide ranging IAG some students would be at great risk of dropping out of education all together.

Self-motivation amongst self-confessed previously unmotivated students suggests recognition of both the value of remaining in post-compulsory education as well as a great deal of personal agency in terms of their efforts to find something they feel they can achieve at. That vocational courses are experienced as having value and seen to have relevancy to later working lives is clear. In addition to a strong degree of commitment to their study because they have chosen to do it; positive relationship with peers and staff and a strong sense of being on a level playing field all contribute significantly to the ways that vocational courses are experienced and engaged with. Research suggests that vocational courses lack status and have questionable academic content yet employers' value employees that have the work

based skills and knowledge required. The new coalition government is also strongly committed to increasing funding in the area of vocational training (Coalition Government, 2011). Clearly there is work needed in raising both the prestige and the viability of vocational courses as an attractive post-16 route. Only when traditional and non-traditional educational routes have parity can vocational courses be seen as an option that is not just for educational underachievers. As Leitch points out in his Review of Skills:

*Our intermediate and technical skills lag countries such as Germany and France. We have neither the quantity nor the quality of necessary vocational skills....Despite recent improvements, the UK's post-16 participation in education and training is below the OECD average. At age 17, 83 per cent are enrolled in education and training, compared to more than 90 per cent in the best performing countries. International evidence suggests that parity of esteem of the vocational route...are needed to achieve world-leading levels of post-16 participation in education and training. (Leitch, 2006:6)*

The first place to start then is with the schools, teachers and careers guidance providers who direct and support young people. However, it is important that adequate resources, training and support also exist to ensure that these can be delivered well. Increasing the range of post-16 options that schools offer will also do much to tackle some of the market challenges facing schools when offering IAG. With the possibility of rising university tuition fees looming and demand already exceeding places available in higher education, vocational training courses are likely to grow in relevancy as a post-16 option. Whilst the research reported here is from an English study, these issues are not case specific. Raising the status of alternative

educational routes is an international concern and important, if young people are to feel that the choices they make are the 'right' ones.

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