Deciding what and where to study: How do BTEC students at an FE College make their HE choices and how does the College shape these decisions?

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# **Table of Contents**

[Acknowledgements ii](#_Toc97112749)

[Table of Contents iii](#_Toc97112750)

[Abstract vii](#_Toc97112751)

[List of Tables viii](#_Toc97112752)

[List of Figures ix](#_Toc97112753)

[Glossary x](#_Toc97112754)

[Chapter 1 Introduction 1](#_Toc97112755)

[**1.1** **Background Context (Personal, policy and research)** 1](#_Toc97112756)

[**1.2 Identifying the gap** 3](#_Toc97112757)

[**1.3 Research Questions** 4](#_Toc97112758)

[**1.4 Defining “disadvantaged” or “under-represented” groups** 4](#_Toc97112759)

[**1.5 Defining “elite” or “selective” universities** 5](#_Toc97112760)

[**1.6 A note on organisational culture** 6](#_Toc97112761)

[**1.7 Organisation of the thesis** 7](#_Toc97112762)

[Chapter 2 Literature Review 8](#_Toc97112763)

[**2.1 Introduction** 8](#_Toc97112764)

[**2.2 Further and Higher Education Context** 8](#_Toc97112765)

[**2.2.1 Policy Overview** 10](#_Toc97112766)

[**2.2.2 Marketisation** 12](#_Toc97112767)

[**2.2.3 Widening Participation** 15](#_Toc97112768)

[**2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Student HE Decision-making** 21](#_Toc97112769)

[**2.3.1 Rational Choice Theory** 21](#_Toc97112770)

[**2.3.2 Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction** 23](#_Toc97112771)

[**2.3.3 The Theory of Practice Architectures** 25](#_Toc97112772)

[**2.4 HE Choice Research: How do students make HE decisions?** 29](#_Toc97112773)

[**2.4.1 Subject Choice** 29](#_Toc97112774)

[**2.4.2 Use of Information** 30](#_Toc97112775)

[**2.4.3 Financial Constraints** 32](#_Toc97112776)

[**2.4.4 Geographical Constraints** 33](#_Toc97112777)

[**2.4.5 Academic Constraints** 34](#_Toc97112778)

[**2.4.6 Psychological Constraints** 35](#_Toc97112779)

[**2.5 HE Choice Research: How does a school/college shape a students’ HE decisions?** 37](#_Toc97112780)

[**2.5.1 Comparing private and state institutions** 37](#_Toc97112781)

[**2.5.2 Institutions within the FE sector** 39](#_Toc97112782)

[**2.5.3 The influence of teachers/lecturers** 40](#_Toc97112783)

[**2.6 Conclusion** 41](#_Toc97112784)

[Chapter 3: Methodology 43](#_Toc97112785)

[**3.1 Introduction** 43](#_Toc97112786)

[**3.2 Research Aims and Questions** 43](#_Toc97112787)

[**3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings** 44](#_Toc97112788)

[**3.3.1 Ontology and Epistemology** 44](#_Toc97112789)

[**3.3.2 Methodology: A Qualitative Case Study Approach** 46](#_Toc97112790)

[**3.4 Selecting the Case** 49](#_Toc97112791)

[**3.4.1 Background Context of “Central College”** 49](#_Toc97112792)

[**3.4.2 Level 3 BTEC Qualifications** 51](#_Toc97112793)

[**3.4.3 Statement of Positionality** 52](#_Toc97112794)

[**3.4.4 Insider Research** 53](#_Toc97112795)

[**3.4.5 Learning from the Pilot Study** 57](#_Toc97112796)

[**3.5 Phases of Research (Data Sources and Research Methods)** 58](#_Toc97112797)

[**3.5.1 Phase One: Document Analysis** 58](#_Toc97112798)

[**3.5.2 Phase Two: UCAS Choice Data** 61](#_Toc97112799)

[**3.5.3 Phase Three: Semi-structured Interviews of Students and Staff** 64](#_Toc97112800)

[**3.5.4 Ethical Issues during Data Collection** 71](#_Toc97112801)

[**3.6 Conclusion** 73](#_Toc97112802)

[Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis: How BTEC students at an FE College make their university choices 74](#_Toc97112803)

[**4.1 Introduction** 74](#_Toc97112804)

[**4.2 Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for? BTEC subject, local post-92 choices and the risk of deviation** 74](#_Toc97112805)

[**4.2.1 Applications** 75](#_Toc97112806)

[**4.2.2 Offers and Rejections** 77](#_Toc97112807)

[**4.2.3 Final Choices** 78](#_Toc97112808)

[**4.2.4 Summary** 80](#_Toc97112809)

[**4.3 Deciding what and where to study at university** 81](#_Toc97112810)

[**4.3.1 Sayings: Natural progression, “safe” “easy” choices or thought-provoking complex decisions?** 82](#_Toc97112811)

[**4.3.2 Doings: Methodical comprehensive search, a minimalist random approach or a targeted efficient process?** 91](#_Toc97112812)

[**4.3.3 Relatings: Family/peer influence, variable HE networks and the local university as default** 97](#_Toc97112813)

[**4.3.4 Summary** 103](#_Toc97112814)

[Chapter 5 Findings and Analysis: How an FE College shapes the university choices of their BTEC students 105](#_Toc97112815)

[**5.1 Introduction** 105](#_Toc97112816)

[**5.2 College organisational culture and practice and its effect on student HE decisions** 105](#_Toc97112817)

[**5.2.1 Sayings: Competing priorities of employability, local regeneration and recruitment/achievement** 106](#_Toc97112818)

[**5.2.2 Doings: The College HE Support Programme and issues of inconsistency, tailored individual support and reliance on local universities** 110](#_Toc97112819)

[**5.2.3 Relatings: Tutor Support and “convenient” College-university relationships** 118](#_Toc97112820)

[**5.2.4 Summary** 123](#_Toc97112821)

[**5.3 The College and the WP/FA agenda: “Raising Aspirations”, Ambiguity and Ambivalence** 124](#_Toc97112822)

[**5.3.1 Sayings: “Raising aspirations”: what does it really mean and to whom?** 124](#_Toc97112823)

[**5.3.2 Doings: The College’s WP/FA Strategies and issues of ambiguity, poor communication and the HE offer** 129](#_Toc97112824)

[**5.3.3 Relatings: Perspectives on “elite” universities and issues of ambivalence, impartiality and personal choice** 135](#_Toc97112825)

[**5.3.4 Summary** 143](#_Toc97112826)

[Chapter 6 Conclusion 145](#_Toc97112827)

[**6.1 Introduction** 145](#_Toc97112828)

[**6.2 Revisiting the Research Questions** 145](#_Toc97112829)

[**6.2.1 SRQ1: Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for?** 145](#_Toc97112830)

[**6.2.2 SRQ2: How do the College’s BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?** 146](#_Toc97112831)

[**6.2.3 SRQ3: In what ways does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?** 148](#_Toc97112832)

[**6.2.4 SRQ4: Does the organisational culture of the College influence the HE decisions made by their BTEC students and, if so, in what ways?** 149](#_Toc97112833)

[**6.2.5 SRQ5: What is the relationship between College organisational culture, College practice and the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?** 150](#_Toc97112834)

[**6.3 Recommendations for Policy and Practice** 151](#_Toc97112835)

[**6.3.1 National (Policy-makers)** 152](#_Toc97112836)

[**6.3.2 Institutional (Colleges)** 154](#_Toc97112837)

[**6.3.3 Institutional (Universities):** 156](#_Toc97112838)

[**6.4 Limitations of the Study** 158](#_Toc97112839)

[**6.5 Further areas for research** 159](#_Toc97112840)

[**6.6 Personal Reflections on my EdD** 160](#_Toc97112841)

[**6.7 Concluding Comments** 161](#_Toc97112842)

[References 163](#_Toc97112843)

[Appendix A: Letter of College approval 192](#_Toc97112844)

[Appendix B: Demographics of College BTEC Students applying for University 193](#_Toc97112845)

[Appendix C: Pre-Interview Questionnaire (students) 195](#_Toc97112846)

[Appendix D: Pre-Interview Questionnaire (staff) 197](#_Toc97112847)

[Appendix E: Interview Questions (students – first interview) 199](#_Toc97112848)

[Appendix F: Interview Questions (students – second interview) 201](#_Toc97112849)

[Appendix G: Interview Questions (tutors/careers coordinator) 203](#_Toc97112850)

[Appendix H: Deciding what and where to study at university: Interview Guide (Staff - Management) 206](#_Toc97112851)

[Appendix I: Participant Information Sheets 209](#_Toc97112852)

[Appendix J: Letter to parents/guardians 213](#_Toc97112853)

[Appendix K: Demographics for students interviewed (10) 214](#_Toc97112854)

[Appendix L: Participant Consent Form 215](#_Toc97112855)

[Appendix M: Demographics for staff interviewed (10) 216](#_Toc97112856)

[Appendix N: Themes and supporting codes/categories 217](#_Toc97112857)

[Appendix O: Applying the Theory of Practice Architectures (using the Table of Invention as suggested in Kemmis et al., 2014) 220](#_Toc97112858)

[Appendix P: Data supporting Chapter 4.2 226](#_Toc97112859)

# **Abstract**

The HE decision-making of BTEC students has typically been framed as somewhat deficient, restricted by financial, geographical and psychological constraints which lead to “inferior” choices of applied subjects and local, post-92 universities. Similarly, the HE choice support provided by FE colleges has been depicted as under-resourced and patchy, appearing insufficient in comparison with other providers. This EdD thesis aimed to explore these framings in more depth and, in particular, to consider how and why FE HE choice support exists in the form that it does. To this end, a primarily qualitative case study of BTEC HE choice in an FE college in the West Midlands was undertaken. Multiple sources of evidence were utilised, namely the College UCAS database, College documents and interviews with students and staff (including senior FE staff, a previously under-explored area). Document and interview data were analysed in accordance with the Theory of Practice Architectures, a framework which illuminated the various arrangements holding the practices of HE choice-making in place, hence indicating what pre-existing conditions (such as organisational arrangements) would need to change for the practices themselves to change. Findings revealed that a number of BTEC student practices challenged the notion of deficient decision-making, including a strong student focus on researching “what” rather than “where” to study and evidence of thorough, comprehensive research, albeit on a small selection of universities. Findings also offered an insight into the conditions underlying the perceived deficiencies in the HE choice support offered by FE colleges. These existed at a practical level, in that competing priorities and daily struggles for survival undermined attempts for a consistent approach. Constraints further existed as moral and ethical issues, with participants debating the impact of conflicting notions such as “raising aspirations”, impartiality and personal choice on the construction of student HE choice support. Findings were translated into a number of practical recommendations for policy-makers, universities and colleges which are detailed at the conclusion of the thesis.

# **List of Tables**

[Table 2.1 The main FE/HE policies and initiatives since 1963 11](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305311)

[Table 2.2 Graduate outcomes for Business Management graduates 18](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305311)

[Table 2.3 Graduate outcomes for Criminology graduates 18](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305311)

[Table 3.1 Economic and educational statistics comparing the city, the West Midlands and Great Britain (ONS, 2020) 50](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305312)

[Table 3.2 Central College enrolment figures (2000-2017) 51](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305313)

[Table 3.3 College documents selected for analysis 59](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305314)

[Table 3.4 Themes generated by document analysis 60](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305315)

[Table 3.5 College BTEC students applying to university by current course 62](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305316)

[Table 3.6 Comparison between demographics of whole BTEC cohort applying to university and those selected for interview 68](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305317)

[Table 4.1 Final UCAS choices of BTEC interviewees 82](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305318)

# **List of Figures**

[Figure 2.1 The three arrangements in which sayings, doings and relatings exist (Kemmis et al, 2014., p. 34) 27](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305986)

[Figure 3.1 NS-SEC class of parental occupations 63](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305987)

[Figure 3.2 Ages of Staff Interviewees 69](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305988)

[Figure 4.1 Applications of College BTEC students by number and subject/university preference 75](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305989)

[Figure 4.2 Offers and rejections of College BTEC students 77](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305990)

[Figure 4.3 Final choices of the College BTEC students by geographical distance and status of university 78](file:///C:\Users\warre\Downloads\EdD%20Thesis%20FINAL%20COPY%20(3).docx#_Toc95305991)

# **Glossary**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A-Level | Academic Level 3 qualifications. |
| Aimhigher | Government initiative to widen participation (2004-2011). |
| BTEC | Business and Technology Education Council. Vocational qualifications. |
| CEIAG | Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance |
| Conditional offer | An offer of a university place with conditions attached (e.g., achieving certain BTEC grades). |
| Coalition Government | Term used to describe government formed jointly by more than one political party (e.g., the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government of 2010-1015 which was formed after the May 2010 UK General Election resulted in a hung parliament). |
| FA | Fair Access. Government policy aiming to increase the number of students from under-represented groups attending “elite”/”selective” universities. |
| FE | Further Education |
| HE | Higher Education |
| IAG | Information, Advice and Guidance |
| HNC | Higher National Certificate. Vocational Level 4 qualification. |
| Maintenance Grants | Money provided by the government to support HE students with living costs. It did not have to be paid back. Abolished in 2015. |
| NCOP | National Collaborative Outreach Programme. Government  initiative to widen participation to HE (2017- 2019). |
| New Labour | Term used to describe the UK Labour government of 1997-2010. Refers to the ideology of a “third way” between capitalism and socialism, in which use of markets delivers both economic efficiency and social justice. |
| New Right | Term associated with the UK Conservative Government of 1979-1997. Refers to a strand of Conservatism ideologically committed to economic liberalism and social conservatism. |
| OfS | Office for Students. Independent regulator of HE in England, aiming to ensure that all students are able to access, succeed in and progress from HE. |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills. Inspectors of services providing education and skills training for all ages and of care for young people. |
| Pre-1992 Universities | Term used to describe institutions that held university status prior to the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992. |
| Post-1992 Universities | Term used to describe the former polytechnics, central institutions and colleges of HE that were given university status by the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 (as well as institutions given this status since then). |
| Russell Group (RG) | Self-selecting group of 24 public research universities in the UK. This group is sometimes perceived as representing the “best” of UK universities, although this claim is disputed. |
| Sutton Trust 30 (ST30)  T Levels | Group of 30 UK universities in which it was estimated that less than 10% of places could be accessed by students with less than 200 UCAS points. Used by the Sutton Trust (an educational charity addressing social mobility) as an alternative to the Russell Group when considering access to “top” universities.  Level 3 vocational qualifications similar to BTECs (from 2020). |
| “Top-up” loans | Government policy from 1988 which “topped up” the student maintenance grant with a loan and began the gradual replacement of the student maintenance grant with student loans. |
| WP | Widening Participation. Government policy with the aim of increasing the number of students from under-represented groups entering higher education. |
| Unconditional offer | An offer of a university place with no conditions attached. |
| UCAS | University and Colleges Admissions Service. |
| UniConnect | Government initiative to widen participation to HE, consisting of 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners (2019-present). |

# **Chapter 1 Introduction**

The following serves as an introduction to the thesis. The initial section outlines my personal motivations for choosing to research the higher education (HE) decision-making of Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) students in a further education (FE) college and includes a brief synopsis of policy and research in this area. Gaps within the research are then identified and the research questions emanating from these gaps, elucidated. A section follows in which some of the controversial terminology within the thesis is addressed and the understanding I have of these terms is analysed. Finally, the structure of the thesis is detailed.

## **Background Context (Personal, policy and research)**

Between 2003 and 2019, I worked as a careers adviser at an FE college in an urban area of high economic deprivation. Part of my role involved assisting BTEC students in making decisions about what and where to study at university, an experience which led to an interest in the research topic of BTEC HE decision-making and eventually resulted in the current study. My interest was initially aroused by the decision of many of the students to continue to study their BTEC subject at the local post-92 university and to wonder to what extent this might be a default decision and to what extent other options might have been considered. My interest was also piqued by division within the careers team as to how we might best conduct initial HE sessions with the BTEC students. One colleague, for example, tended to focus on the local universities she knew students were interested in, whilst another focused on league table positions with the underlying purpose of encouraging students to look away from the local area. My own position was somewhat conflicted, as I was mindful as to what the students in front of me favoured but also aware of rhetoric emphasising the importance of ensuring students (and particularly low socio-economic status (SES), first-generation HE students) fulfilled their potential.

The BTEC course is a vocational qualification combining practical and theory work that, although initially developed as a route into employment, can also be used to access higher education (UCAS, 2016; 2018a). The qualification is a good example of the overlap in English vocational education between vocational and academic pathways. This overlap is also found in other European countries such as France but not, for example, in the Netherlands, where vocational education is solely about preparation for particular occupations (Herbert, 2019). Vocational education in England has long been criticised for its lack of coherence and structure and has faced a number of programmes of reform (Wolf, 2011; Sainsbury, 2016). The current programme of reform has seen the introduction of a new vocational qualification, the T-level (first introduced in 2020), with plans for many BTECs to be withdrawn as more T-levels are introduced. This move has been widely criticised, with many education leaders resistant to the withdrawal of courses which are both popular with students and well-respected by universities (Camden, 2022).

BTEC students applying for university have increased substantially in recent years, with students taking a BTEC qualification accounting for 26% of the university cohort in 2015, compared to 14% in 2008 (Mian et al., 2016). However, BTEC students tend to be under-represented in both “higher status” courses such as medicine and dentistry (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Mian et al., 2016) and “higher tariff” or “highly selective” universities, such as the Russell Group universities (Kelly, 2017; UCAS, 2020). One reason for this may be because BTECs tend to offer clearer routes to the applied degree courses which are more likely to be offered by recruiter universities than selective ones (Shields and Masardo, 2015). This is a particular issue for BTEC courses such as Travel and Tourism or Games Design, with those studying BTEC courses more closely aligned with academic subjects (such as Business or Applied Science) more likely to be able to access a wider range of courses and so, universities.

As BTEC students are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than their A level peers (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014), they are sometimes used as a proxy group for those exploring widening participation (WP), a long-standing government policy focused on increasing numbers from disadvantaged or under-represented groups attending university and, in particular, “highly selective” universities (DfES, 2003; DBIS, 2011; 2016). One explanation for the differing HE participation rates between groups of students is that their HE decision-making processes are significantly different. For example, research has shown that the HE choices of low SES students are constrained by a number of factors including financial, geographical, academic and psychological barriers (Archer et al., 2003; Pugsley, 2004; Reay et al., 2005). Research specifically with vocational students has tended to show similar patterns (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012). Research has also revealed that one influence on students’ HE decisions can be schools and colleges, with research indicating that the support offered at FE colleges is often under-resourced, patchy and compares unfavourably with other providers (Pugsley, 2004; Gartland and Smith, 2018).

Consideration of the above and associated literature, seems to suggest somewhat of a deficit discourse emerging around low SES BTEC students studying at FE colleges with the intention of progressing to local post-92 universities. For example, such students’ parental level of income and/or occupation denotes that they are said to be in a “disadvantaged” group (DBIS, 2011; 2016). Secondly, their vocational BTEC course can be viewed as less suitable a preparation for university than other more academic level 3 courses such as A levels (Russell Group, 2019; Cambridge University, 2020). Additionally, their institution, the FE college, is often perceived as an inferior post-16 option and is often found wanting in its HE choice support (Pugsley, 2004; Gartland and Smith, 2018). Finally, the local, post-92 choices of the students can potentially lead researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to question the students’ ability to make the best choice to fulfil their potential, whether the underlying issue is seen to be individual deficits such as low aspiration (primarily policy-makers) or structural constraints such as finance (primarily researchers).The realisation of this potentially deficit picture of FE BTEC students and their HE choices added to my motivation to want to study this particular research area and to compare the picture painted by policy and past research with the experiences of the students and the staff in my institution of employment.

## **1.2 Identifying the gap**

The literature relating to HE choice has largely focused on students studying A levels in schools or sixth forms with less attention paid to those studying vocational qualifications in FE colleges (Reay et al., 2005; Donnelly, 2015a). When studies have focused on FE colleges and on BTEC students in particular, they have tended to focus primarily on the students themselves, with the potentially key influencers of staff either not involved or involved only peripherally (Gartland and Smith, 2018; Baker, 2020). When studies have involved staff, they have tended to involve teaching or careers staff rather than senior management, despite the fact that senior leaders may greatly influence the nature of an institution’s HE support and that the inclusion of this group’s perspectives could provide new insights. A primary focus on the student perspective has tended to lead to reporting of the ways in which an institution supports their students with their HE choices rather than an in-depth look at how and why this support exists in the form that it does. The current study aimed to address this gap in the literature by means of a holistic, multi-dimensional case study of BTEC HE choice in an FE College. It aimed to explore perceptions around HE choice and HE choice support in the College, to identify any particular enablers or constraints and to provide recommendations to inform future policy and practice within both FE and HE.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

The main research question was as follows:

How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions?

The subsidiary research questions (SRQs) were:

* SRQ1: Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for?
* SRQ2: How do the College’s BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?
* SRQ3: In what ways does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?
* SRQ4: Does the organisational culture of the College influence the HE decisions made by their BTEC students and, if so, in what ways?
* SRQ5: What is the relationship between College organisational culture, College practice and the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

## **1.4 Defining “disadvantaged” or “under-represented” groups**

Throughout this thesis, reference is made variously to disadvantaged, under-represented and low socio-economic status students. When referring to WP policy, I have tended to use the terms “disadvantaged” or “under-represented” as these are the terms used in policy documents (DBIS, 2011; 2016; OfS, 2021). Examples of disadvantaged or under-represented groups (as defined by policy) would typically include students from areas of low HE participation, low income or low socio-economic background, some Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, mature students, disabled students and care leavers (OfS, 2021). The BTEC student cohort generally contains higher proportions of these groups and, as highlighted earlier, is sometimes utilised as a proxy group for the disadvantaged or under-represented. When referring to the literature, I have tended to use the term favoured by the various authors, as I am aware that changing this may change the exact meaning of their research. In addition, I have tended to favour the term “low socio-economic status” when making overall points as this is, for me, a term that is less nebulous and less subjective a concept than, for example, “working class” and also the literature often seems to use the term “working class” to signify belonging to lower social class categories, as measured by a number of different scales (for example, Reay et al., 2001b; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). One of the dangers of employing terms such as “disadvantaged” or “low socio-economic status” is that it tends to reinforce the notion of a deficit discourse in relation to particular groups as it defines them by what they do not have. In this research, I collected information in relation to the job title and earnings of students’ parents/guardians and as to whether students were first or second-generation HE students. Whilst I did loosely characterise students as low or high socio-economic status in order to give the reader the possibility of comparison, I have also tried to be clear as to exact parental occupations and earnings so that readers can understand some of the nuances of students’ circumstances (see 3.5.2 and 3.5.3 for further discussion).

## **1.5 Defining “elite” or “selective” universities**

An aspect of widening participation explored within this thesis is the notion of “fair access” (FA). “Fair access” encompasses the idea that disadvantaged/under-represented students should be encouraged to apply for the “best” universities. One of the issues with this policy is defining the notion of “best” university. The 2003 HE White Paper uses the language of “best” or “elite” universities, the 2011 HE White Paper talks about encouraging disadvantaged students to apply for the most “selective” universities, whilst the 2016 HE White Paper uses the term “highly selective institutions”. However, none of these papers include an exact definition. A Sutton Trust paper, attempting to address this issue, contended that “elite” universities were likely to be the ones most highly regarded by employers, most regularly topping league tables and associated with the highest lifetime earnings (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). The paper considered that one of the common groups to be included in this definition were Russell Group (RG) universities, a group of highly selective, research-intensive universities, attendance at which is said to increase earnings around 10% more than the average degree (Belfield et al., 2018). However, they also pointed out that this group ignores some highly ranked and highly regarded institutions and that a slightly larger group (such as the Sutton Trust 30 (ST30) which includes universities in which it was estimated that less than 10% of places at the universities could be accessed by students with less than 200 UCAS points) might also be utilised. For this study, I have chosen to consider both RG universities and ST30 universities as “elite” because, although the RG group seems to be the group that most studies reference when looking at “elite” university applications (see for example, Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Donnelly, 2015a), including the ST30 group potentially avoids too narrow a definition of “best”. In adopting this definition of “best” or “elite”, I am not conceding that these universities are necessarily the best, just that these are the universities that I believe (based on the evidence discussed above) policy-makers, researchers and practitioners are thinking of when the terms “selective”, “elite”, “best” and “top” are discussed. I will be continuing to place these terms in inverted commas throughout the remainder of the thesis in order to denote their contested nature.

## **1.6 A note on organisational culture**

The research questions make mention of the College’s “organisational culture”, a term that it will also be useful to consider prior to proceeding with the main body of the thesis. The notion of organisational culture is not one with a universal definition agreed by all who study it. Most would pertain to the idea that it is a set of norms, beliefs, principles and ways of behaving that give an organisation its distinctive character (Brown, 1995). However, there is disagreement, for example, as to whether an organisation has one over-riding monoculture or many sub-cultures, whether organisational culture is a deeply embedded social system or just one aspect of an organisation and to what extent it is resistant to change (Willcoxson and Millett, 2000). Schein (2017) conceives of organisational culture as multi-layered, with three layers: artifacts (visible signs of culture such as dress or office layout), espoused values (public statements about an organisation’s values) and basic underlying assumptions (ways in which things actually get done in the organisation). This study focused on the College’s espoused values (as outlined in its prospectus, website and various strategic documents) and the basic underlying assumptions operating in relation to its HE choice programme and the relationships between the two. It is important to note that it was not the intention of the current study to build a complete picture of the College’s culture across all contexts. The aim was to use strategic documents to provide a general overview of “official” College culture (or espoused values) and then to examine this in relation to the culture within one particular context, that of HE choice support.

## **1.7 Organisation of the thesis**

The remainder of this thesis is organised as follows. Chapter Two is a literature review covering the policy context in which students are making HE decisions, possible theoretical approaches to HE decision-making and previous research involving the HE choice-making of both vocational and low SES students and the ways in which schools and colleges might shape student decisions. Chapter Three covers the methodology of the study starting with the philosophical underpinnings of the research before moving on to cover the reasons behind the selection of a primarily qualitative case study approach. It further adds information on my positionality to the research, including a section on my insider-outsider role. Background context of the College and its BTEC qualifications form another part of this chapter, with its final section dedicated to describing each phase of the research from document analysis to statistical analysis of UCAS choices to interviews of staff and students. Chapters Four and Five comprise the two findings and analysis chapters of the thesis, with Chapter Four focusing primarily on the students’ decision-making processes and Chapter Five focusing on the role of the College in supporting the students’ HE choices. Chapter Six forms the conclusion to the thesis, revisiting and answering each research question before highlighting the unique contribution to knowledge. Recommendations for policy and practice are made before the limitations of the research are discussed and some personal reflections on the EdD are considered.

# **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

## **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter contextualises the study by considering the conditions in which BTEC students are making their HE decisions, potential theoretical approaches to HE decision-making and previous research on student HE choices. The chapter will begin by outlining the policy context in which students are making HE decisions and in which staff are supporting them. The policy discussed will be primarily English policy as education in the UK has been a devolved responsibility since the late 1990s (UK Government, 2021) and will consist of two main areas; higher education and further education. There is a particular emphasis on widening participation (WP) as both BTEC courses and FE colleges contain large numbers of disadvantaged or under-represented students. The chapter will continue by examining the theoretical approaches utilised by previous researchers of HE choice and introducing a different approach, which could add a new perspective to the field. The final part of the chapter will highlight previous research into HE decision-making and, in particular, the influence of schools and colleges on these choices. This section will highlight what is already known and consider how an in-depth focus on BTEC students and college staff in the context of an FE environment will be able to add to the literature.

## **2.2 Further and Higher Education Context**

Within the English education system, most young people study within a school until the age of 16, at which point, the majority will take their General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications (GCSEs). Continuing education from this point means entering further education where (unlike a number of European countries, such as Ireland and Germany) students are faced with a wide choice, not only of subjects to study but of institutions at which to study. Possible choices of FE institution include training providers, school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and FE colleges. Although FE providers can offer students a range of both academic and vocational courses, the term “FE” has traditionally been associated with vocational provision and vocational courses continue to make up a large part of its offer, particularly in the case of FE colleges (Hodgson and Spours, 2017). This association has led to one of FE’s primary functions being considered to be an economic one: providing people with the skills they need in the labour market (DfE, 2021). This association is in line with many other European and international countries who also emphasise the link between vocational education and employment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop], 2020). One difference, however, is that most European countries see vocational training as an important subsector of the education system with its own institutions (Cedefop, 2017). In England, vocational training is not generally prioritised in the same way and the FE sector as a whole tends to have low status, commonly referred to as the “forgotten sector” or HE’s poor relation (Augar, 2019).

At the conclusion of further education study, one option for students who have taken appropriate courses (such as A levels or BTECs) is to progress onto a HE course. These are primarily offered at universities, although some FE colleges and alternative institutions also offer HE provision. Contrary to FE, where it is very unusual for students to move outside of the local area, the existence of maintenance (“living costs”) loans for HE students means that they can, in theory, consider a huge variety of institutions from all over the UK. From 1970 to 1992, these institutions were divided into two main types, with polytechnics offering vocationally-oriented government awarded degrees on one side and universities awarding their own more academically-focused degrees on the other (Bathmaker and Bowl, 2018). Although this division was officially abolished in 1992 (Further and HE Act, 1992), in practice, division has remained, with former polytechnics continually referred to as post-1992 institutions and existing universities described as pre-1992. This division informs the generally accepted hierarchical system of universities in the UK, that sees Oxbridge and the ancient Scottish universities generally perceived to be at the top, other pre-92 universities such as redbrick and plate glass next and post-1992 universities positioned further down (see section 1.5 for further discussion of “elite” universities). This generally accepted hierarchy is supported by a number of university league tables (although rankings can vary depending on the exact measures used by the various systems). It is important to note that this hierarchy is open to criticism as much depends on the criteria that the universities are judged on and the criteria that a particular individual student might have in selecting an institution.

### **2.2.1 Policy Overview**

Since the mass expansion of both FE and HE began in the 1960s, the sectors have come to be dominated by two key political agendas; marketisation and widening participation. The table below outlines the main FE and HE policy reforms since this time, beginning with the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), an early example of both marketisation and widening participation, as the report envisaged HE expansion as a means to improve both the country’s economic position and the accessibility of its provision (see Table 2.1). The marketisation of English FE/HE began to really accelerate in the 1980s, following global trends in HE (Brown, 2011; Marginson, 2013) and also mirroring what was happening to the rest of the English education system under the New Right Conservative government of that era (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). This pursuit of marketisation embodied the New Right’s perception of education primarily in terms of economic growth and was one manifestation of their neoliberal ideology, with its prizing of the free market, competition and individualism. The concept of individualism is particularly interesting in relation to HE choices as it suggests we are all essentially independent and self-directed and all equally able to achieve success through rational, calculated choices and/or hard work (Taylor-Gooby and Leruth, 2018). This notion connects to the related concept of individualisation, which suggests that this emphasis on individual responsibility for such decisions as university choices, indicates that it is the individual themselves who has failed, for example, to convert the opportunity of a particular university place into reality and downplays the role of any structural constraints, such as family income or other circumstances. Examples of the New Right’s pursuit of marketisation include HE “top-up” loans (which supplemented student grants) and the incorporation of FE colleges in 1992.

The corresponding acceleration of WP policy, which also followed global trends in HE (Chien et al., 2017), can more easily be seen in the policies of the subsequent government, New Labour (1997-2010) whose approach, the “third way”, strongly intertwined the concepts of widening participation and marketisation, with the market seen as an important element for the promotion of social justice and opportunities for all. New Labour’s ascent to power heralded an acceleration of HE policy in particular and their ideology can be seen reflected in this policy which involved the introduction of tuition fees, counterbalanced by a range of initiatives designed to increase participation for disadvantaged young people (DfES, 2003; 2004). Government since 2010 has tended not to deviate from the path of FE and HE as marketised commodities which can also serve to widen participation, with both the Coalition government (2010-2015) and the subsequent Conservative government (2015-present) championing a discourse of qualifications for economic growth, the value of a competitive marketplace and the importance of education for social mobility (DBIS, 2011; 2016; Wolf, 2011; Sainsbury, 2016).

Table 2.1 The main FE/HE policies and initiatives since 1963

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Policy/Initiative** | **Government** |
| 1963 | The Committee of Higher Education Report (Robbins Report) | Conservative |
| 1988 | Top up loans for students White Paper | Conservative |
| 1992 | Further and Higher Education Act | Conservative |
| 1997 | The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report) | New Labour (commissioned by Conservatives) |
| 1997 | Kennedy Report: Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education | New Labour |
| 1998 | Teaching and Higher Education Act (Tuition fees of £1000 introduced) | New Labour |
| 2003 | The Future of Higher Education White Paper | New Labour |
| 2004 | Higher Education Act (Tuition fees of up to £3000 a year introduced) | New Labour |
| 2004 | Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions to Higher Education | New Labour |
| 2005 | Foster Review of Further Education Colleges | New Labour |
| 2010 | Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance | Coalition: Conservative/Liberal Democrat (commissioned by Labour)) |
| 2011 | Wolf Review of Vocational Education | Coalition: Conservative/Liberal Democrat |
| 2011 | Students at the Heart of the System White Paper | Coalition: Conservative/Liberal Democrat |
| 2012 | Tuition fees increased to £9000 a year | Coalition: Conservative/Liberal Democrat |
| 2016 | Sainsbury Review of Technical Education | Conservative |
| 2016 | Higher Education: Success as a Knowledge Economy White Paper | Conservative |
| 2017 | Higher Education Research Act | Conservative |
| 2017 | Careers Strategy: making the most of everyone’s skills and talents | Conservative |
| 2019 | Augar Review of Post-18 Education and Funding | Conservative |
| 2021 | Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning Opportunity for Opportunity and Growth White Paper | Conservative |

### **2.2.2 Marketisation**

*FE (Incorporation, funding cuts and FE culture)*

The primary manifestation of marketisation in FE was the incorporation of FE colleges that occurred in 1992 as part of the neoliberal agenda of the New Right. Incorporation meant that FE colleges were freed from local government control so that they could act more like private businesses, selecting for example, the courses they wanted to run and competing with one another for students. One advantage of this was thought to be that colleges could more easily fulfil their economic purpose by being responsive to local businesses and so addressing a perceived skills gap in the workforce (Hammond, 2003). However, FE could only really operate as a “quasi-market” as it remained tightly controlled by national government. For example, New Labour extended government’s central control of FE through the use of numerous quangos (non-governmental funded bodies who operate at arm’s length from the government) ensuring that FE leaders’ “freedoms” were largely restricted by preoccupations with funding, targets and inspection (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Although, the Coalition government abolished many of these quangos in an attempt to free colleges to compete (Forrester and Garratt, 2016), they and the subsequent Conservative government retained close central control of the sector, with a particular emphasis on vocational qualification reform (Wolf, 2011; Sainsbury, 2016). This tight control is also enacted in the HE sector by means, for example, of tuition fee caps (Furedi, 2011).

The continued involvement of central government in FE has had a significant impact on colleges, with the period beyond 2010 marking a time of considerable FE funding reduction (far more than faced by HE) and policy reform (Savours and Keohane, 2019; Augar, 2019). Over the last 15 years, 25 reforms have taken place, including changes to funding bodies, to qualification frameworks and a national programme of college mergers (Robinson, 2019). A large number of colleges are in deficit; 40% in 2016/17 had a financial notice to improve (AoC, 2018) and a number of senior leaders have commented that cuts to funding are the biggest challenges they face in FE (Thornton et al., 2018; Savours and Keohane, 2019). Financial cuts have led to an increased pressure for colleges to chase the growing range of competitive funding sources available, competing with training providers to provide apprenticeships, universities to provide HE, and with sixth forms and schools to provide 16-19 provision (Keep, 2018; Augar, 2019). Colleges can feel forced to try to offer everything to everybody (for example, the typical FE College offer could include A levels, apprenticeships, adult back-to-work programmes and specialist provision for off-rolled 14–16-year-olds) which can impact on their ability to develop specialisms and also on the general coherence and nature of FE culture.

In-depth studies of FE culture appear thin on the ground compared to the number devoted to culture within HE, with Lucas and Crowther (2016) considering that incorporation left FE with no clear distinct function and Feather (2016) commenting that difficulties in pinpointing FE culture arise from this loss of identity. For most commentators, the culture of FE was altered after incorporation (1992), with the increased emphasis on enhancing student outcomes and reducing costs leading to the adoption of the practices of corporate management or managerialism (Shain and Gleeson, 1999; Simkins and Lumby, 2002; Lucas and Crowther, 2016). Simkins and Lumby (2002), criticise the tendency to associate this managerialism primarily with FE senior staff and ideas such as community service and teacher autonomy with FE lecturers, pointing out that the two groups are not homogenous (for example, many managers will previously have been lecturers) and that support staff and students also contribute to the culture of FE. Lecturers for example have been found to vary as to the extent to which they follow orders from management (Shain and Gleeson, 1999), perhaps because they are also influenced by the cultures of their previous vocational professions and by their own morals and values. In a more recent study of FE culture, Feather (2016) found that FE lecturers described the culture of their college in relation to themes of blame, bureaucracy, constant change and the relentless seeking of funding, supporting the notion of FE culture as altered by marketisation and as a rather contested and conflicted arena in which to study or work.

*HE (Tuition fees, competition and student choice)*

Marketisation in HE is related primarily to university tuition fees which were first introduced by New Labour in 1998, raised again by New Labour to £3000 in 2004 and then raised again to £9000 by the Coalition government in 2012 (Teaching and HE Act, 1998; HE Act, 2004; DBIS, 2011). Alongside these modifications, changes were also made to students’ financial support packages, with the gradual move away from grants to student loans completed with the abolition of the maintenance grant in 2015 (Hubble and Bolton, 2017). Although university-funded bursaries were introduced in an attempt to offset some of these changes, they proved problematic as there were so many of them at so many different institutions that students struggled to gain knowledge and understanding of them (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013). This transferral of financial risk from the government to the individual (a marked difference to the majority of FE funding) led to an increased emphasis on student choice and competition, with precedence given to increasing numbers of HE providers and increasing the information available to students (DBIS, 2011; 2016). The ideology behind this was the neo-liberal theory of choice; the idea that the process of competition will drive up quality and standards (Ward and Eden, 2009). However, in addition to the acceptance that a lack of quality is an issue in the first place, this notion and the related idea of students as consumers make several further assumptions about the capacities and motivations of the students themselves.

For example, one assumption is that all students/consumers are equaI and have similar economic, social and cultural resources to draw upon when making a HE decision. A further assumption is that all students (and/or parents) will choose or be able to gather information on all possible choices and will thoroughly evaluate the pros and cons of each possible option before selecting the highest quality course. Research has suggested that a large number of students just do not make such choices in this way, even when they have all of the information (Diamond et al., 2012) and that low SES students in particular may struggle to find and decode information (Ball et al., 2003; McGrath and Rogers, 2021) and lack the social and cultural resources (such as links with HE and confidence within its environment) that can ease the choice process (Reay et al., 2005; Bathmaker et al., 2016). These latter points are particularly relevant to the WP agenda as they suggest that some of the students these policies are targeting may not be best served by a system run on the assumption that optimal decisions are only made by exhaustive consideration of all options. For example, government attempts to improve the system by increased provision and/or access to information (for example, Key Information Sets in 2012) have the potential consequence of overloading students who already face an enormous amount of potential choices due to increasing numbers of providers (see for example, Davies et al., 2010; Diamond et al., 2012). If no consideration is given to how students might manage all of this information (or, indeed, if they want or need to), then students (and, in particular, low SES students) may find it difficult to navigate their way through an increasingly marketized HE system. See section 2.3 for further discussion on choice-making processes, including consideration of both individualistic and structural approaches alluded to above.

### **2.2.3 Widening Participation**

*FE (Social inclusion, competing priorities and the academic/vocational divide)*

For both FE and HE, numbers prior to the 1960s/1970s were small, with FE courses tending to be part-time and linked to specific occupations (Lenon, 2018). During the 1970s and 1980s, issues of growing youth unemployment (particularly amongst the working classes) and the rise of the participation age vastly increased numbers attending and FE institutions added more of a social inclusion mission to their original economic intent (Hodgson and Spours, 2017). This was because FE tended to attract those who had not done quite as well in their school exams (for example, O levels or GCSEs) and a lot of these students tended to be from disadvantaged backgrounds (Lenon, 2018). Incorporation was identified as a threat to FE’s status as a centre of widening participation as it emphasised competition rather than collaboration between educational providers, encouraging colleges to pursue students with the best chance of success and to ignore those with the greatest need (Kennedy, 1997). New Labour, whilst still committed to the notion of FE’s economic role (Foster, 2005), attempted to address these concerns by further raising the compulsory participation age and offering a weekly cash payment to young people from low-income families who stayed in full-time education (Lupton and Obolenskaya, 2013). From 2010 onwards, the social inclusion mission of FE was still evident but not emphasised as strongly as the economic imperative, with the suggestion that successful qualification reform would result in enhanced employment opportunities for all which would address social inequalities (for example, Sainsbury, 2016; DBIS, 2016; DfE, 2021).

As the Kennedy Report suggested, the pressure to operate in the competitive market place can create tensions when considered in relation to the type of students FE tends to attract, adding a layer of complexity beyond that generally experienced by schools, even though some schools may have a similarly disadvantaged student cohort. The social mission of FE with its traditional attraction to potentially disenchanted low achievers is often at odds with commercial reality and the need for students to hit retention and achievement targets in order to meet funding requirements, to achieve high Ofsted ratings and to be able to offer employers the engaged and able students they desire (Savours and Keohane, 2019). Another tension is the difficulty in competing with other education institutions in one sense whilst also being asked to collaborate with them for social mobility purposes (for example, DfE, 2017a).

As identified above, a preoccupation of both the Coalition government (2010-2015) and the Conservatives (2015-present) has been vocational qualification reform, arising from concerns that too many vocational qualifications are of low or uncertain quality and/or labour market value and that this can have both an economic and a social impact (Wolf, 2011; Sainsbury, 2016). A related issue with vocational qualifications is around their parity of esteem with academic qualifications; an example of this being the relationship between BTEC and A level qualifications (particularly in relation to university entry). This issue is particularly relevant to WP given that, as with many FE college students, BTEC students tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014; Shields and Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017). In the UK, increased participation in HE by students from non-traditional backgrounds is largely due to the increase in entry of students with BTEC qualifications (Kelly, 2017), with 17.3% of those students starting university in 2018 holding some form of BTEC qualification (UCAS, 2018b). However, the significant majority of BTEC students enter medium or lower-tariff providers; only 3% of 18-year-olds with a vocational qualification entered higher-tariff providers in 2019 compared to 27% of those with a general qualification such as A levels (UCAS, 2020). There is some evidence to say that the rarity of BTEC students accessing “elite” provision may be at least in part attributable to the qualification they hold. For example, Rouncefield-Swales (2012) and Baker (2020) report that some of the BTEC students they interviewed felt that their qualification was a barrier to attending “elite” universities. As the next section illustrates, the barrier of a vocational qualification is just one factor in the complex, stratified field of WP in HE.

*HE (“Fair access” and “elite” provision)*

In 1962, only 4% of the population attended full-time university and the majority of these students were male and middle/upper class (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). The mass expansion of HE that followed the Robbins Report (1963), led to a 30% increase in young people accessing HE between the 1950s and 1997 (Chitty, 2014) but did not necessarily address disadvantage. This was because the increase came disproportionately from the middle classes/higher socio-economic groups (Bathmaker and Bowl, 2018). The first major consideration of widening rather than just increasing participation in HE came in 1998 when the introduction of tuition fees heightened concerns around this issue. New Labour devised a two-pronged approach which is still broadly in action today, with one strand, “widening participation” (WP), addressing the need to increase participation of disadvantaged groups in HE in general and the other strand, “fair access” (FA), tackling issues of participation of disadvantaged groups in “selective” universities (DfES, 2003; 2004; DBIS, 2011; 2016). One related aim also still resonating today was the idea of raising the aspirations of disadvantaged students, an intention which has been criticised for individualising structural disadvantage and promoting a “deficit” view of working-class youth (Spohrer, 2018). Despite the WP commitment of successive governments, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are still 2.3 times less likely to go into HE and 5.7 times less likely to attend an “elite” institution than their advantaged peers (UCAS, 2018b). In 2020, the Office for Students (OfS) introduced national WP targets for the first time, including the aim that the most disadvantaged students will be less than four times as likely to attend a selective university (including Oxbridge and Russell Group universities) as their advantaged peers by 2024/25 (OfS, 2020).

As identified above, and in the previous section, although more students with disadvantaged and/or vocational backgrounds are participating in university, they are considerably more likely to be found in newer institutions than “elite” universities, a situation faced by many countries with high HE participation (Marginson, 2017). Possible reasons behind this include the idea that low SES students attend less “selective” university courses than their attainment might otherwise suggest (Campbell et al., 2019) and that they are less likely than advantaged peers to select a university that would be an academic “reach” for them (Mullen and Goyette, 2019). Further, “elite” universities may perceive non-traditional students as a threat due to the potential effect of their lower entry qualifications, higher risk of drop-out and/or lower chance of employment on rankings and so, recruitment and survival (McCaig, 2018; Bathmaker and Bowl, 2018). Lower-tariff universities can also potentially divert WP students from higher-tariff universities as they are the predominant makers of unconditional offers (see Glossary), offers which WP students may accept not because they are from their favoured university but because they are a “safe” option (OfS, 2019).

Much of the concern around “fair access” is based on the idea that disadvantaged students potentially miss out on the economic, social and cultural advantages that attendance at “elite” universities can bring (de Vries, 2014; Jerrim, 2013; Britton, 2017; Britton et al., 2021). For example, five years after graduation, RG graduates earn approximately 40% more than those who studied at other universities (Belfield et al., 2018). A similar premium exists in relation to subject studied, with medicine and economics graduates showing increased earnings of 60% compared to graduates of history and english (Belfield et al., 2018). However, it must be noted that returns from specific subject and institution combinations can vary which means that the broad headlines of increased earnings/opportunities from certain universities can prove misleading. For example, considering the outcomes of studying business management at a variety of universities suggests that an RG would be the “best” choice, whereas studying criminology (a popular choice for BTEC Applied Science students) at the same universities does not present such a clear-cut decision (see Tables 2.2 and 2.3):

Table 2.2 Graduate outcomes for Business Management graduates (discoveruni, 2022)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **University** | **Average earnings for Business Management graduates (15 months after graduation)** | **% of Business Management graduates in highly skilled employment (15 months after graduation)** |
| Post-92 (Middleton\*) | £19, 500 | 50% |
| Pre-92 (Greene\*) | £21, 000 | 65% |
| RG1 (Midlands) | £25, 000 | 80% |
| RG2 (Midlands) | £27, 000 | 75% |
| RG3 (NorthWest) | £25, 000 | 73% |
| RG4 (Wales) | £23, 000 | 70% |
| RG5 (SouthWest) | £29, 000 | 80% |

\*Pseudonyms for the local universities in this study.

Table 2.3 Graduate outcomes for Criminology graduates (discoveruni, 2022)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| University | Average earnings for Criminology graduates (15 months after graduation) | % of Criminology graduates in highly skilled employment (15 months after graduation) |
| Post-92 (Middleton\*) | £20, 000 | 50% |
| Pre-92 (Greene\*) | £22, 500 | 50% |
| RG1 (Midlands) | £20, 000 | 65% |
| RG2 (Midlands) | £20, 000 | 45% |
| RG3 (NorthWest) | £20, 000 | 50% |
| RG4 (Wales) | £20, 000 | 54% |
| RG5 (SouthWest) | £25, 000 | 75% |

\*Pseudonyms for the local universities in this study.

Further, it must be recognised that consideration of graduate outcomes is only one way in which to judge the value of HE courses and/or universities. The strong economic imperative behind HE policy (see section 2.2.1) is perhaps one reason why government appears to subscribe to this particular judgement, a preference recently evidenced by government plans to restrict “low quality” courses, with a major measure of “low quality” being low graduate returns (OfS, 2022). However, it is not necessarily the case that students’ primary motivation for attending university is to convert the qualification into the highest economic terms possible and to ignore other considerations such as location or support. Increasingly (following the introduction of tuition fees and subsequently, the discourse of the student as consumer), interest has developed into measuring university quality by way of the broader concept of the “student experience” (Temple et al., 2016). One way in which this measure is quantified is by means of student satisfaction scores derived from the National Student Survey (NSS). It may, however, be difficult for students to extract the specific information they need from such broad statistics. One example of this is support, which features only in relation to academic support on the NSS, with other surveys showing that broader definitions of support can produce results that more clearly challenge traditional notions of hierarchy; for example, one survey found only two RG universities were positioned in the top 50 institutions for support (Whatuni, 2020). The discussion above shows that identifying the “best” course/university is a complex and often highly personal issue. The “fair access” agenda seems to have gradually moved towards unquestioningly supporting the notion of an “elite” university being the optimum choice for all when, in reality, this is a debatable notion (Fazackerly, 2013; Rainford, 2021).

*The role of schools and colleges in widening participation in HE*

For the most part, governments have seemed to place responsibility for WP and “fair access” in the hands of HE providers, with the role of schools and colleges defined mainly in terms of the general information, advice and guidance (IAG) they offer to students (DBIS, 2014; DBIS, 2016). The careers education and IAG offer for young people has, however, faced similar turbulence to both FE and HE over the last 20 years with each successive government prone to undoing whatever the previous government had put in place (Hooley et al., 2012; Andrews, 2019). In 2015, a DfE report found that one in three schools were not meeting their statutory duty to provide independent careers guidance and that 16% had dropped careers education from the curriculum (Gibson et al., 2015). This discovery led to the development of the Careers Strategy, a strategy for both schools and colleges, primarily consisting of eight careers benchmarks that institutions should use to review and improve their provision (DfE, 2017b; 2018). The benchmarks primarily focus on employer encounters and general careers provision rather than WP/FA, an omission which was criticised by a recent Sutton Trust report, concerned that the strategy failed to ensure that state school students were given the appropriate advice regarding applications to “top” universities (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). An example of the more general guidelines of the Careers Strategy is the suggestion that all students should understand “the full range” of learning opportunities available to them including university routes (DfE, 2018, p. 9). This approach is perhaps manageable for post-16 choices where students may be comparing five or six local institutions but less so for HE options where, for example, a BTEC Business student could have a potential choice of over 6000 different courses at a huge number of different institutions (UCAS, 2018c).

The extensive nature of the HE market and the lack of guidelines available to colleges on how to present this to students means that the WP outreach initiatives which encourage collaborative partnerships between universities and schools/colleges could be an important factor in determining the support on offer. These have existed on and off since Aimhigher (2004-2011), fulfilling an important role in successive government’s WP agendas. Preliminary evaluation of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), an initiative existing from 2015, now called UniConnect, has revealed some of the barriers to collaborative working for schools and FE colleges (Tazzyman et al., 2018). For example, a major barrier has been identified in that many schools/colleges do not have the time and resources to engage with NCOP. This was found to be a particular difficulty for FE colleges due to factors such as students being more independent, having flexible timetables and being based on different campuses. A further related issue was that outreach could be judged by schools/colleges to be of secondary importance to achievement. The identification of these barriers to successful college-university partnerships suggests that more thought needs to be given to the independent college role in delivering messages about WP/FA. This seems particularly important given the fact that it is colleges that have daily interactions with students all through the HE decision-making process.

Section 2.2 has outlined the complex conditions in which BTEC students in an FE college are making their HE choices. HE policy emphasises the importance of student choice whilst also creating conditions (for example, stratification) that can restrict it. FE policy ensures that the needs of FE students applying to university will have to be balanced against the numerous other pressures for colleges (for example, recruitment, retention and achievement). Finally, a lack of coherence between WP/FA and general IAG policies potentially makes for uncertainty in terms of messages delivered to students. The next section will aim to consider how students make HE decisions within these various conditions, initially considering the various theoretical perspectives on this issue.

## **2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Student HE Decision-making**

Research into HE choice suggests that students of different classes make decisions in different ways and that different practices within a school/college can shape student decisions. Prior to considering this research in detail, it will be useful to outline the various theories that have been utilised to frame these research studies and also to consider their utility in relation to this study. Student HE decision-making has been viewed through the lens of a number of different theoretical perspectives, including those from the fields of economics, sociology and psychology. However, the main debate within HE choice research has involved pitting an economic explanation of choice against a sociological one. The theories most cited in this debate are Rational Choice Theory (a primarily economic theory) and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction (as its sociological counterpart).

### **2.3.1 Rational Choice Theory**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) asserts that an individual will choose the option that offers them the most benefits and the fewest costs. In its purest economic form (for example, Expected Utility Theory), it assumes that decision-makers operate with complete knowledge and the ability to utilise that knowledge (Diamond et al., 2014). RCT explains differences in educational outcomes for different social groups as a result of the groups weighing benefits and costs differently (Boudon, 1974, cited in Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). For example, the Breen-Goldthorpe model of educational decision-making (based on Boudon’s work) assumes that young people are motivated to maintain their current class status but not necessarily to aim any higher and that it is rational for young people of different classes to make different decisions if they are aiming for different goals (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). Government policy tends to align with the RCT model of HE decision-making. For example, the idea that increased choice and competition will result in increased quality is only feasible if students are able to make decisions rationally. Further, the idea that low aspirations are deterring disadvantaged students from entering HE perhaps mirrors the Breen-Goldthorpe model idea of class-motivated maintenance.

There is some empirical evidence to support the notion of RCT as an explanation of HE choice. Becker and Hecken (2009), for example, found that class maintenance was crucial for German students choosing between HE and vocational training. Further, Tavares and Cardoso (2013) considered that Portuguese undergraduates made rational choices when choosing if and where to study at university. However, one of the main criticisms is that many students just do not seem to make decisions in this way (Reay et al., 2005; Menon et al., 2007; Diamond et al., 2012). One answer to this criticism is to query the RCT definition of rationality; for example, Mangan et al. (2010a) suggest that it is rational for students not to seek information if it is hard to find and will make little impact. However, for many researchers, RCT can provide only a partial explanation of student HE choice, with some suggesting that it needs to be paired with other theories such as Bourdieu’s theory on social reproduction (see below) in order to account for the deviations from this model (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014; Davies et al., 2014). As the current study is particularly concerned with exploring the complexities and intricacies of BTEC student HE decision-making within the FE context, the “logical”, individual-focused theory of RCT (at least, alone) does not seem able to offer a complex enough framework to accomplish this task.

RCT is perhaps best viewed as a simplified model, allowing researchers to consider where and why students deviate from this perception of rationality. An example of this can be found within the closely related fields of bounded rationality and behavioural economics. The theory of bounded rationality assumes that rationality is compromised by the limited information-processing capacities of the individual and that people consequently search for a satisfactory outcome (a process known as “satisficing”) rather than the optimal (or “maximising”) solution that RCT suggests (Simon, 1972). This theory is one of the foundational components of the field of behavioural economics, along with the idea that people use heuristics (mental short-cuts) to cope with complicated decisions, resulting in predictable biases and errors (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Both the concept of satisficing and related behavioural economic theories have been successfully applied to HE choice (for example, Mangan et al., 2010a) but there can be issues. Heuristics, for example, are often used unconsciously and so it can be difficult to uncover their use (Diamond et al., 2012). Further, behavioural economics has been used in advertising and politics as a means to “nudge” people in the “right” direction, meaning there are some ethical issues too in relation to how this theory might be utilised (Hansen and Jepherson, 2017; Moore, 2019). Most pertinently, this approach, though more able than RCT to explain seemingly “irrational” decisions, similarly focuses on individual cognition. Therefore, it still struggles to provide a complete framework for a study exploring HE decision-making within the social context of an FE college, with the hope of engendering change at an organisational rather than just individual level.

### **2.3.2 Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction**

Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction shares similarities with behavioural economics in that it also rejects the economic idea of the rational agent, fully able to make optimal choices. However, Bourdieu argues that rationality is compromised not only by the limits of human cognition but also because it is socially structured and determined (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013). Bourdieu suggests that the culture of the dominant group (or groups) in society becomes synonymous with the culture of the education system, ensuring that this group has and is able to keep an inherent advantage (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). One of the ways in which this advantage manifests itself is in the creation of the habitus; a durable internalisation of culture which creates dispositions toward or away from certain behaviours. Another manifestation is in terms of capital; the economic, social and cultural resources people in different groups are able to appropriate (Bourdieu, 1986). In terms of navigating entry to HE for example, the system would be seen as inherently aligned with the culture of the middle classes (dominant group) and so middle-class pre-dispositions and resources. So, for example, a middle-class young person would be more pre-disposed than a working-class person towards going to university and would have more of the economic, social and cultural resources that could ease this transition.

Bourdieu’s concepts have been used frequently to theorise about the structural constraints that low SES students encounter when making decisions about HE (Reay et al., 2001b; 2005; Kleanthous, 2013; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Dunne et al.; 2014). His theories provide a means to discuss the relationship between class and higher education choices and have proved invaluable in the context of understanding widening participation (Burke, 2017). However, they have also been the object of criticism. One of the main criticisms of Bourdieu’s theory is that it is too deterministic; that it denies individual agency and places the working classes in a deficit position (Sullivan, 2002). This is a possible issue for this study as it hopes to focus strongly on ways in which practice might be improved and so would benefit from a theory which is perhaps more disposed to the possibility of change and, in particular, change at an organisational level as opposed to societal. A further criticism is that it struggles to account for intra-class differences (Reay, 1998; Brooks, 2003; Morrison, 2011), an issue perhaps for an in-depth case study hoping to uncover the nuances of each individual’s situation. Bourdieu’s theories have also been criticised as hard to define and so to interpret (Atkinson, 2011; Donnelly, 2015a). For example, when considering the habitus of a family (described by Reay,1998, as “familial habitus”), Atkinson (2011) considers “family-specific doxa” to be the appropriate term, whereas Kleanthous (2013) prefers family to be seen as a field.

Bourdieu’s theories have also been used to explore institutional influence in HE choice, with “habitus” playing a particularly prominent role. The term “institutional habitus” (IH) was first developed by Reay (1998) in order to: “demonstrate how the organisational cultures of schools and colleges are linked to wider socio-economic cultures through processes in which schools and their catchments mutually shape and reshape each other” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 36). IH is considered to cover educational status, curriculum offer, organisational practices and cultural/expressive characteristics of the institution and has been used by Reay in several studies (Reay et al., 2001a; Reay et al., 2010). It has also been used by several other researchers (for example, Morrison, 2009; Ingram, 2009) but not without attracting a number of criticisms. Atkinson (2011), for example, considers it debatable as to whether an institution can be said to have a disposition and suggests that IH conceptualises the school as a one-dimensional entity, leaving no room for the idea of internal differentiation. Burke et al. (2013) counter this argument claiming that institutions can still have a collective ethos even with dissention in the ranks and that whilst institutions do not have an emotional life the people within them do. The complexity and constant change in FE, however, does suggest that focus beyond the detection of a collective viewpoint may highlight the diversity of perspectives likely to be found within the College.

Donnelly (2015b) suggests that IH is an oversimplification in that it reduces an institution to a single set of definitions and that it assumes an interconnected relationship between, for example, a school and its intake (for example, the idea that a school’s intake constrains its practices). Donnelly (2015b) also comments that IH does not enable the effects of school and home to be separated, making it difficult to be certain of the extent of the isolated school effect. These latter criticisms are particularly relevant in relation to the current study which aims to consider the particular effect of the College and so ideally needs a framework with this as its focus and which can more easily cope with multiple perspectives. In his study on HE choice, Donnelly (2015a) chose to use some of the concepts of Basil Bernstein; classification (the basic structure of the school curriculum) and framing (the control teacher and student possess in terms of the selection/organisation of knowledge), to compare two schools with similar intakes but different HE progression rates (see 2.5.1 for further details). Although, this approach seems to offer a useful way to explore how HE choice information is transmitted within the school (for example, strongly classified as seen as separate from other parts of curriculum or weakly framed as not prioritised), it does not necessarily offer the means to explore in detail why HE is classified and/or framed in this way (Donnelly, 2015a; 2015b, himself comments that it does not explain the differences). A theory enabling exploration of this area would be useful for the current study as, in highlighting why an institution practises in the way it does, insight could be gained into the practicalities, consequences and ethics of changing the practice.

### **2.3.3 The Theory of Practice Architectures**

Although the theories discussed above have contributed much to the understanding of student HE decision-making, they perhaps lack the detail necessary for an in-depth consideration of the reasons behind one practice in one institution from a number of different perspectives (student, teacher, senior management). In order to build on previous work, a theory considering practice at different levels within a complex institution and how these interrelate would be useful and one possibility is the theory of practice architectures, first articulated by Kemmis and Grootenboer in 2008 (Kemmis et al., 2014; Kemmis, 2019). The theory of practice architectures is influenced mainly by Schatzki’s theory of practice and in particular his focus on the idea of arrangements of doings and sayings enabling and constraining practice (Kemmis, 2019). Kemmis and Grootenboer developed this idea, adding a further element of relatings to arrive at this definition of practice:

“A practice is a form of socially established cooperative human activity in which characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings) and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (relatings) and when this complex of sayings, doings and relatings “hangs together” in a distinctive project.” (Kemmis et al., 2014, pg. 31)

The aim of the theory is to reveal the way in which practices are enabled and constrained by the conditions in which they transpire. Practice is seen as involving sayings (ways of understanding, language and discourses), doings (modes of action or activities) and relatings (the way in which an individual relates to other people and to the world). Practices occur within a site or sites (for example, student learning, teaching and/or leadership) and are shaped by arrangements existing at each site. Kemmis et al. (2014) describe three different types of arrangements: cultural-discursive arrangements (resources that make possible sayings of a practice), material-economic arrangements (resources that make possible doings of a practice) and social-political arrangements (resources that make possible the relationships between people and non-human objects that occur in the practice). These three arrangements are known as practice architectures; pre-conditions that shape practice. Figure 2.1 illustrates the three arrangements in which sayings, doings and relatings exist. The theory of practice architectures is linked to the theory of ecologies of practice in that practices are not considered to exist in isolation but to interrelate (Mahon et al., 2017). For example, the practice architectures found at one site (for example, the sayings, doings and relatings of teaching) can become the practice architectures that enable and constrain student learning.

The theory of practice architectures appeals as a possible way to theorise about the way an institution shapes HE choice for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is not a theory which denies the utility of previous theories. For example, Kemmis et al. (2014) draw parallels between the three arrangements of the theory and both, Habermas’ themes of language, work and power and Bourdieu’s concept of capitals. In re-imagining Bourdieu’s concepts in relation to TOPA, it is possible to see cultural capital in the form of the sayings of a practice, economic capital in the form of the doings and social capital in the form of the relatings. Wilkinson et al. (2010) further evoke Bourdieu when they suggest that if learners do not find meaning in the sayings of a practice, continuity in the doings of a practice and belonging in the relatings of a practice, they will struggle to develop the dispositions (habitus) in order to successfully partake in the practice (this also mirrors Bourdieu’s idea that without the requisite dispositions/capitals it is difficult to understand the

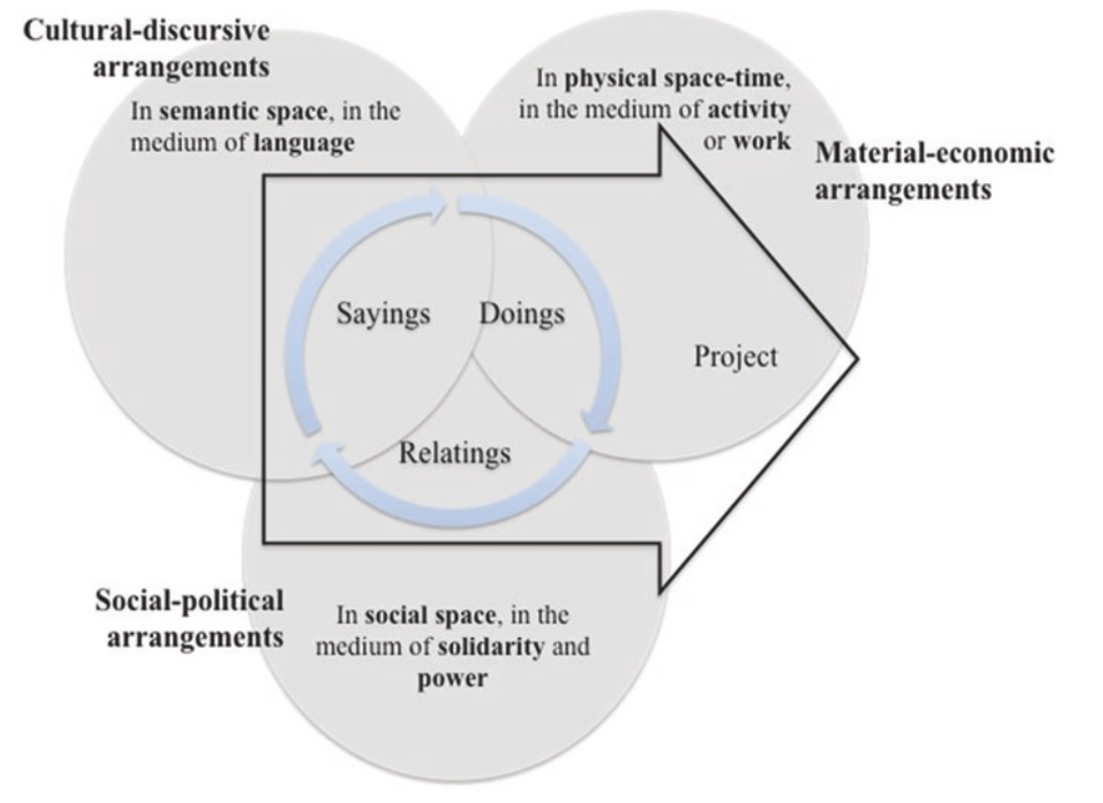


Figure 2.1 The three arrangements in which sayings, doings and relatings exist (Kemmis et al, 2014., p. 34)

rules of the game; doxa; and so successfully play it). There are further parallels to be drawn between Bourdieu and TOPA in that both theories and concepts are concerned with what is holding practices in place, thus enabling them to explore the structural context underlying the individual cognition explored by theories such as RCT or BE. A difference in the starting points of the two theories, however (with Bourdieu focusing on capital as the property of individuals and TOPA focusing on organisational practices), means that this structural context is explored/imagined in two different ways. For Bourdieu, it is specifically tied to the various constrictions or architectures of class, whereas for TOPA, it relates more to the particular architectures underlying the specific sayings, doings and relatings of a practice. In this way, TOPA can be used in order to build on previous work utilising Bourdieu. For example, Bourdieu’s work identifies the dominance of the “elite” (middle-classes) in education in that the structure/architectures of the education system mirror the habitus and available capitals of the “elite”, thus their dominance is maintained. TOPA’s notion of the architectural constraints of practices also potentially suggests the idea of a status quo which can be firmly entrenched. It’s emphasis on unravelling the particular arrangements behind the sayings, doings and relatings, however, seems to offer an opportunity to start to unpick some of the taken-for-granted assumptions and to possibly re-imagine things differently, potentially challenging and changing the status quo.

A further advantage of TOPA is that it acknowledges not only the complexity but the interrelatedness of practice and the impact of one set of practices on another. This seems to be particularly relevant as HE choice is a complex subject and an FE College is a complex institution, with a number of competing forces. This focus on complexity and interrelatedness seems to offer the means to deal with an organisational culture such as FE which may be fluid, contradictory and constantly shifting rather than a mono-culture or disposition which is static or fixed. It further potentially aids exploration of the interactions between the various elements of the “deficit” discourse (see section 1.1), for example, the BTEC course, the FE College, post-92 universities, individual deficits such as low aspirations and structural constraints such as finance. TOPA is an approach which has been developed for use in education and so is particularly aware of likely conditions in educational settings. One reason for the original development of the theory was a concern that teachers were being asked to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources and that a theory demonstrating factors constraining practice would help to elucidate why results were compromised (Blue and Shove, 2019). It is an approach which has been designed for practical use; although it is relatively new, the authors and others have made several attempts to demonstrate the theory at work in practice and also stress the potential of the theory to effect change, predominantly at an organisational level. Up to date, the theory of practice architectures has been used to theorise about PE pedagogy in New Zealand (Petrie, 2016), a school’s development in difficult times in Sweden (Tyren, 2017) and initial teacher education learning practices in Norway (Sjolie, 2017). With this emphasis on practical application within education, it is likely that this theory will map comparatively easily onto practice in an FE College and thus facilitate development of some of the themes explored by previous work utilising concepts such as institutional habitus. The theory of practice architectures seems to offer an alternative lens through which to view practices which support informed HE choice and could complement the other/earlier perspectives discussed, given that it enables a thorough review of the way an institution might shape its HE choice input.

Having considered the various theoretical perspectives on HE choice and outlined a possible alternative, the next section will aim to consider how students actually make HE decisions, highlighting what is known already about how students make their HE choices, how schools and colleges support them and the theoretical perspectives utilised.

## **2.4 HE Choice Research: How do students make HE decisions?**

There have been numerous studies investigating student HE decision-making and the factors, influences and constraints it involves (for example, Reay et al., 2001b; Davies et al., 2010; Diamond et al., 2012). A subset of this research has tended to focus on class differences, often utilising the theories and concepts of Bourdieu to suggest that low SES students make HE decisions under more constraints than high SES students (Ball et al., 2002; Archer et al., 2003; Pugsley, 2004; Reay et al., 2005). As many BTEC students come from a low SES background, consideration of the findings of this body of research is pertinent, especially when combined with what is currently known about vocational/BTEC student HE decision-making. The following section aims to explore the five main constraints usually cited; use of information, financial, geographical, academic and psychological and the relationship between these factors. Before focusing on these constraints, it is important to consider separately the processes of students making subject choices, as the literature on constraint often relates more strongly to choice of institution than subject.

### **2.4.1 Subject Choice**

The ways in which students decide which subject to study at university have received far less attention than the ways in which they decide on an HE institution. Often, research has focused on why students choose a particular degree subject. For example, Trend (2009) researched the subject choices of geography, earth and environmental sciences, suggesting that students were influenced by family and social class expectations, subject interest and potential career opportunities. Skatova and Ferguson (2014) found that motivations could vary depending on course, finding, for example, that those choosing engineering were motivated more by career than interest whilst those choosing arts or humanities subjects were motivated more by interest than career. Bates et al. (2009) differentiated between students taking academic and vocational routes, suggesting that students taking academic routes were more likely to choose a subject based on interest whereas vocational students were more likely to choose based on the link to possible careers. They further suggested that less advantaged students were more likely to be interested in vocational/professional degrees.

Rouncefield-Swales (2012) found that BTEC study tended to deepen students’ subject interest and strengthen their career aspirations and that their main reasons for attending university related to both wishing to increase subject knowledge and interest in particular careers. Research further suggests that vocational and BTEC students have tended to select the subjects which align with their current studies which has contributed to them being over-represented in certain subject areas (such as computing science, engineering and creative arts) and under-represented in others, (such as medicine, maths and languages) (Hoelshcler, 2008; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; UCAS, 2020). It has also perhaps contributed to vocational students being over-represented at post-92 universities as these tend to offer degree subjects which align with the vocational subjects studied on pre-university courses (Reay et al., 2001a; Shields and Masardo, 2015).

### **2.4.2 Use of Information**

The role of information in HE choice-making has been politically prominent since 2010/11 when government documents began to highlight the vital role it would play in ensuring that students made the rational decisions necessary to promote quality within the HE sector (DBIS, 2010; 2011; 2016). This approach aligns with RCT as highlighted above. However, a number of researchers, utilising concepts from both Bourdieu and Behavioural Economics, have suggested that many students do not make decisions according to RCT (Archer et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2005; Diamond et al., 2012) and that low SES students in particular can have a number of issues. For example, Ball et al. (2003) identified two different types of choosers; embedded choosers (largely aligned with middle-class students) and contingent choosers (broadly aligned with working-class students). Utilising Ball and Vincent’s (1998) concepts of “cold”, formal information sources (for example, prospectuses and websites) and “hot”, informal information sources (for example, family and friends), Ball et al. (2003) suggested that embedded choosers use a broad mix of “cold” and “hot” information sources whereas contingent choosers tend to use fewer sources and rely heavily on a few sources of “hot” information. Slack et al. (2014) added a third type of information source they termed “warm knowledge” (knowledge acquired from strangers such as university ambassadors perceived to be “just like me”) and commented that an unquestioning acceptance of hot and/or warm information as trustworthy could be problematic for low SES students relying on small samples of knowledge. Further research has supported the idea of a differential information use process for low SES students, suggesting that low SES students do not tend to be active information seekers (Menon et al., 2007) and that they struggle to decode and so evaluate information (which may be one reason as to why they tend to rely more on informal sources) (Smith, 2011).

Vocational students have also been shown to struggle with use of information. For example, Hoelscher et al. (2008) interviewed undergraduate students with vocational backgrounds and found that many had used restrictive information strategies when making their university decisions. Baker (2020) found that some of the BTEC students in her study were restricted by the cost of open days which led them to rely more heavily on the cold information of websites and Rouncefield-Swales (2012) commented that BTEC students with no parental HE background weredisadvantaged by the fact that their parents struggled to offer guidance about courses or institutions. One possible limitation of the above studies is that only Baker’s (2020) involved non-vocational students for comparison. If low SES/vocational students experience more difficulties in accessing and/or interpreting the vast amount of HE information available, they are potentially more at risk of making an ill-informed decision which, research shows, may lead to course dissatisfaction and issues with achievement and retention (Quinn et al., 2005). There is, however, a concern that comparing the information use of such broad groups as working/middle class and vocational/academic may be too simplistic a device. In studying the HE decision-making of middle-class sixth form students, Brooks (2003), for example, found considerable differentiation in the students’ knowledge and engagement with the HE market and the information sources they used. Similarly, Morrison’s (2011) study of the HE choices of middle-class students on a vocational course highlighted the different cultural and material resources (such as links to HE and perceptions of debt) that individual students accessed. Although it is undoubtedly useful to consider the impact of background circumstances on students’ use of information, it is still important to bear in mind the potential heterogeneity even between students who on the surface appear to be very similar.

### **2.4.3 Financial Constraints**

The idea of financial constraints affecting the university choices of low SES students has been highlighted particularly since the introduction and subsequent rise of tuition fees (THEA, 1998) and the decline and eventual abolition of the maintenance grant (Hubble and Bolton, 2017). For some researchers this concern is unwarranted. Student applications/entry, for example, have not been seen to dip significantly since the introduction of £9000 fees in 2012 (Bolton, 2017). Further, some studies show that although students consider financial issues to be important when making HE decisions, there is little difference between social classes as to how important they are (for example, Wilkins et al., 2013). Other researchers, however, have shown a difference in attitudes to debt aversion. Callender and Jackson (2005; 2008), for example, found that low SES students considering university had a higher fear of debt and Jones (2016) also found a high level of concern for HE debt in his research in schools in low participation neighbourhoods. In a 2015 repeat of the research informing her 2005 paper, Callender and Mason (2017) found that although there was little difference between working and middle-class attitudes to debt aversion, attitudes to debt still contributed to lower planned HE participation for low SES students. The issue of whether tuition fees are a deterrent to low SES students is not just an English concern as there is global uncertainty about the exact impact of tuition fees on low SES students (Chien et al., 2017).

However, a further point to make is that financial constraints can exist outside of directly reported concerns about tuition fees and debt. For example, Reay et al. (2001b), found that many low SES students needed to take part-time jobs which impacted on their time to study, their grades and so their university choices. Mangan et al. (2010b) commented that some low SES students chose to stay home to study for financial reasons which could then mean, for example, that they could not attend an “elite” university (if there was not one in the area). Baker (2020) found that BTEC Performing Arts students were struggling to finance open day visits, partly because they were not benefitting from some of the free outreach events provided for A level students but also because they could not afford trips for both open days and auditions. It would appear that financial constraints can prove a barrier for both low SES and BTEC students, although it may be necessary to look at the nuances of students’ decision-making rather than just to think in terms of overall fee and debt aversion.

### **2.4.4 Geographical Constraints**

In past research, geographical constraints relating to HE choice have tended to be grouped with (and perhaps seen as a consequence of) financial constraints. However, recently, there has been a renewed focus on geographical constraints, with the recognition of the strong relationship between geography and social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Higher education in the UK is unusual in that the vast majority of students (80% in 2017/18) move away from home to attend university. This contrasts with Ireland, where nearly half of undergraduates live with parents, Europe where 36% live with family and the US where 40% reside at home (Whyte, 2019). However, Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) point out the juxtaposition between the UK middle-class ideology of university as an “experience” that involves immersing yourself in university life far away from home and the reality that the majority of university students actually attend universities relatively locally (approximately 55% live less than 55 miles away from their home address, with approximately 25% commuting from home). In a detailed analysis considering student characteristics and choice of university, they conclude that the lowest social class students are by far the most likely to live at home and commute and the highest social class students the most likely to live at a considerable distance from home. An earlier study conducted by Donnelly and Evans (2016), however, noted the need for caution in considering geographical constraint only in terms of class, as participants in this study showed attachment to their local area irrespective of their class.

The reasons for geographical choice of university can be complicated, with the concepts of Bourdieu often employed to try to unravel them. Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005), for example, cited finance, family/peer expectations and the emotional security of the familiar, Abrahams and Ingrams (2013) commented that low SES students could use staying at home as a way to manage risk and Finn (2017) questioned the binary conception of living at home or away and suggested that the impact of emotion and personal life could lead to different ways of being mobile or immobile. In relation particularly to vocational students, Hoelscher et al. (2008) considered that spatial boundaries were an issue, with students giving location as the most important reason for university choice and a good choice often meaning local. Rouncefield-Swales (2012) found similarly that the BTEC students in her study equated a good location with close to home and that their reasons for this choice were sometimes financial but that other reasons such as family were also given. There can be a number of advantages to local university attendance (for example, low cost and maintaining support networks such as family, religious and/or community) but commuter students can also struggle with issues such as timetabling, unpredictability of travel and missing out on university learning and social opportunities (Maguire and Morris, 2018). One reason for these issues is the strong discourse of university involving moving away from home which potentially skews policy and procedures in favour of those who follow this path and can potentially leave commuter students feeling marginalised (Thomas and Jones, 2017).

### **2.4.5 Academic Constraints**

Although HE choice research has not focused unduly on academic constraints, these are certainly something that most students will have to consider, as the vast majority of university courses have entry requirements, usually particular grades on a level 3 course and Maths and English GCSE at grade C/4 or above. It is possible to consider academic constraints in several ways. Gorard (2013) for example considers that academic constraints are the major barrier to WP facing low SES students but that they have already been set by the time the student enters further education and so WP strategies must address this issue much earlier on in the student’s academic career. The Sutton Trust (Jerrim, 2013) counters this argument, suggesting that academic constraints cannot entirely explain the participation gap between high and low SES students and so other factors must be at work. With its reputation as the sector for “second chances”, FE often offers a more flexible attitude towards lower GCSE grades. Although this helps smooth the transition from school to college, it cannot erase barriers when choosing universities, as some, particularly the “elite”, have high GCSE entry requirements.

Those taking BTEC qualifications may also be restricted due to perceptions of the BTEC qualification. These could be their own perceptions or the perceptions of those around them, perhaps leading them to avoid certain courses or institutions when applying for university (Atkins and Flint, 2015; Gartland and Smith, 2018). For example, Gartland and Smith (2018) reported that BTEC students studying at an FE College felt that both their course and institution were seen as inferior and that this undermined their learner identities. Student choice could also be restricted by the perceptions of the universities themselves who may not value (or be perceived by the students to value) BTEC qualifications in the same way they do A levels (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012). For example, the Russell Group’s website “Informing Choices” offers only A level choices in an online “Informing Choices” degree advice tool and comments that: “Some universities will only accept BTECs in certain subjects and you may also be required to have studied other qualifications such as A levels alongside a BTEC qualification.” (Russell Group, 2019). Cambridge University’s website states: “BTECs don’t provide an appropriate preparation for most Cambridge courses, where the emphasis is more academic than vocational. As such, these qualifications can’t, unless otherwise stated, be used to replace the required or highly desirable A-level subjects listed for each course.”  (Cambridge University, 2020). This is despite the fact that research has often indicated that BTECs can be excellent preparation for university as they encourage a sense of agency, build confidence and involve the industry links that can lead to success at university (Shields and Masardo, 2015; Gartland and Smith, 2018; Hurrell et al., 2019).

### **2.4.6 Psychological Constraints**

An area of interest for several researchers of HE choice has been the psychological constraints experienced by low SES students making their HE choices. Reay et al. (2001b) and Ball et al. (2002) for example, have commented on the issue of low SES students’ concerns about “fitting in” at a university, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of a sense of place and the idea that people exclude themselves from places they feel are not for people like them. Reay et al. (2001b) suggested that some low SES students eliminated universities they found “daunting” and that perceptions about a “good” university were more likely to be based on whether students thought they would feel comfortable there as opposed to whether it rated highly in the league tables. Hoelscher et al. (2008) comment that the vocational students in their study excluded institutions that they felt were outside of their social space (for example, institutions not being considered by friends) whereas Baker (2020) found that the BTEC students she interviewed felt a lack of belonging with Russell Group universities and Rouncefield-Swales (2012) commented that the BTEC students in her study did not feel welcomed by some Russell Group institutions. There has, again, however, been some criticism as to whether psychological constraints can be directly related to class (or course). Kettley and Whitehead (2012), for example, were particularly critical of some of the sampling and classification methods used by Ball et al. (2002), suggesting that both private school and FE students were over-represented in the sample and that the class categories used should be extended from two to six. Kettley and Whitehead (2012) commented that their own research led to much smaller class–related differences in the psych-social factors influencing the choice process.

One related area of controversy over the years has been the issue of low SES aspiration. Early attempts to widen participation (for example, Aimhigher) featured a strong discourse of lack of aspiration (as noted earlier), suggesting a deficit on the part of low SES students by suggesting that the difficulty was that they did not have enough ambition to aim for university/for an “elite “university and that this was an area which could be targeted (Dearing, 1997; DfES, 2003). Later research suggested that this was not the case; young people did have high aspirations but these were constrained by factors such as family work history, local job opportunities, beliefs about what was a “good” job and knowing how to make aspirations concrete (Allen and Hollingsworth, 2013; Baker 2016; St Clair et al., 2013). Spohrer (2016) found, for example, that whilst the secondary students in her study recognised that certain occupations might be desirable, they also contested the notion of occupational hierarchies. Harrison and Waller (2018) argue that the issue may be low SES young people’s expectations rather than aspirations, as these are not just about what a young person wants to be but also about how likely they think this is to happen.

The research above illustrates that student HE decision-making (and particularly class differences) has been extensively studied and various constraints identified. The majority of research, however, has not tended to focus specifically on vocational or BTEC students. When research has focused specifically on BTEC students (for example, Gartland and Smith, 2018; Baker, 2020), it has identified some issues specific to those students, suggesting that there is merit in investigating them as a separate group. In order to add to the growing literature on BTEC student HE choice, it could be useful to pay further attention to the educational institution they study in as, as Gartland and Smith (2018) identify, this can lead to a very different experience of the HE choice process.

## **2.5 HE Choice Research: How does a school/college shape a students’ HE decisions?**

It is generally accepted that a student will experience a number of influences when making their HE decisions and that these will include the influence of family, friends and educational institution (Brooks, 2003; Pugsley, 2004; Reay et al., 2005). Previous studies have identified the importance of all three factors and by focusing on the third (educational institution) it is not the intention of this study to suggest that the other two (family and friends) are of less importance. However, a focus on the role of the institution does have the advantage that findings may more easily be converted into actions as educational institutions are subject to policy and procedure, in a way that informal networks of family and friends are not. A number of studies have focused primarily on the effects of institution attended (often through the use of comparative studies) and it will be useful to consider these next.

### **2.5.1 Comparing private and state institutions**

Montacute and Cullinane (2018) found that private school students were seven times more likely to gain an Oxbridge place and twice as likely to attend a Russell Group university as state school students. Students from state schools were less likely to apply, receive and accept an offer from a Russell Group university. This research supported earlier studies which also found that attending private school was a predictor of attendance at “elite” universities (Boliver, 2013; Hemsley-Brown, 2015). As students at private school are likely to have family-related economic, social and cultural advantages, it is difficult to untangle these from the school’s influence. However, a number of studies have identified a difference between private and state institutions in the way students are supported to make HE decisions.

Reay et al. (2001a), for example, (utilising the concept of institutional habitus) identified that private schools had numerous staff involved in the HE process, contact with outside agencies, visits from professionals and regular timetabled HE input. In contrast, FE college support operated in recognition and support of the financial and geographical constraints of their students, spending a lot of time and energy just persuading students of the benefits of staying on in HE. Similarly, Pugsley (2004) observed that private schools offered highly-resourced and timely assistance compared to the poorly resourced and patchy and inconsistent HE choice support of the FE College she researched. Reay et al. (2001a) commented that, whereas private schools seemed to have strong links with “elite” universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, FE colleges were more likely to have built relationships with their local post-1992 universities. Similarly, Pugsley (2004) found that the FE College in her study relied heavily on agreements with local “new” universities and Rouncefield-Swales (2012) found that FE colleges were more likely to have relationships with recruitment rather than selective universities. Dunne et al. (2014) (also utilising Bourdieu’s concepts) completed a more recent study into the difference between HE choice support in private and state schools, finding similar differences, and commenting that private schools seemed to have a culture of expectation that students would go to university and to prestigious universities and that this seemed to influence the students in their applications.

Research has also been undertaken in relation to comparing HE choice support in similar schools. Donnelly (2015a) for example, compared two state schools in the same urban area with very similar cohorts but differing rates of progression to HE and to “elite” universities. Using a number of methods, including document analysis, interviews and observations which he then analysed utilising the Bernsteinian concepts of classification and framing, he concluded that the schools operated in such a way as to send “hidden messages” to their students in relation to HE choice. For example, the school with higher rates of HE participation put a strong emphasis on progression to HE and ideally Russell Group universities, providing only HE-related events and displaying HE-related literature in a prominent position (almost to the exclusion of other possible routes). In contrast, the school with lower HE participation rates promoted a range of post-18 opportunities, held non-HE related events and stored HE literature mixed in with other options. The idea that there is a school effect separate to that of other factors is also supported by other studies, both quantitative and qualitative in nature (for example, Pustjens et al., 2004, using multilevel logistic regression modelling and Smyth and Hannan, 2007, utilising institutional habitus).

### **2.5.2 Institutions within the FE sector**

Students from FE colleges are even more unlikely to attend “elite” universities than students from state schools (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) and, as identified earlier, BTEC (and other vocational students) are more likely to be found in less prestigious universities (Kelly, 2017; Shields and Masardo, 2015). This potentially has repercussions in terms of students’ future income, although, as highlighted earlier, “elite” universities may not be the right choice for every student., Morrison (2009) interviewed nine working-class vocational students studying in an FE College and planning to continue their higher education at that institution. Utilising Bourdieu’s institutional habitus, he found that the students were influenced in their choice of institution by strong staff-student relations, the reputation of the college and the specialist nature of its curriculum offer. However, college staff felt that the college acted as a safety blanket for those not confident or mature enough for university outside of FE and characterised “stayers on” as weaker students and poorly motivated.

Gartland and Smith (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 24 BTEC students studying at either an FE college or a sixth form college in an area of multiple deprivation and low HE participation. Utilising a number of Bourdieu’s concepts (alongside “possible selves” theory), they found there was a big difference in the way the two colleges supported their students into HE. Students at the FE college, for example, reported little assistance with applying to university. In contrast, students of the sixth form reported that the emphasis on progressing to HE at the sixth form encouraged them to apply and nine out of twelve had felt able to apply to non-local universities. Students at the FE college benefitted particularly from the support and motivation of their individual tutors. However, students at the sixth form college had the added benefit of support from a number of additional sources (for example, recent graduate mentors, local university advisors and student services). Careers fairs and university visits were organised for the students at the sixth form college whereas the students at the FE college were more likely to have to approach these independently. Gartland and Smith (2018) felt that the sixth formers were better informed, prepared and more confident about progressing to HE. A recent evaluation of NCOP, though not primarily investigating institutional HE support, also identified stark differences in attitudes between sixth form and FE college learners, with FE college learners being less likely to see a clear path to HE and if they did, more likely to see that progression taking place locally (Tazzyman et al., 2018).

### **2.5.3 The influence of teachers/lecturers**

Several of the studies above highlighted the importance of teachers or lecturers in guiding students to their HE decisions. For example, Rouncefield-Swales (2012) and Gartland and Smith (2018) found that BTEC students used lecturers as vital sources of information when making their HE choices and Pugsley (2004) found that private school staff used personal contacts at “elite” universities to assist students with the choice process. There is also evidence to suggest that teachers can have strong opinions on their students’ potential choices; for example, The Sutton Trust (2016) reported that 40% of state school teachers would not encourage their brightest students to go to Oxbridge. Oliver and Kettley (2010) conducted research focused solely on the role of teachers and lecturers in their students’ HE decision-making. Interviewing staff responsible for HE from six state schools and colleges, they found that teachers’ political and ethical dispositions influenced the students’ choices, identifying teachers as acting as either facilitators or gatekeepers to higher education. Facilitators, for example, were driven by the social justice agenda to increase participation at “elite” universities and attempted to convince non-traditional students to go, challenge any inferiority complexes and use their own social capital to improve student chances (often these teachers had links to “elite” universities). Gatekeepers, on the other hand, exhibited concerns as to whether students would fit in at more “elite” provision and whether they would complete. They also felt there were moral ethical implications in investing in “elite” universities (as it would only benefit a few) and in promoting one university above another. Burgess (2021) completed a similar study considering the HE support available for moderately attaining students in a school sixth form, suggesting that teachers only operated as facilitators for these students if they had an ethical disposition and chose to go against the school’s institutional habitus of focusing on getting high attaining students into “elite” universities. These studies highlight the importance of individual staff within the HE process, emphasising the importance of considering individual staff beliefs and practices as well as the overall policies and procedures of the institution.

The research above illustrates that attention has been paid to school/college effect on HE decision-making and that differences between provider approach have been identified. However, relatively little research has concerned itself with why schools support HE choice in different ways, which could be a useful addition to the literature, particularly if institutions are to be expected to change. In order to fully comprehend why a school/college approaches HE support in the way they do, it would be important to involve senior management, again an area which does not seem to have been fully explored. Involvement from this level of the school/college hierarchy could add to the understanding of how and why school/colleges support students in the way they do and what the challenges and barriers to change might be.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Students considering applications to HE are making choices in a marketised environment. Although marketisation has helped to ensure that an expanded HE system is viable, it has also been accused of limiting the options of disadvantaged students. Research into student HE decision-making has focused largely on low SES students and has suggested that they face a number of constraints, including financial, geographical and psychological. Research has also suggested that the HE support offered by a student’s school or college can have an impact on their choices. To date, research has been conducted primarily with A level students in schools or sixth forms, with very few studies focused solely on BTEC students or FE colleges. This is an area which could offer important insights for widening participation as both BTEC courses and FE colleges are known for their high proportions of disadvantaged students. Further, FE colleges are very different environments to schools or sixth forms, with different overall cohorts and different pressures and so could offer an interesting counterbalance to school/sixth form-based studies. Research into the school/college effect on HE choice has tended to focus on student and frontline staff. The additional involvement of senior management figures in a study could also contribute to knowledge in that it would provide a greater insight into the decision-making that takes place to decide how an institution supports students in making HE choices. This study could also seek to explore the deficit discourse that surrounds BTEC FE students making HE decisions, with a particular emphasis on the deficiencies attributed to FE HE choice support. A study involving BTEC students, frontline staff and senior managers at an FE college would benefit from the adoption of a theoretical approach that can capture in detail the individual and organisational processes which lead to the students’ decisions. The majority of previous studies have utilised the concept of “institutional habitus” but, as argued above, this concept can lack the clarity required for this study. The theory of practice architectures, with its basis in the detailed scrutiny of educational practice and change is potentially better suited and offers the opportunity to view student HE choice from a new perspective and so add to the growing body of literature.

# **Chapter 3: Methodology**

## **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design of the study. The study aimed to explore the HE choices of BTEC students at an FE College and to consider the role of the College in shaping these decisions. It was an interpretative case-study, utilising primarily qualitative research methods and involving analysis of College documents, UCAS choice data and interviews with BTEC students and both frontline and senior College staff. The chapter will explain the rationale for these choices, highlighting the study’s research aims, research questions, philosophical underpinnings, research methods and identifying and addressing specific ethical issues relating to the research.

## **3.2 Research Aims and Questions**

Previous research has mainly focused on the HE decision-making of students studying in schools or sixth form colleges with relatively little consideration of those studying in FE colleges (Reay et al., 2005; Donnelly, 2015a). Studies that do focus on BTEC students in FE colleges have tended to focus on the students themselves, with staff, usually front-line, playing only a minor role, if involved at all (Gartland and Smith, 2018; Baker, 2020). The tendency to focus heavily on students has led to reporting of the ways in which an institution supports its students with their HE choices rather than an in-depth look at how and why this support exists in the form that it does. It was felt that consideration of a college’s documents, of college students’ UCAS choices and sampling from senior management as well as teaching staff and the students themselves would allow a more holistic, multi-dimensional exploration of the effect of the culture and practice of an FE College. This could then add a useful contribution to the developing understanding of BTEC student HE choice. The aim of the study was therefore to investigate the university choices of BTEC students at an FE College and explore how they make these decisions and how the institution they attend influences this process.

The main research question was:

How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions?

The subsidiary research questions (SRQs) were:

* SRQ1: Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for?
* SRQ2: How do the College’s BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?
* SRQ3: In what ways does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?
* SRQ4: Does the organisational culture of the College influence the HE decisions made by their BTEC students and, if so, in what ways?
* SRQ5: What is the relationship between College organisational culture, College practice and the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

## **3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings**

### **3.3.1 Ontology and Epistemology**

Both HE decision-making and the culture and practice of large institutions are potentially complex phenomena which may be experienced quite differently by different individuals. As discussed in sections 2.4 and 2.5, much of the literature on HE decision-making and HE choice support identifies differences in the way students and staff make and support HE decisions, with these differences often explained by the varying understandings, beliefs and values of individuals or groups in relation to HE (Reay et al., 2005; Baker, 2019; Burgess, 2021). For example, a senior teacher in one study, focuses mainly on trying to get students into Russell Group universities, driven by his belief in the superiority of RG options and in the necessity of this action in order to compete with another local sixth form (Burgess, 2021). In contrast, John, a BTEC student in a second study seems to operate completely outside of this type of focus, as he struggles to finance his idea of the ideal choice (an overseas university) and has to manage the reality of a number of rejections from his primarily post-92 UK choices (Baker, 2017; 2019). These two varying perspectives illustrate how different positioning and beliefs about the HE system can result in different ways of navigating or supporting navigation of HE systems.

The different perspectives outlined above illustrate the difficulty in framing this research as positivist and measuring an external, objective reality of the world (of HE decision-making) completely separate from our descriptions of it (Flick, 2014). Instead,the ontological position which underpins this research is the relativist belief that the reality in question is subjective and can best be understood in the light of human views, perceptions and behaviours (Basit, 2010). As people interpret and understand the world differently to each other, the students and staff will create a number of “truths” about HE decision-making that will be limited, highly subjective, approximate and under constant revision (Al-Saadi, 2014). This ontological position informs the epistemological position of the study which is interpretative in nature, grounded on the belief that knowledge is not “out there” waiting to be discovered but has to be constructed from an exploration of the various views and perceptions held by individuals. I am not looking to uncover objective “truths” about HE decision-making but to interpret the perceptions and understandings of students and staff, thus constructing a range of subjective “truths” about HE choices. Interpretation of the views of others will necessitate use of my own perceptions and understandings, meaning that I will be inextricably involved in the (construction of the) reality which is ultimately reflected.The adoption of an interpretivist perspective highlights the importance of context, given that this perspective emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality where meanings are often formed through interactions with others and societal and cultural norms (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013). This research foregrounds the context of HE decision-making in terms of considering a specific group in a specific environment (BTEC students in an FE College) and so an interpretivist perspective seems to also align with the research in this sense.

One of the main criticisms levelled at the interpretivist perspective is that consideration of multiple perspectives does not allow findings to be generalised. It is true to say that interpretivist findings cannot be generalised in the same way as positivist results as they are not designed to be “representative”. Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bryman, 2015) suggest that researchers consider the “transferability” rather than the “generalisability” of such data and attempt to provide the thick description necessary for readers to judge the insights the research might bring to other contexts. This will be addressed within this research in section 3.4.1. A further criticism of interpretivism is that there is potential for researcher bias to affect findings. One way to address this limitation is to ensure that the role of the researcher and their potential impact on the research is acknowledged and that the researcher is positioned within the research (Creswell, 2013). This will be addressed within this research in sections 3.4.3 and 3.4.4. Another criticism of the interpretivist perspective is that it ignores political and ideological influences on social reality and knowledge and that it does not seek to challenge and change (Mack, 2010). It could be argued that in some situations there is a need to work to understand a complex phenomenon (such as the current study) first without necessarily having a political agenda, with the possibility of considering it from this viewpoint at a later date.

### **3.3.2 Methodology: A Qualitative Case Study Approach**

The overall research design adopted was that of a case study. A case study has been identified as a useful approach when seeking to understand the complex relationship between factors in a social setting (Denscombe, 2014) and when it is impossible to separate a phenomenon from its setting (Yin, 2009). This approach aligned with the overarching research question and the philosophical underpinnings of the study in that it allowed the role of the setting (the College) to pre-dominate and supported an in-depth exploration of the various factors at play in determining HE choice. Merriam (2009) defines a case study approach as in-depth analysis of a bounded system, a description which also aligns with the current study in that there was a finite number of College BTEC students applying to university and a finite number of staff involved in supporting them. The unit of analysis in this study was the phenomenon of BTEC HE decision-making within an FE College. The case consisted of 60 second-year Level 3 BTEC College students applying for university in the academic year 2018/19. It further consisted of the College staff involved in supporting the students’ UCAS applications (whether directly or indirectly) and aspects of general College culture (such as HE or IAG policies/procedures) potentially affecting their UCAS applications. One of the issues with case study research is that it can be considered to be more about choosing what people or incidents to study rather than choosing an actual research method by which to study them (Stake, 1995). This means that it can still be potentially twinned with other methodological approaches such as ethnography and/or grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). An attempt was made in the pilot study to pair this approach with grounded theory but this wasultimately deemed unsuitable (see section 3.5.3 for further discussion). Instead, the research design is best described as a basic interpretivist case study with its overall goal to uncover and interpret the meanings that students and staff construct about their experiences in relation to HE decision-making.

The adoption of a case study approach does not necessarily need to sway the researcher towards either quantitative or qualitative research methods as it is not aligned to a particular paradigm; in fact, two major proponents of the case study approach, Yin and Stake, favour opposing philosophies, with Yin tending towards a more positivist approach and Stake a more interpretivist stance.However, an interpretivist perspective is more usually twinned with a qualitative approach as this typically word-based approach is judged to be an effective tool in exploring complex views, perceptions and behaviours (Punch, 2014). Four of the five subsidiary research questions (SRQs) suited a qualitative approach in that they were fairly complex “How” type questions, addressing complex, ongoing processes and necessitating a full and dense exploration (see section 3.2). The first SRQ (Where do the BTEC students apply and what for?) was slightly different in that it sought to quantify the frequency with which the BTEC students made applications to the various subjects or institutions, meaning that a quantitative approach was appropriate. The resulting quantitative analysis provided the statistical data on which institutions and subjects the students applied for, thus answering this “what” type question and providing the basic data to underpin further exploration of this issue. Although this study utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods, it was a primarily qualitative study, with the quantitative analysis only used to provide descriptive background information.

A major criticism of the case study approach (and in particular a single case study approach) is that it is difficult to generalise findings. This mirrors concerns that adoption of an interpretivist perspective runs the risk of focusing so heavily on individual practice that relatively little can be developed into theory or applied to practice elsewhere. One way in which researchers have attempted to address this issue is to study multiple cases. In relation to this research, attempts were made in the pilot study to consider two case study institutions but difficulties arose concerning access and whether direct comparisons could easily be made (see section 3.4.5 for further details). Crowe et al. (2011) found that one pitfall of their case study research on undergraduate awareness of patient safety was data overload, a danger that Harland (2014) considered could lead those involved in case study research to write too descriptively without integrating existing theory. Given the time and resources available to this study, it was decided to concentrate on gathering a full picture of the case in question whilst still retaining the ability to analyse the data in depth. Further, although this particular study concentrated on only one institution, there is the potential for future readers to consider it alongside similar studies and to complete a meta-analysis.

Walsham (1995) suggests that that there are four alternative ways in which findings from interpretative case studies can be generalised; development of concepts, generation of theory, the drawing of specific implications and the contribution of rich insight. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) agree that case study research can be generalised, citing their research into “Training Credits” which produced an important new theory of career decision-making which has been tested in a number of other situations. Within the field of HE choice research, case study research has been used to develop seminal concepts such as “institutional habitus” (Reay, 1998) and also to explore those concepts in different contexts; for example, within an AVCE class in an FHE College (Morrison, 2009). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) also contest that experienced readers will be able to judge how convincing case study research findings are by the extent to which they “ring true” to their own situations. In order that readers are able to consider the “transferability” of the knowledge gained (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Bryman, 2015), it is important to produce a full explanation of the case (in this instance, the College). See section 3.4.1 for information about the context of the College and its surrounding area.

Another criticism of case study research is that researcher positionality may unduly influence findings (again in common with researcher positionality concerns if taking an interpretivist perspective). Merriam (2009) considers that researchers must guard against issues such as biased selection of data and how to report studies in sufficient detail to allow readers to consider transferability but not to overwhelm busy practitioners and policy-makers. In order to guard against these issues, it has been necessary to position myself within the research (see section 3.4.3 below). It has also been important to produce a full and detailed description of how I undertook the research. I have produced field notes and kept a research diary in order to understand my choices at a later date, to be able to describe these in detail and so to potentially allow them to be screened for consideration of how my positionality has contributed towards the lines of enquiry followed and the claims made. Houghton et al., (2013) utilised this approach when researching the ways in which Clinical Skills Labs prepared student nurses for the real world, including excerpts from both field notes and reflective diaries in their final report in order that the full context could be appreciated and the way in which themes were developed could be understood. This type of transparent presentation is important in that it assures the reader that the analysis was carried out systematically and comprehensively and that the interpretation is well supported by evidence (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003).

One major advantage to case study research is that it allows for difference, it does not discount what cannot be discounted or simplify what cannot be simplified (Merriam, 2009). It enables a study to be in-depth, detailed and particular and views it holistically, foregoing a limited number of variables in order to encompass everything that could be relevant (Tight, 2017). Further, it has proved to be a helpful approach previously when considering HE choice of specific groups at specific institutions (for example, Morrison, 2011; Donnelly, 2015a). From the outset of this research, the aim was to produce a holistic multi-dimensional study of BTEC HE Choice and a case study approach offers the means to achieve this objective.

## **3.4 Selecting the Case**

The case-study College was selected primarily as it was the one I was currently working in and so offered a high level of familiarity with the institution and the potential to develop good practice within my place of employment. It also offered the opportunity to study BTEC students in isolation from A level students (a context shared with many other colleges in the wider community but not otherwise present in the local area). Below, follows a description of the College and its BTEC offer. As this research was a case study of my own organisation, I have also included a statement of positionality and some discussion of the advantages and limitations of the insider researcher.

### **3.4.1 Background Context of “Central College”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Central College is based in an urban area in the West Midlands with a population of more than 250,000 people (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020). The population is approximately 50% male, 50% female and is 88.6% white, 7.4% Asian,1.5% black, 1.8% mixed ethnicity and 0.6% other ethnic groups (ONS, 2011). The area has a rich industrial history, primarily involving the manufacturing, coal and steel industries. Deindustrialisation in the 1980s, combined with the collapse of the mining industry, led to mass redundancies which have contributed to persistent problems with unemployment and poverty (City’s Local Industrial Strategy, 2020). The current dominant industries of the city are health and social care, vehicle retail/repair and manufacturing (ONS, 2020).

According to the latest English Indices of Deprivation, the city ranks in the top 20 most deprived districts in England (Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government, 2019). Average pay is low and the percentage of those claiming an out of work benefit is high compared to both the West Midlands and Great Britain (ONS, 2020) (see Table 3.1). The city has nearly twice the national average of people with no qualifications (ONS, 2020) (see Table 3.1) and the number of school-leavers with five GCSEs at 4 or above (including English and Maths) is below the national average (“Central College” Ofsted Report, 2018).Approximately 60% of young people in the local authority progress onto university, just below the national average of 62% (UK Government, 2019). The city has two local universities, “Middleton” (post-1992), and “Greene” (pre-1992).

Table 3.1 Economic and educational statistics comparing the city, the West Midlands and Great Britain (ONS, 2020)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **City** | **West Midlands** | **Great Britain** |
| Average gross weekly pay | £501.2 | £550.8 | £587.0 |
| Percentage claiming out-of-work benefits | 8.1% | 7.3% | 6.5% |
| No qualifications | 12.6% | 10.2% | 7.7% |

Central College formed in 1990 from a federation of a local technical college and a local college of further and higher education. In addition to the two campuses currently in use, it previously comprised of three neighbourhood colleges, 100 plus satellite sites and a sixth form centre (run jointly with another provider) (“Central College” ALI Inspection Report, 2002). Between 2000 and 2017, College enrolment numbers reduced from approximately 32, 000 to just under 8,000 (see Table 3.2). This change was largely as a result of a decline in adult numbers due to dramatic funding cuts to adult learning (Smith et al., 2019).

*Table 3.2 Central College enrolment figures (2000 – 2017)[[2]](#footnote-2)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Central College Enrolment Numbers** |
| 2000/1 | 32, 000 |
| 2007/8 | 25, 284 |
| 2010/11 | 14, 113 |
| 2016/17 | 7, 984 |

The period between 2010 to the present day has been largely characterised by financial instability for the College and consequently a number of redundancies. In more recent years, there has also been a period of managerial instability, culminating in 2016/17 when the College had four principals in a year (“Central College’s” Strategic Plan, 2018-21). The College was reviewed as part of the area reviews of post-16 education and training, where it was decided that it would continue as a “stand alone” provider and adopt a “fresh start” approach (“Central College’s” Strategic Plan, 2018-21).

According to the “Central College” Ofsted Report (2018) the College is now a medium-sized further education college offering vocational courses and apprenticeship programmes across two main sites and in the community. Qualifications range from entry level to Level 4+ and many students entering the College lack five GCSEs at grade 4 or above. Destination data for College students completing Level 3 16-18 study in 2016 showed that 29% went on to Higher Education (compared to 60% in the local authority and 62% nationally) (UK Government, 2019). The numbers of those students entering top third and Russell Group universities were small enough (0-0.5%) that they needed to be suppressed to protect identities (UK Government, 2019). The College has been graded as Requires Improvement at three successive Ofsted inspections, meaning that it is subject to frequent monitoring and an imminent re-inspection.

### **3.4.2 Level 3 BTEC Qualifications**

The College offers a range of Business, Education and Technology Council (BTEC) courses which are specialist work-related qualifications, combining practical learning with subject and theory content (UCAS, 2018a). They are mainly provided by FE colleges (Herbert, 2019) and are generally assessed throughout the course, in contrast to A levels which tend to be assessed by end-of course examinations (Pearson, 2020). Although initially developed in 1984 in order to offer students a route into employment, these qualifications are increasingly being used as a route into university (UCAS, 2016). The College offers BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma qualifications in Business, IT, Applied Science, Sport, Public Services, Travel and Tourism, Engineering and Construction. A BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma is a two-year, full-time course and is equivalent to A Levels (Pearson, 2019). Students receive three final grades, comprising some combination of Distinction, Merit and Pass grades (for example, DDM, MMP or PPP). These grades can be directly equated to A level grades; for example, DDD is equivalent to AAA; MMM equivalent to CCC (UCAS, 2019). Many universities and courses accept BTEC qualifications for entry to the first year of an undergraduate degree, although research has indicated that “elite” universities are less likely to recruit students with BTECs (UCAS, 2018b). Possible reasons for this include the potential mismatch between the applied content of BTECs and the academic subjects offered by many “elite” universities which can lead both BTEC students and “elite” universities to question their compatibility with each other.

### **3.4.3 Statement of Positionality**

Providing a statement of positionality is suggested as good practice in terms of addressing the concerns of researcher bias related to both an interpretivist perspective and a case study approach (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013).See sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 for further detail.As part of my interviews of College staff, I asked them to provide some information on their background in relation to their position at the college and previous study at universities (see Appendix M) and here I have attempted to provide similar information for myself.I worked at the College for 16 years before my post was deleted and I took voluntary redundancy during summer 2019. I held the position of careers adviser and worked in a small team with my manager (the Careers and HE Coordinator) and other careers staff from the Local Authority Careers Service. A large part of my role involved supporting BTEC students who were applying to university, either through individual interviews or group sessions. Prior to working at the College, I worked as a teaching assistant in a secondary school and as a voluntary support worker at a college for the blind and a school for children with epilepsy.

My own experiences of applying to university took place primarily in the mid-1990s. I completed A levels in the sixth form of the school I had previously attended and was strongly encouraged by the school to apply for Russell Group universities. I was able to visit a number of these universities on school trips. My school also arranged for me to attend a week’s residential course in order to explore my chosen university subject of psychology. I attended an out-of-area Russell Group university for my undergraduate degree, with the vast majority of my friends at school also moving away to study at Russell Group universities. I have since attended two local post-92 universities in completing my careers adviser qualifications and my masters. The choice of these universities was largely driven by practical considerations; for example, considerations of distance, time commitment and cost, considerations which were less important at the time of my undergraduate degree. I qualified for full financial support during my undergraduate degree, primarily as I was from a single-parent family. My absent parent (father) was a mechanic with minimal interest in academic achievement and higher education. However, my mother was a secondary school teacher with a keen interest and enthusiasm for educational achievements and a high level of knowledge about the education system as a whole. My wider family and social circle comprised of a complete mix of university and non-university educated people.

### **3.4.4 Insider Research**

As identified above, I have undertaken this research as an insider, with all the advantages and disadvantages this brings. Traditionally (in line with the positivist perspective) the outsider researcher has been seen as preferable to the insider, with the suggestion that they will generate more objective and accurate data. However, this viewpoint has been heavily criticised, with the insider/outsider position conceptualised as more of a continuum than a dichotomous distinction and acknowledgement made that even extreme outsiders will still have to consider issues of positionality and the impact these might have on their research (Merton, 1972; Naples, 1996; Banks, 1998).

Within my research I was an insider both in terms of being a member of the College community and also more specifically in terms of being a member of staff. However, as my relationship and prior experience with participants differed significantly, the extent of my insiderness varied. In terms of my interaction with students, I was potentially a partial insider (Chavez, 2008) in that I shared the identity of being a member of the College community but differed in terms of age, educational stage and position within the College. However, as I had deliberately chosen to sample from groups that I had not delivered sessions to, most of the students had not met me, although they were likely to have seen me, due to the proximity of my desk to the main reception. In terms of staff interactions, I was more of a total insider (Chavez, 2008) sharing multiple identities such as educational professional, staff member of College, member of the Careers team and member of the team assisting with HE applications. However, the extent of my insiderness (in terms of experiences) shifted dramatically depending on who I was interviewing, as my staff participants ranged from the College Principal who has been in role for less than two years and who I had never previously spoken with, to the Careers and HE Coordinator who has been my line manager and close friend for the last 16 years. Taylor (2011) uses the term “intimate insider” to refer to researchers whose pre-existing friendships evolve into informant relationships. My relationship with my line manager could be described in this way and this situation produced particular challenges which I have discussed below.

My position as an insider gave me several advantages. Greene (2014) identifies insider advantages as falling into three main categories which relate to access, interaction and knowledge. For example, being present in the workplace every day meant that it was easy to contact potential participants and to offer flexibility in terms of when and where we could meet. Further, cancelled interviews (of which there were several) could be easily re-arranged at a time more convenient for the interviewees. With regard to interaction, I feel that my insider position allowed students and staff to feel comfortable with me, either because they had already met me through my careers position or would know that the College had approved me to work as a member of its staff. My 16 years’ experience working in the College environment also meant that I was very familiar with the habitual pace and tone of College interactions and so my approach to students and staff was likely to be perceived as non-threatening. Finally, my pre-existing insider knowledge meant that staff and students could be confident that I would understand the language and systems of both UCAS and the College and that they would not need to spend time explaining this to me. My insider knowledge also helped to ensure that I could probe effectively during interview. Examples of when I believe my knowledge helped to increase my insight were when I used my knowledge of UCAS to clarify student decisions, when I used my knowledge of previous failed activities to challenge senior management notions of new initiatives, and when I utilised knowledge of future College plans (for example, introduction of Higher National Certificates) to inform my questioning regarding College priorities.

My insider position also raised a number of issues. For example, in common with other insider researchers (for example, Mercer, 2007; Drake, 2010), I struggled in terms of how much to tell colleagues before and after the research and how much of my own opinions I should share. This was primarily a difficulty with one essential participant who was a close friend and genuinely interested in my work, but also was concerned about the potential criticisms that my research might generate. An example of the difficulties inherent in this relationship was that this colleague would ask me what senior staff had said in their interviews. I resolved these types of issue by explaining the ethical and quality issues of sharing every detail whilst ensuring that my colleague still felt able to question me if she had concerns about the impact of my research. Taylor (2011) advises against relying solely on friend-informants and fortunately I was far more distantly positioned to the rest of my participants.

A further issue with my insider position was the danger of making assumptions as a result of prior knowledge and/or experience (DeLyser, 2001). For example, my knowledge of the College could lead to me assuming I knew what a participant meant and misinterpreting them. There was also a related danger that I might project my own views onto participants or data analysis. The subject area of HE choice in the College is one that I have been interested in for a number of years and so have developed my own thoughts and opinions over this time (for example, the idea that a number of students seem to make under-researched, default, local choices). I attempted to counterbalance the impact of my own influence on the study by employing a number of techniques (see section 3.5. for further details). However, it was a little more difficult to counterbalance this during interview as snap decisions had to be made as to which part of an answer to probe first which could then influence the whole trajectory of the interview. In order to counter this, I ensured I had a number of open questions under each main question and returned to these if I felt there was a danger I was starting to pursue a particular agenda/interest of my own.

Another issue of concern relating to my insider position was the notion of power, an issue which Naples (1996) is particularly keen to highlight in relation to the insiders/outsider debate. In terms of the students, I was concerned that my role as a member of staff would lead to students thinking that the interview was a test of their research skills. One technique I used to put students at ease was to explain that they could not give a “wrong” answer, I was just interested in how they made their choices. In this way, I tried to erase the idea that there was a right way of researching or that I was going to critique a lack of action (something that might happen were a tutor asking similar questions in a tutorial). Similarly, despite my equal or lower position in the College hierarchy, some staff seemed concerned that their level of knowledge might not be adequate (DeLyser, 2001, encountered similar issues when interviewing work colleagues in an old gold-mining town). Again, I attempted to reassure staff, this time by explaining that I was not necessarily sure what their role covered and that it was fine to let me know if I was asking them for details they did not have. Many College staff had recently been involved in interview scenarios either for jobs or College inspections and I was aware of the necessity to present this interview differently, as more about explaining to me how everything works rather than meeting particular standards.

I also had to be aware that my position as a careers adviser in the College might influence student and staff responses in that they may feel pressure to judge or to present the College HE Choice Support programme in a positive manner. In order to try to counteract this issue with students, I tried hard to probe the students in relation to improvements they would like to see (perhaps an easier way to critique a service that to outrightly disparage it) and also accepted that I would need to allow for the possibility of the influence of my careers adviser positioning when considering positive findings. In relation to the difficulties staff might face in honestly reporting their thoughts, it was important to be clear that comments made by frontline staff would not be shared with the senior management who would also be interviewed. This was important ethically as it ensured that staff would not face negative consequences as a result of the research and of explaining what they did or did not do in relation to HE choice support.

As I have noted above, in summer 2019, I took voluntary redundancy from the College. During the latter part of my data collection, (second student interviews and all staff interviews) I was in the strange position of still being an insider but knowing I was about to become an outsider, albeit one with considerable knowledge of the College. This was difficult at times during staff interviews as I was constantly talking about College plans for the future whilst simultaneously adjusting to the fact that I would no longer be part of these plans. However, for the most part, I was able to put this aside, again, using my prompt questions to ensure the interview stayed on track. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that holding back from participating during the later stages of the research can actually be an advantage as it can enable the researcher to achieve some distance from the study and perhaps more clearly identify the patterns within the data.

### **3.4.5 Learning from the Pilot Study**

Before embarking on the main research project, a pilot study was carried out. As mentioned earlier, the research was initially envisaged as a comparative case study involving BTEC students at two different local institutions, an FE college and a sixth form college. Data would be collected from each institution with regard to UCAS choices and students and staff in each college would be interviewed. A pilot study was completed involving the interviewing of BTEC students from the sixth form college. This highlighted the difficulties inherent in gaining access to both data and students when I did not have personal links with the college and was also a staff member at a rival institution (Amundsen et al., 2017, report similar issues in accessing educational institutions as an outsider). It also highlighted an issue in terms of the number of data sources utilised, as two (i.e., staff and students) felt inadequate in terms of gaining an in-depth understanding of a college’s approach to assisting HE choice. The decision to focus on one, familiar college lessened the likelihood of access being initially denied or withdrawn or limited further down the line (as experienced by both Wanat, 2008, and Siwale, 2015). It also allowed an extension of the data sources to include document analysis and interviews of senior staff; the latter of which helped to add to the originality of the study as senior staff have rarely been interviewed in relation to this topic.

The piloting of the student interview process provided a further opportunity for learning. In general, the interviews went smoothly, with only minor changes needed to ensure questions were clear, for example, specifying “Why have you chosen to study this subject *at university?”*, as otherwise students explained why they had made their BTEC choices. The opportunity to listen to myself during the transcription stage enabled me to see that I was sometimes confusing the participants by asking multiple questions and this was something which I was able to control in further interviews. Another issue that arose from the pilot study was consideration of participants’ anonymity as I realised that the unusualness of one participant’s university choice would identify her even if her name was changed. For the actual study, I decided not to name non-local universities and to choose pseudonyms for local choices; this was also necessary in order not to identify the College as many students chose to study locally. Finally, analysis of the pilot interviews enabled me to experience the advantages and disadvantages of manual transcription and open coding and to make decisions accordingly (see 3.5.3 for further detail).

## **3.5 Phases of Research (Data Sources and Research Methods)**

Denscombe (2014) comments that a case study should involve combining different data sources and methods in order to build the full picture of the matter under investigation. In order to explore the research questions above, three different phases of research were planned, each involving a different data source and research method. Phase One was a document analysis of key College documents, Phase Two, a quantitative analysis of UCAS choice data and Phase Three, semi-structured interviews with College students and staff. The addition of the document analysis phase to the original plan increased the potential depth and breadth of the research and offered the opportunity to look at the College from a different angle. Before the research began, the College Principal was provided with information about the study and asked to provide overall consent (see Appendix A). All data collected during the project was stored on a password protected computer, with a list of real names and names allocated for research stored separately.

### **3.5.1 Phase One: Document Analysis**

The first phase of the research was a document analysis of key College documents. This phase was used to explore SRQs 3 to 5, which focus on the College’s culture and practice in relation to assisting BTEC students with HE decisions. The reason for proceeding with this phase of the research first was that insight gained from these analyses could be used to inform both the development of interview questions and analysis of interview data. An example of this in practice was the use of highlighted sections of the College’s Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) strategy as a prompt to encourage staff interviewees to give their thoughts on the document and to consider how (if at all) the document related to their current practice. This represented an attempt to go beyond consideration of the documents purely in terms of content and to investigate what people actually do with them (Prior, 2016; Jacobsson, 2016).

*Document Selection*

One of the reasons for inclusion of documents in the study was that these were data sources produced for purposes other than the research and so were not influenced by the study in the way that answers to interview questions might be. However, it was important to remember that these documents did not represent a neutral objective “reality” of the organisation and that issues of production and implied readership, for example, could easily affect the reality they portrayed (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011). For example, the primary purpose of the prospectus and website is to market the college and whilst these documents still offered a valuable opportunity to gather background context and assess the priorities of the College, they could not be relied upon to provide a full picture. For this reason, effort was made to include more documents from an alternative perspective such as the College’s most recent Ofsted report, whilst still bearing in mind that these also have their own agenda and implied readership. Documents were selected for one of two main reasons; because they allowed an overview of the College as a whole organisation or because they allowed insight into the College’s approach to assisting students with HE choice. The table below lists the documents selected and the reason for selection.

*Table 3.3: College documents selected for analysis*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **College Documents Selected for Analysis** | **Reason for Selection** |
| * Prospectus 2019 * Website 2019 * Ofsted reports (Feb 2018 and Oct 2019) * Strategic Plan (Sept 2018 – July 2021) * Strategic Objectives Key Performance Indicators (2018/19) | Overview of general College culture and practice |
| * HE Strategy (2018 – 2021) * Learner Information, Advice and Guidance and Support Policy (2018) * Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Policy (2018) * Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy (2018) | College culture and practice, specific to assisting students with career (including HE) choices. |

*Document Analysis*

The size of some of the documents meant that not all sections could be selected for close analysis. The relevant parts of each document were deemed to be those where the college elucidated its main aims, mission and strategy, with particular reference to those parts of the documents which related to Level 3 BTEC courses, HE and HE choices. The analysis focused on the language used in each document and was carefully grounded in the actual words and concepts within the text (Prior, 2016). This was particularly important as there was a danger of interpreting the documents selectively and in light of my own assumptions, particularly in view of my insider positions as employee and careers adviser (Merriam, 2009). The analysis also considered the documents in terms of intertextuality; focusing on their relationship to each other but also, particularly in the case of the CEIAG strategy, their relationship to external documents, such as government policy (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011). After a process of open coding line-by-line, similar codes were grouped together and were developed into categories and then themes (Bryman, 2015). Six main themes were generated which are detailed in the table below.

*Table 3.4: Themes generated by document analysis*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Definition** |
| Employability | The College prioritises strategies (e.g., employer links) which enhance the employability of its students. |
| Local Regeneration (community role) | The College prioritises its role in meeting the economic and social needs of the local area. |
| College’s Turbulent Recent History | The College has faced both financial and leadership instability over recent years which has led to its positioning itself as needing change/striving for excellence. |
| Recruitment, Retention and Achievement | An important part of the College’s recovery plan is an emphasis on attracting students and ensuring that they complete their courses. |
| Aspiration and Inspiration | Meeting and raising students’ aspirations is an important College goal. |
| Impartiality | IAG College documents in particular focus on the importance of not being seen to promote one option over another. |

These themes were then fed into the interview questions, particularly the staff ones. For example, questions were included on the extent to which HE choice assistance was a priority and whether current HE destinations of students were as desired. As highlighted above, the CEIAG strategy was selected for further exploration during interview due to its close connection to the topic in hand. Questions were asked during staff interviews about awareness, production and use of the document, covering the context rather than just the text of the documents (Jacobsson, 2016). This allowed the strategy to be considered in terms of text, processes and outcomes and highlighted the importance of reader interpretation and translation when considering policy (Ball, 1993; Ball et al., 2012).

### **3.5.2 Phase Two: UCAS Choice Data**

The second phase of research utilised the College’s UCAS database and was used to answer SRQ1 (Where do the College BTEC students apply and what for?). This database allowed access to BTEC students’ UCAS application forms so that accurate information on subject and university choices could be gained. The database was only accessible to nominated College staff, including myself. However, consent was specifically sought from the College Principal in relation to using this data as part of the research (See Appendix A) and student personal details anonymised prior to analysis. The reason for proceeding with this phase of the research prior to the semi-structured interviews was that information gained could be used to inform the interview questions. For example, two of the interview questions asked to senior staff utilised pie charts showing students’ provisional university choices.

Previous research into the actual HE choices of vocational students has tended to involve large quantitative datasets, usually supplied by UCAS or HESA and has tended to focus on/report patterns in final choices rather than applications (Hoelscher et al. 2008; Shields and Masardo, 2015). Studies focusing on the influence of particular institutions have tended not to look at a database of application choices, preferring to allow interviewees to detail these (for example, Morrison, 2009). Detailed analysis of the College BTEC students’ actual application and final choices provided a rich context within which to further explore participants’ decisions.

*Selecting Participants*

Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that a quantitative approach, such as that selected for SRQ1, benefits from as large a sample of the total target group as possible. The College’s UCAS database included all BTEC students applying to university and so choice data was collected in relation to all of these students. Sixty College BTEC students had completed an application form by 15th January 2019 (the official UCAS application closing date). The 60 students were spread across seven Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma courses as identified in the table below:

*Table 3.5: College BTEC students applying to university by current course*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma subject (total: 7)** | **Number applying to university (total: 60)** |
| Applied Science | 13 |
| Business | 13 |
| Construction | 1 |
| IT | 14 |
| Public Services | 8 |
| Sport | 8 |
| Travel and Tourism | 3 |

The full demographics of the College BTEC students applying can be seen in Appendix B. There was a fairly even split between males and females (53% female, 47% male). Students were primarily 17 to 19 years old (92%) and predominantly White (77%) with 10% of students being Asian Pakistani and the remaining 13% encompassing Black African, Asian Other and those of mixed ethnic origin. The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) Occupation Coding Tool (ONS, 2010) was used to categorise the parental occupations of the students. This categorisation has been criticised as a measure of class given that it only measures employment with no consideration of social and cultural capital. Savage et al. (2013) propose an alternative (with additional questions on topics such as savings, leisure interests and social ties) but as this study did not have access to this information, the NS-SEC coding system has been used with the caveat that it is only an indication of social class.The UCAS system only requires students to provide the occupation of the parent who earns the most so each of the 60 students is represented by one parental occupation (see Figure 3.1).

*Figure 3.1 NS-SEC class of parental occupations*

Of the 60 parental occupations given by students, 29 (48%) would be classed as routine and manual occupations (for example, window fitter, care worker or chef). Fifteen (25%) would be classed as intermediate occupations (for example, taxi driver, builder or medical secretary) and twelve (20%) would be classed as managerial, administrative and professional occupations (for example, teacher, pharmacist or facilities manager). Four responses (7%) could not be coded, either because the student chose not to answer the question or because the category they chose was not represented. The demographics also illuminated the current qualifications of both parents and students. Twenty-three students (38%) had parents with no HE qualifications whilst 13 students (22%) had parents with HE qualifications. Fourteen (23%) did not know whether their parents had HE qualifications or not and 10 (6%) did not answer, making it a little difficult to know exactly how many of the cohort would be first generation HE students. Thirty-eight students (63%) already held both Maths and English GCSE A\*-C. This meant that 37% of the cohort were likely to be re-taking one or both of these GCSEs. Twenty-four (40%) of the cohort had been predicted D\*D\*D\*, the highest grades possible for BTEC Extended Diploma, equivalent to A\*A\*A\* at A level (UCAS, 2019).

*Analysis of UCAS Choice Data*

The data collected from the College’s UCAS database were quantitative numerical data and so were analysed accordingly, using descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions. UCAS applicants are initially allowed to choose up to five options for course/university. These choices tend to be for the same (or similar) subjects at different universities, although students do sometimes choose a range of subjects at the same university (See 4.2.1 for further details). Analysis of these data illustrated to what extent students deviated from their BTEC course subject when choosing a university subject to study and to what extent they applied for a range of universities (either geographically and/or pre/post-92). Further on in the UCAS cycle, UCAS applicants select a firm and insurance choice and, still further, their final destination is confirmed. Analysis of this data, allowed comparisons to be made between initial and final choices and so provided a general context of UCAS decision-making which could then be explored further in interviews.

### **3.5.3 Phase Three: Semi-structured Interviews of Students and Staff**

The third phase of the research comprised of individual semi-structured interviews with key College stakeholders involved in the HE choice process. This phase was used to explore SRQs 2 to 5. The purpose of using this data source and research method was to attempt to “capture” the subjective opinions and perceptions of the participants regarding their experiences of choosing subjects and universities and/or their experiences of the way in which the College supports these decisions. The reasoning behind the use of semi-structured interviews was that they provided a framework for discussion which limited the number of disconnected issues likely to be discussed but allowed participants to introduce issues they thought were relevant (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Participants included BTEC students currently applying to university, the BTEC tutors of those students and both mid-level and senior managers. BTEC students were interviewed twice, once after making their initial choices and then again after they had made their final choices. The reason for this was to attempt to explore whether students spoke differently about their choices at different points within the UCAS cycle and the impact College support had had at different points during the application process. An advantage of interviewing students, teachers and managers was that receiving different perspectives on the same issues allowed for triangulation of the data (Bryman, 2015). An advantage of interviewing students twice was that this prolonged engagement helped address issues of credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Bryman, 2015) in that repetition of views in both interviews could provide evidence for the believability of findings.

*Developing the Interview Questions*

A decision was made to create a pre-interview questionnaire which would generate data on participant demographics such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic background and parental HE qualifications (see Appendix C). The reason for this is that previous research has found such characteristics to be significant in career and HE decision-making (Adshead and Jamieson, 2008; Ball et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2001b) and so it was useful to be able to consider decision-making strategies in light of participants’ backgrounds. After the pilot study, an additional question was added in regard to sibling attendance at university due to one participant being heavily influenced by her brother who was at university. A similar pre-interview questionnaire was developed for staff (see Appendix D). Here the emphasis was more on educational and employment background as it has also been previously shown that the personal experiences of staff can affect the advice they offer to students making HE choices (Oliver and Kettley, 2010).

Initial student interview questions were developed with close regard to the research questions, so, for example, SRQ 2 (How do the College’s BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?) became: “How did you decide what to study at university?” and “How did you decide on your universities?” (see Appendix E). Similarly, the front-line staff version asked: “What are the main factors that you think have influenced your students when choosing what to study at university?” and the management staff version: “What do you think of the choices the College BTEC students have made when choosing what to study at university?”. Additionally, staff were asked about the college’s CEIAG strategy and government policy on HE choice, with senior staff also asked about college priorities (see Appendices G and H). Second student interview schedules were developed after coding and analysis of the first interviews and followed up some of the issues raised by the first interviews. For example, questions were included specifically relating to the influence of locality, and to student thoughts on what makes a good university. Some questions were the same for each student whilst some related to their individual circumstances (see Appendix F).

Staff interview questions were finalised following coding and analysis of both sets of student interviews (with the exception of one delayed second student interview). Findings from the student interviews did not substantially alter the main questions but added to the list of possible prompt questions with the idea of further exploring such issues as length and breadth of student research, unconditional offers and links with local universities. Similarly, additions were made to prompt questions for management to encompass impact of introduction of A levels and HNCs. Staff interview questions were also influenced by findings from the document analysis and UCAS choice data phases of the research, as detailed above.

*Selecting Participants*

Twenty participants were selected for interview, ten students and ten staff members. The reason for selection of this number was that it allowed a reasonable breadth of data to be gathered whilst still ensuring that it was possible to analyse the data in the appropriate depth. Two BTEC Extended Diploma groups were initially approached; BTEC Extended Diploma Applied Science and BTEC Extended Diploma Business. These groups were selected purposively on the basis that both subjects had a reasonable number of university applicants (see Table 3.5) and that these subjects potentially offer access to a large range of courses and universities. Visits were made to each group, a short explanation of the research was given and an Information Sheet handed out (see Appendix I).

Students were asked to volunteer if they would like to be involved. Ten students initially volunteered, five from each group. Two of the students were 17 and so were informed that they would need to take home a parental letter of consent[[3]](#footnote-3) (see Appendix J). Upon hearing this, one 17-year-old student requested that he be interviewed a few weeks later after his 18th birthday (this was agreed) and the other 17-year-old student dropped out of the study altogether. Concern that seeking parental consent may undermine a child’s authority has been expressed by several researchers (for example, Alderson, 2005; Brooks et al., 2014). This issue is likely to be particularly prevalent at age 17 and the reaction of the volunteers here seems to suggest that this is something that may prevent participation. Given that most young people over 16 are judged to have the capacity to consent to their own medical treatment (National Health Service, 2019), it would seem that this age group would also have the capacity to make their own decisions regarding participation in research. A re-visit to each group elicited a replacement volunteer from Business, meaning that interviews were completed with four Applied Science students and six Business students. All ten students took part in both interviews.

Prior to the interviews, students completed the Pre-Interview Questionnaire. Full data gathered from the questionnaire can be found in Appendix K. The findings from this, in comparison with the BTEC cohort as a whole, are illustrated below (see Table 3.6). Comparison between the demographics of the whole BTEC cohort and those selected for interview revealed a similar ratio of males to females and similar ratios in relation to ethnicity (with a slightly higher number of non-whites). 17-year-olds were under-represented in the interviewees, partially because of consent issues discussed above but also perhaps because as the term moved on, more and more students turned 18. Parental HE qualifications and higher occupational classes were slightly over-represented in the interview cohort, meaning that it was important to specify participants’ backgrounds in the Findings and Analysis chapters.

Ten staff were interviewed; five frontline staff and five senior and middle managers. These participants were selected purposively based on the information they were likely to be able to add to the study; they were judged to be “information-rich” participants (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Four tutors were selected on the basis that they taught the Applied Science and Business students who had been interviewed and so that data could be triangulated. The College Careers and HE Coordinator was selected on the basis of their involvement with these particular groups and overall knowledge of the support system within the College. Senior management were selected with the help of the manager in the College responsible for learner services and were: Head of Learner Services, Head of Faculty of Health, Sport and Science, Executive Director of HE, Adults and Community Support, Deputy Principal and Principal/CEO. Staff were contacted by a number of means; face-to-face (for one tutor and the Careers and HE Coordinator), directly by email (for three tutors and three management staff) and indirectly by email (for the Deputy Principal and Principal/CEO who both had PAs). At this point, all staff were supplied with the Information Sheet.

*Table 3.6: Comparison between demographics of whole BTEC cohort applying to university and those selected for interview[[4]](#footnote-4)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | Whole BTEC Cohort (60) | Interviewees (10) |
| Gender | 47% Male  53% Female | 40% Male  60% Female |
| Ethnicity | 77% White  10% Asian  13% Other | 60% White  20% Asian  20% Other |
| Age | 28% 17  42% 18  22% 19  8% 20+ | 0% 17  80% 18  10% 19  10% 20+ |
| Parental HE qualifications | 22% Yes  38% No  23% Don’t know  6% DNA | 30% Yes  40% No  30% Don’t know |
| Parental Occupational background\* | -  17% Routine occupations  22% Semi-routine occupations  10% Lower supervisory or technical occupations  15% Small employers or own account organisations  10% Intermediate occupations  15% Lower managerial, administrative and professional  occupations  5% Higher professional, managerial and administrative occupations  (4 responses not codable) | 10% Never worked/long-term unemployed  -  10% Semi-routine occupations  -  30% Small employers or own account organisations  -  20% Lower professional or higher technical occupations  10% Higher professional, managerial and administrative occupations  (2 responses not codable) |

Prior to the interviews, staff participants were asked to fill in a different version of the Pre-Interview Questionnaire filled in by the students (see Appendix M to view these demographics in full). Seven females and three males were interviewed. Senior management interviewees were all female but the senior management of the College was predominantly female. Ages of staff are represented in the chart below.

Figure 3.2 Ages of staff interviewees

Nine staff interviewees were white and one was of mixed ethnicity. Six staff interviewees had worked at the College for more than 10 years, one had worked at College for 5-10 years and the remaining three had worked at College for less than 5 years (this included the Principal and the Deputy Principal). Six staff interviewees had previously worked in other educational establishments and six had previously worked outside of education. One staff interviewee had only worked within the College. For five staff interviewees their highest qualification was degree level, one had a postgraduate diploma and four had masters qualifications. All staff interviewees had been to at least one university, including Russell Group institutions. Universities attended ranged geographically from Edinburgh to Kingston, London.

*The Interviews*

At the beginning of the interviews, participants were given a chance to re-visit the Information Sheet and asked to complete a Consent Form (see Appendix L). Twenty-five interviews took place in a neutral interview room within the College, one in a neutral classroom and four (staff interviews) in the interviewee’s office. The interview room and classroom were neutral in that they were available for all staff to book and did not belong specifically to any particular staff member/course department. Student interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes for the first interview and 30 minutes for the second. First interviews took place from 31st January 2019 to 28th March 2019, beginning as soon as the UCAS closing date passed. Second interviews took place between 7th May 2019 and 11th June 2019, beginning as soon as the UCAS closing date for final decisions passed. Staff interviews took place between 7th June, 2019 and 21st August, 2019, and lasted approximately an hour. Interviews were audio recorded and field notes were taken during the interview.

*Analysis of Interviews*

Interviews were manually transcribed and coded. This was trialled during the pilot study and although time-consuming, it ensured a high level of familiarity with the data. Transcriptions included not only the words of the interviewer and participant but also false starts, the interviewer’s verbal encouragements (for example, “mmm”, “ahhh”), laughs, sighs and other occurrences which could be important in understanding the overall meaning of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Data collected from the semi-structured interviews was then analysed thematically. During the analysis, the interviews were coded line-by-line to guard against making assumptions or closing down the analysis too quickly (Rapley, 2016). Memoing was also used in order to record any ideas that occurred during the coding and might later aid the move from descriptive to conceptual (Punch, 2014). Coding began utilising a set of pre-determined themes drawn from the literature and/or earlier analyses. However, it was felt that in proceeding in this way there was a danger that participants’ actual words and meanings could be lost. In the pilot study, an attempt was made to follow a grounded theory approach to analysis. This approach was ultimately deemed unsuitable as it proved difficult to ignore knowledge I had already obtained from existing literature and potentially led to an over-concentration on micro phenomena rather than consideration of these in light of macro theories (Layder, 1982). However, piloting this approach did highlight the importance of keeping an open mind when coding and encouraged me to revert to open coding for the initial stages of analysis. I then compared the pre-determined codes with the codes I had generated from the data whilst attempting to move from codes to categories. In this way, I attempted to avoid some of the pitfalls of purely inductive coding (e.g., re-inventing the wheel) and some of the pitfalls of purely deductive coding (e.g., missing something new). In constructing categories and then themes, I looked for similarity and overlap between codes and then clustered these codes together, gradually moving towards identifying the broad issues that the data illustrated (Braun and Clarke, 2012) (see Appendix N). I also considered the codes and categories in light of the theoretical framework of practice architectures, using the Table of Invention (Kemmis et al., 2014) as a prompt to consider the relationships between the various aspects of practice in order to find connections that would help to tell the overall story of the data (see Appendix O).

### **3.5.4 Ethical Issues during Data Collection**

Ethical issues in relation to Phases One and Two of the research related primarily to issues of anonymity. For example, a number of College documents are available in the public domain meaning that readers could potentially identify the College by internet searching any document quotes.In order to attempt to address this, the thesis will be made confidential and therefore not available in the University library. Further, my job-related access to the College UCAS database meant that I could potentially cross-reference details from this database with the details of my interviewees. I addressed this by anonymising all student choices before commencing with the analysis.

The majority of ethical issues arose in relation to the interviews. The first was in relation to accessing the students. Although securing volunteers to be interviewed was relatively straightforward, the process of translating this offer into an actual interview could be more complex. For example, out of the ten students, three made appointments and then failed to arrive. My position as an insider (and particularly my physical position sitting opposite main reception in the college) meant that I saw these students every day and had to decide to what extent it was ethical to pursue them. My insider knowledge of the general College student population meant that I knew it was quite likely students had forgotten to turn up rather than that they had changed their mind about doing the interview. However, given my potential position of power as a staff member, I had to be careful that when I approached them again I re-emphasised that participation was voluntary and did not pressurise their involvement. This felt like an example of the advantages of the insider position (ease of access) versus the disadvantages (not inadvertently pressurising students to participate). A related ethical issue arose during the second student interviews which took place during the month of Ramadan. Two of the interviewees were fasting for Ramadan and were finding it difficult to attend a second interview, alongside pressures to complete the course, while feeling hungry and tired. I knew this might be the case prior to the interviews and was careful to arrange an interview date/time that suited them, reassuring the participants that whatever they could do was fine and that we could finish the interview whenever they needed to.

A further ethical issue arose in relation to my dual role as both researcher and careers adviser. Several times during the student interviews, students revealed issues with the application process that I would have immediately assisted with as a careers adviser but not necessarily as a researcher trying to allow the participant to control the flow of the interview. For example, one student was having difficulty in communicating with a university as to whether they would accept an alternative English qualification and one student had mistakenly selected the wrong course as her final choice. I did not address these issues during the interview but made a note and discussed further with students at the end of the interview. In this way I was able to fulfil the requirements of my employed position but not to the detriment of the research. A similar issue with my dual role occurred during some staff interviews when staff would start to question me, particularly with regard to some point they wanted me to qualify from my position as careers adviser. Usually, I would immediately provide this information but within the interview scenario I felt uncomfortable doing so as I felt I was intruding and interrupting the flow of the interview. As highlighted earlier (see 3.4.4), I also had to be very careful in terms of introducing any information I had learned during the course of the interviews so that I did not implicate particular staff members/departments particularly when speaking with senior management. I managed this by remaining non-committal in my responses whilst still encouraging the staff member to continue. Whilst accepting that the interview is an actively co-constructed narrative between participant and interviewer and that an interpretivist perspective should embrace this co-construction (Silverman, 2013; Holstein and Gubrium, 2016), I felt that the interjection of my careers role and/or opinions could distract the interviewee, reduce the information that they shared and potentially leave the research open to accusations of bias (Greene, 2014).

## **3.6 Conclusion**

In summary, the proposed research design was an interpretivist, qualitative case study involving multiple data sources and methods. Phase One involved a qualitative analysis of key College documents, Phase Two involved a quantitative analysis of College BTEC students’ UCAS choice data and Phase Three involved semi-structured interviews with students and staff. Phase One and Phase Two were completed first in order that findings from these phases could inform the subsequent interviews. The following chapters will illuminate the main findings from the study.

# 

# **Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis: How BTEC students at an FE College make their university choices**

## **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter is the first of two chapters elucidating both findings and analysis of the study. It focuses on the actual university decisions made by the students and both student and staff perceptions as to how and why these decisions were made. It is designed to answer the first two subsidiary research questions:

SRQ1: Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for?

SRQ2: How do the College’s BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?

In this chapter the selected theoretical framework (Theory of Practice Architectures) is applied to the second research question but not to the first. The reason for this is that findings in relation to the first question are analysed solely to provide a descriptive overview to contextualise the subsequent analysis. In the remaining part of this chapter (and in Chapter 5) the Theory of Practice Architectures (TOPA) is applied (see section 2.3.3 for full discussion of TOPA). When TOPA is applied, the chapters are divided into sections on “Sayings”, “Doings” and “Relatings” and, further, the arrangements (cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political) holding each of these sayings, doing and relatings in place are also considered. At the end of each sub-section, consideration is given to how each of the sayings, doings and relatings impact on each other and so shape student decisions.

## **4.2 Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for? BTEC subject, local post-92 choices and the risk of deviation**

In order to consider the above question, applications from all 60 College BTEC applicants were analysed (see section 3.5.2 for further details, including demographic information regarding gender, age, ethnicity and social and HE background). Application data was considered in terms of how students had utilised their five choices, the relationship between their BTEC subject of study and their university subject choice, the diversity of universities they had selected for application, the offers they had received and the final decisions they made. Data have been presented primarily in the form of basic pictorial diagrams for the sake of clarity (see Appendix P for more detailed analyses in relation to each diagram).

### **4.2.1 Applications**

The UCAS application system currently allows a student to select five choices of course/university which usually equates to one overall choice of subject at several different universities. The following diagram (Figure 4.1) details the number of applications students chose to make and their preferences in terms of both subject and university choices.

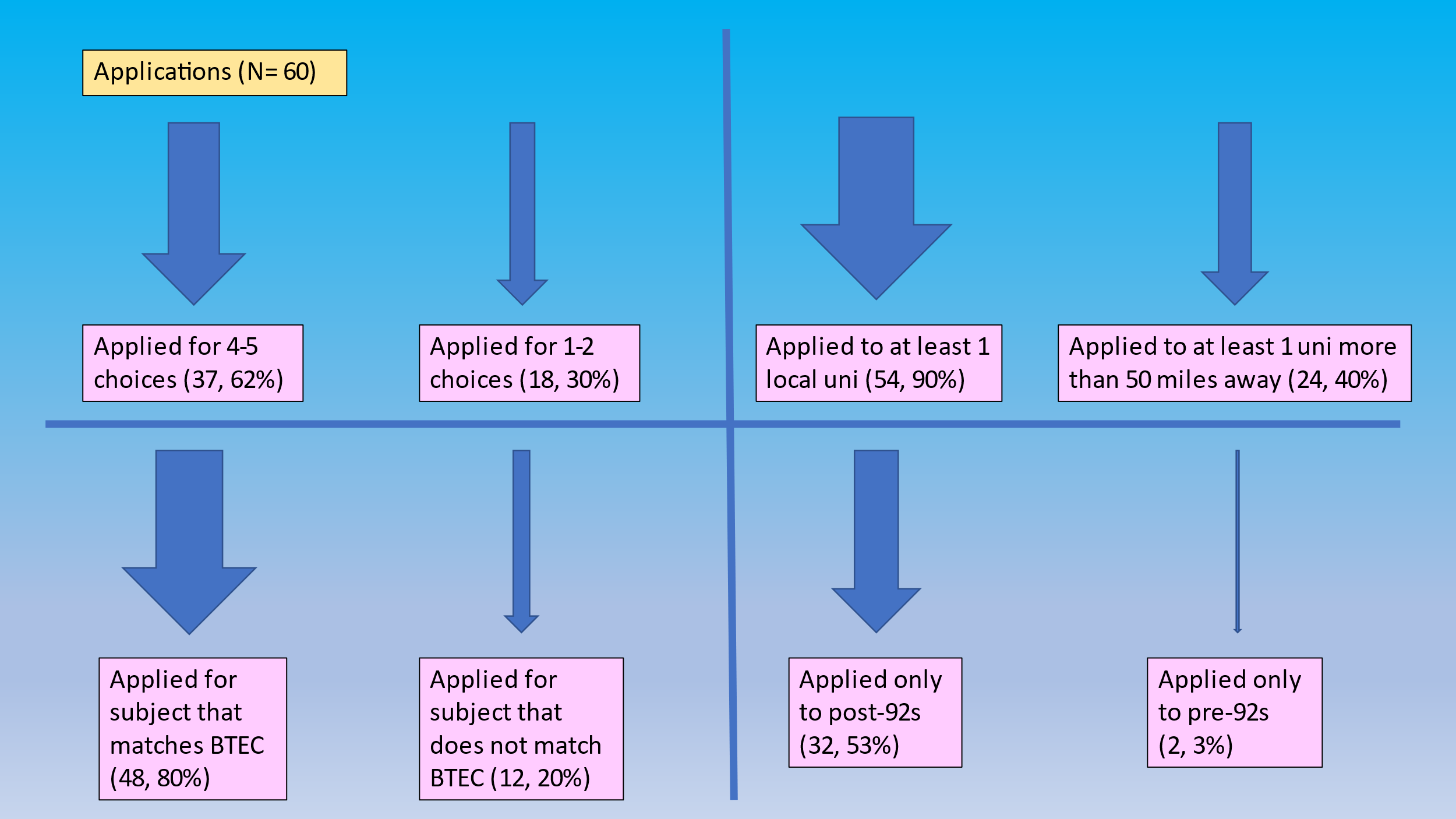


Figure 4.1 Applications of College BTEC students by number and subject/university preference

Thirty-seven out of 60 College BTEC students (62%) chose to apply for four or five options, with 18 students (30%) deciding to select just one or two choices. Business students were most likely to select five choices, whereas IT students were most likely to select just one choice (see Appendix P). The decision to restrict choices to a single university may be in some cases a necessity as students may be unable to relocate and so have selected the only possibility available to them. However, restriction of choices at the application stage may also mean that students have been too quick to discount possibilities which may have delivered more in terms of engaging them and ultimately offering them greater life opportunities. These issues will be explored further in section 4.3.2.

The majority of students (48, 80%) chose to apply for a subject very closely connected to their current BTEC subject. However, 12 (20%) felt able to deviate from their BTEC choice, with some students from most courses finding it possible to opt to study something completely different. Examples of the choices made by those deviating from their BTEC subject choice included an Applied Science student opting for English Literature and Creative Writing, a Business student opting for Film Production and a Public Services student opting for Midwifery (see Appendix P). Previous research suggests that vocational students are under-represented in certain subject areas due to their preference for applied subjects and the lack of match between vocational subjects on offer in FE and some subject areas of HE (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Kelly, 2017). Findings here suggest that the lack of correlation between BTEC subjects and certain university subjects does not have to mean that BTEC students cannot access them but may mean that they have to take a circuitous route. For example, several students changing course had found it necessary to apply for Foundation Years, a factor that may have deterred some from applying. Potential drawbacks to opting to deviate from BTEC subject choice will be discussed further in section 4.3.1.

There was a general tendency for the College’s BTEC students to apply to universities locally and to apply to post-92 universities.Fifty-four (90%) of the applications contained at least one application to either Middleton University (local post-92 university next door to the College) or Greene University (local pre-92 university less than five miles from the College). Eighteen (30%) had Middleton as their only choice of university (see Appendix P). These data provide support for the idea that the university choices of many vocational/BTEC students are strongly influenced by proximity to home (Hoelscher et al. 2008; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012). The possible reasons behind student choices of local or distant institutions will be explored in section 4.3.1. Just over half of the College BTEC students (32, 53%) applied only to post-1992 universities, with just 3% applying only to pre-92 universities. Twenty-six students (43%) applied for a mix of pre and post-1992 universities, although for 12 of these students, their only pre-92 choice was also the local pre-92 choice, Greene (see Appendix P).The above data provides some support for the idea that vocational/BTEC students are more likely to apply to/attend post-1992 universities (Shields and Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017) but also illustrates the difficulty in working out whether the students were more influenced by the proximity or the status of the university. Ten students (17%) had made at least one application to Russell Group/ST30 universities (see Appendix P). This low number supports the suggestion that vocational students are less likely to apply to “elite” universities (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Possible reasons behind numbers of applications to “elite” universities will be explored in section 5.3.

### **4.2.2 Offers and Rejections**

The diagram below (Figure 4.2) details the offers and rejections of the students (see Glossary for definitions of conditional and unconditional offers). Four of the 60 students making applications chose not to allow the College to view their offers and students withdrew from 13 choices so these figures are from a total of 56 students receiving 196 responses.

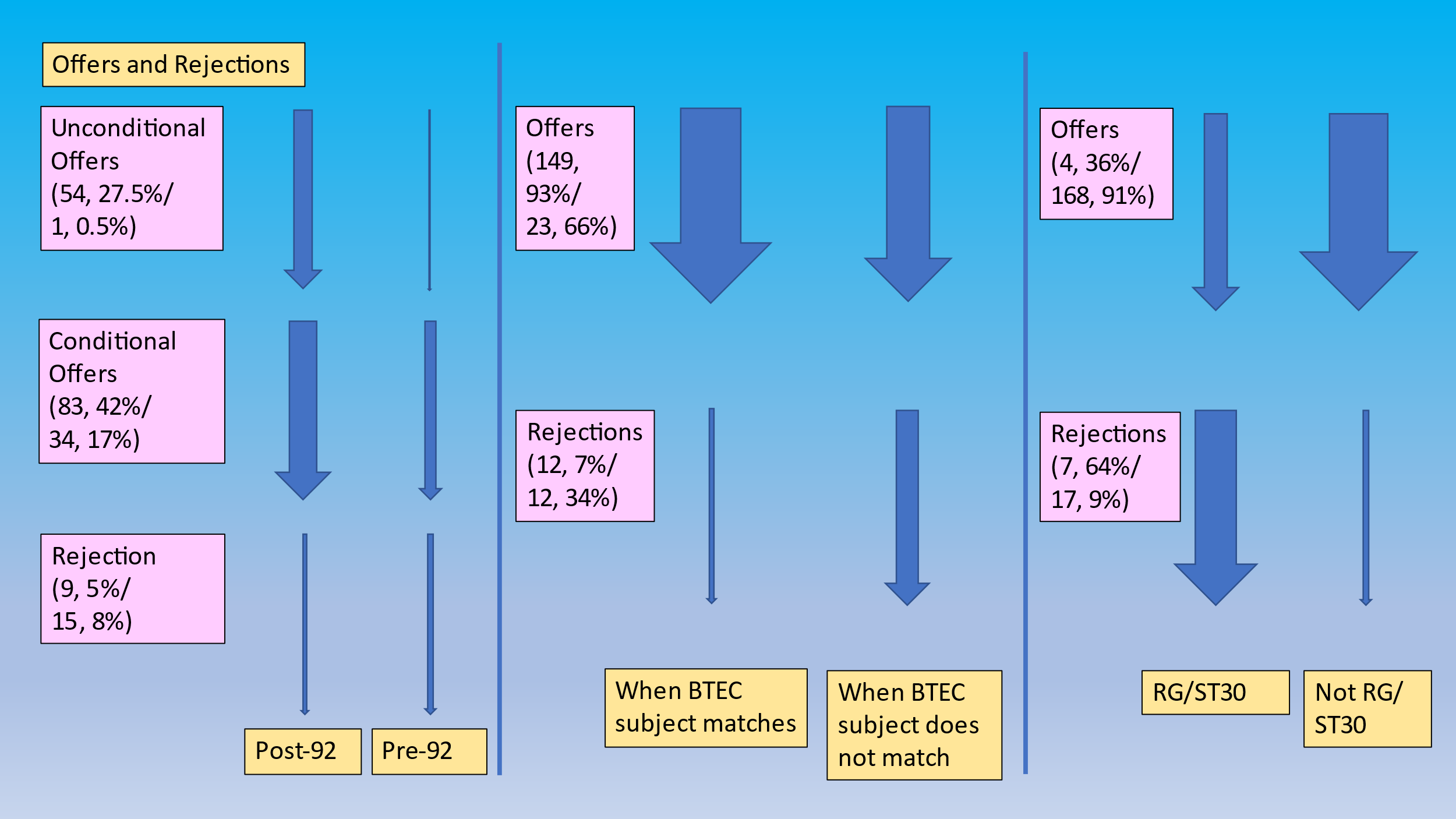


Figure 4.2 Offers and rejections of College BTEC students

More than a quarter of university responses were unconditional offers (55, 28%), with the overwhelming majority being received from a post-92 university. Although 20 students accepted an unconditional offer, it was certainly not always the case, as nine of those accepting a conditional offer could have chosen unconditional at another university (see Appendix P). Further, the influence of unconditional offers on student acceptances was a little difficult to untangle from local influences as all but one of these acceptances were for Middleton or another local post-92 university. Possible reasons for acceptance and rejection of unconditional offers will be discussed in section 4.3.1. The data suggest that choosing to study a different subject or choosing an RG/ST30 university could mean more rejections. 34% of applications involving a change of subject were rejected, compared to 7% of the applications for those continuing study of their BTEC subject. Similarly, 64% of RG/ST30 applications were rejected compared to 9% of non-RG/ST30 applications. This suggests that choosing to change subject and/or to apply to RG/ST30 universities potentially carried a higher amount of risk for the students, an issue that will be discussed further in section 4.3.1.

### **4.2.3 Final Choices**

The following diagram (Figure 4.3) illustrates the final destination choices of the College BTEC students in terms of both geography and university status. As highlighted earlier, full information was only available on 56 out of 60 applications. Of these 56 applications, a further six students ended the UCAS process without a university place, meaning that information on final choices was available for 50 students.

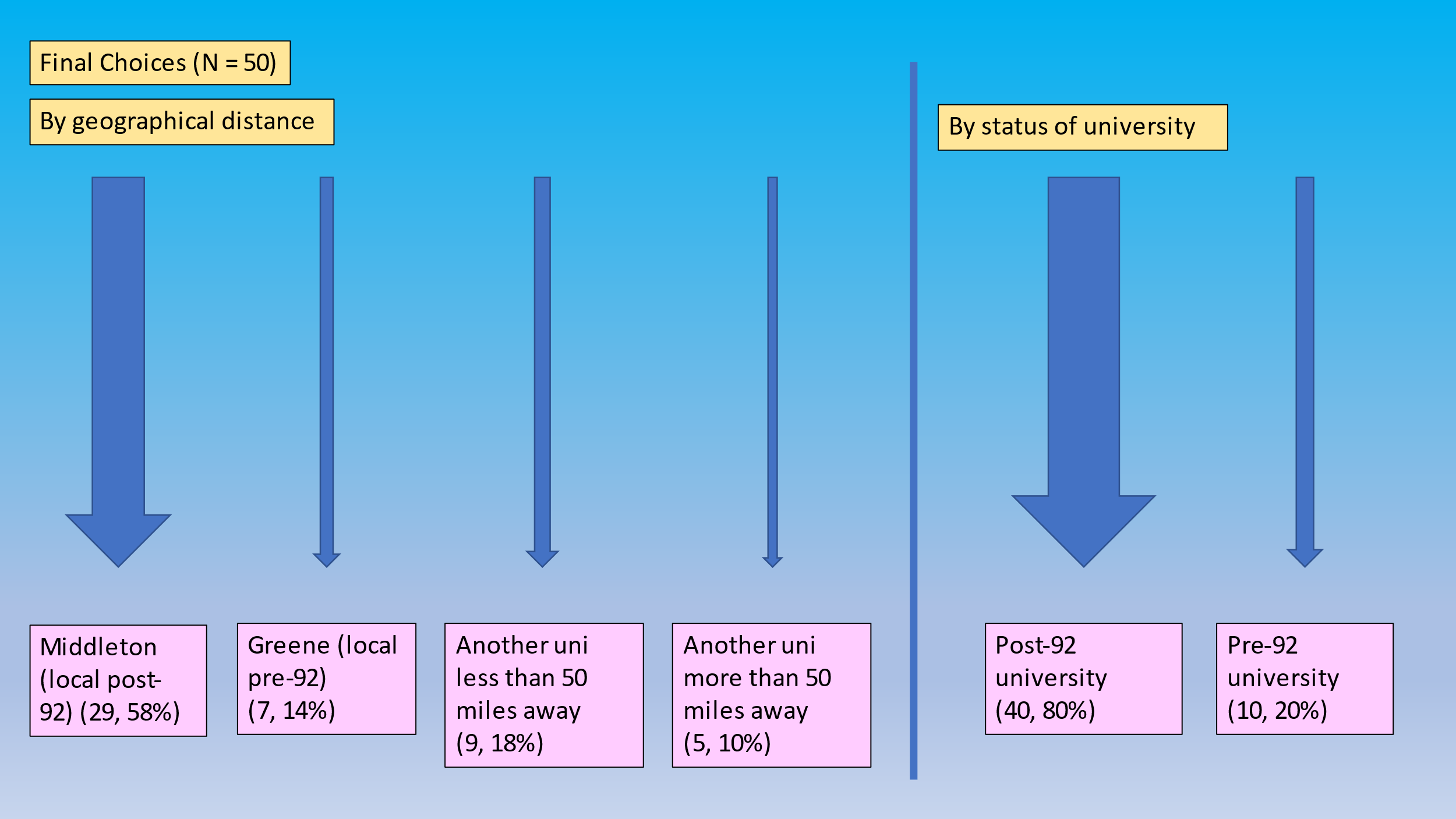


Figure 4.3 Final choices of the College BTEC students by geographical distance and status of university

Twenty-nine (58%) out of the 50 students who selected a place decided on Middleton University as their final choice university. A further seven selected Greene University, meaning that 72% of the cohort chose to attend a university less than 5 miles from the College. Of those studying farther afield, a further nine selected a university less than 50 miles from the College, meaning that 90% of the cohort would be studying within 50 miles of the College. These figures further support research which claims that studying locally is important to vocational students (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012). Forty students (80%) chose to attend a post-1992 university and 10 (20%) a pre-1992 university. As the vast majority attending a post-1992 university chose to attend Middleton, the local post-1992, it is a little difficult to untangle the influence of proximity from the influence of institution type and so fully support research suggesting vocational students prefer to attend post-1992s (Shields and Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017). Further, seven out of the 10 students choosing to attend a pre-1992 university chose to attend Greene (less than 5 miles from College) meaning that, again, locality as opposed to reputation could have been the driving force. As demonstrated by Donnelly and Evans (2016), a preference for a home location cannot necessarily be reduced to one defining characteristic such as low SES, as they found that both low and high SES students in rural Wales favoured local choices due to a sense of attachment and national identity. Local preferences will be discussed in more detail in section 4.3.1. The three remaining students choosing pre-1992 universities were very much the exception to the general rule, one chose a Medical School run by one RG and one pre-92 university, one an RG university and one a pre-92 university more than 100 miles away.

Business students were noticeable during the analysis for the fact that they were the only group (containing more than one applicant) in which each student made five application choices and were the group with the largest variation in choices, including a variety of both local and distant options (see Appendix P). However, although Business students showed more variation in their initial choices (for example, five students chose at least one RG university), only one business student eventually selected a university more than 50 miles away and no business students had an RG/ST30 university as their final choice. Further this group also had the highest number of students (four) who did not go on to finalise a university place. This suggests, perhaps, that not all of the choices of the Business students were serious contenders, a notion that will be discussed in more detail in section 4.3.2.

Of the 50 students who recorded a final choice, 10 students had a parent with an occupation in the top two occupational categories. Seven of these students had chosen Middleton or Greene as their final choice, with only one student selecting a university more than 50 miles away (in line with numbers choosing local from the general cohort). Of the 20 students who had a parent with an occupation in the bottom two occupational categories, 13 had chosen Middleton or Greene as their final choice, with three choosing a university more than 50 miles away (again, in line with numbers choosing local from the general cohort). These findings provide a lack of support for the idea that high SES students are more likely to go to distant universities (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Of the 50 students who recorded a final choice, 10 students had a parent who had undertaken HE study. Eight of these students chose Middleton or Greene, one a post-92 university within 50 miles and one an RG university more than 100 miles away (this was the only student to make an RG/ST30 choice). Of the 20 students without parental HE, 14 chose Middleton or Greene, three chose post-92 universities within 50 miles and three chose universities more than 50 miles away. Again, these choices were in line with the choices of the general cohort and did not provide support for the idea that parental HE means students are more likely to move away (see Appendix P for further details). Only one student of the four who chose to move more than 50 miles away had high SES and a parental HE background. Of the remaining three, two had parents in the lowest occupational categories (one preferred not to say) and two had no parental HE (one did not answer). These exceptions to the rule did not support the idea that more advantaged BTEC students are making different choices to less advantaged.

### **4.2.4 Summary**

A significant minority of College BTEC students were quite specific in the application choices that they made, with 18 students (30%) selecting just one or two choices. Business students were more likely to select all five choices and to have a variety of choices but this did not mean that their final destinations were necessarily any more varied than those of other groups. Most College BTEC students applied for a university subject closely connected with their BTEC courses. However, the majority of courses had at least one person deviating from this, suggesting that changing was an accepted course of action. Changing course subject seemed to come with an increased risk of rejection as half of all rejections were received by this relatively small group of students. Rejection was also more likely for those students selecting RG/ST30 universities. This was unlikely to have dissuaded students from applying, however, as they would likely have been unaware of the probabilities. The majority of College BTEC students made at least one application to their local universities, with 30% applying to Middleton and nowhere else. Twenty-nine (58%) of students selected Middleton as their final choice, with a further 14% selecting Greene (the local pre-1992), meaning that 72% of students would be attending a university less than 5 miles from the College. The tendency of students to make local choices, meant that it was difficult to work out whether students were deliberately prioritising a post-1992 university or an unconditional offer or whether these just happened to be coincidental factors in choosing their nearest university. Students making choices which deviated from the general trends (for example, choosing a different subject or choosing an “elite” or distant university) did not share general characteristics, providing little evidence for the idea of different choices being made between the more and less advantaged BTEC students.

## **4.3 Deciding what and where to study at university**

The main findings outlined in section 4.2 were that the College BTEC students tended to choose to continue study of their BTEC subject and to do this at a local university. Consideration of the interviews of ten students and ten staff at the College now enables a detailed look at how and why such decisions might be made, with the staff perspective primarily employed as a counterpoint, enabling a more rigorous examination of the student perspective. The table below (Table 4.1) outlines the university choices made by the ten student interviewees. In light of research indicating class-related differences in HE decision-making, students have been loosely divided into two groups, low SES (L-SES) and high SES (H-SES). All three “high SES” students have a parent with HE experience and either an occupation in NS-SEC Group 1 or 2 or a household income over £60, 001. Of the six “low SES” students, five have parents with occupations in NS-SEC Groups 3 to 8 and all six have parents with either no or unknown HE experience. Cara is a slight anomaly as her parent’s occupational category is 2. I have, however, placed her in the low SES category due to her family’s low income (under £25, 000) and lack of HE experience. One other student, Anna, was not placed in either group as she did not provide sufficient information. For further details on the demographics of all participants, including staff, see section 3.5.3 and Appendices B, K and M.

*Table 4.1 Final UCAS choices of BTEC interviewees*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Parental Occupation of highest earning parent/Parental HE** | **Household Income** | **Chosen University** | **Chosen University Subject** |
| Cara (AS\*) L-SES | Benchmark Technician /No | Under  £25, 000 | Middleton University | Forensic Investigation |
| Layla (AS) L-SES | Unemployed/No | Under  £25, 000 | Middleton University | Forensic Investigation |
| Dan (AS) H-SES | Psychologist/trainer /Yes | Over  £60, 001 | Greene University | Criminology |
| Josh (AS) H-SES | DK\*\*\*/Yes | Over  £60, 001 | RG University more than 100 miles away | Criminology |
| Rosie (B\*\*) L-SES | Carer/No | DK | Post-92 more than 50 miles away | Business Management |
| Anna (B) | Engineer/DK | DK | Greene University | International Business Management |
| Jade (B)  L-SES | Taxi Driver/DK | DK | Post-92 less than 50 miles away | Accounting and Finance |
| Zak (B)  L-SES | Taxi Driver/No | DK | Greene University | Law with Business |
| Nadia (B) L-SES | Taxi Driver/No | Under  £25, 000 | Middleton University | Law |
| Tom (B)  H-SES | Teacher/Yes | DK | NOT PLACED/WITHDREW | Applied for Film Production |

\*Applied Science; \*\*Business, \*\*\*Don’t know

### **4.3.1 Sayings: Natural progression, “safe” “easy” choices or thought-provoking complex decisions?**

As illustrated in section 4.2, most College BTEC students chose to continue studying their BTEC subject at university. The students interviewed who had made this choice tended to see this as a natural progression and to attribute this to interest in their BTEC studies and the wish to extend this further:

*“I want to do Business ‘cos obviously I’m doing that at college and I enjoy it” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

Several also spoke of an interest in a possible future career in a related area. For example, both Layla and Dan (Applied Science) hoped that their degrees would enable them to move into specific roles within the police force. The majority of staff (particularly management) agreed that the decision to pursue a BTEC subject at university was a natural consequence for students studying a vocational curriculum:

*“. . . so they come to college to do a BTEC route because they’re doing a subject that they actually like and want to participate in . . . so that’s the reason that they’ll go for a degree in that particular subject” (Deputy Principal)*

These findings support previous literature, with BTEC students citing “interest” and “career” as major motivations in selecting subjects (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; UCAS, 2020), though not necessarily that which suggests that vocational students will be more motivated by careers than subject interest (Bates et al., 2009). Continuation of BTEC subject at university level perhaps suggests that subject choice is shaped earlier than for A level students, although students often seemed to delay in confirming the exact aspect of the BTEC course they wanted to study at degree level.

There was some suggestion, primarily from frontline staff, that students might be continuing with the same subject because they were searching for an easy or familiar choice or because they thought it was their only option:

*“I don’t think a lot of them actually know what they want to do, so I think that’s it’s a, for some of them, it is just because they’ve got nowhere else to go . . . and the obvious step is to stay in the subject they’re already in” (Tutor B, Business)*

These ideas were perhaps mirrored by talk, during the student interviews, of selecting a course that was “appropriate” or “suitable”, language which could suggest a tendency to conform to what has already been studied. For example, Anna (Business) commented:

*“I didn’t really know what to study so, I’m from Poland, so I know two languages, so I was thinking that International Business Management will be appropriate for me. ‘Cos I’m doing the Business level 3 so I want to just continue that” (Anna, Business)*

Despite the fact that Anna had considered her interests and chosen IBM over pure business, she spoke with little obvious enthusiasm about her subject, focusing on its appropriateness as opposed to its attractions. However, other students spoke enthusiastically of their passion for the subject, explaining how much they enjoyed studying it and how much they were looking forward to exploring certain aspects in more depth. Further, several students spoke of considering options other than science or business and two of the students, Tom and Nadia, had made the decision to switch from business to film production and law respectively (in Tom’s case because he did not enjoy studying business and in Nadia’s case because she felt drawn to a career in law). As acknowledged in section 4.2, there could be risks with selecting an unusual choice. Tom, for example, struggled in an interview for his chosen subject, feeling under-supported compared to his peers who were able to lean on the subject-expertise of their tutors. Although he received some offers for Film Production, he was rejected from his first choice which resulted in him deciding to take a gap year and review his options.

Considering that continuing to study their BTEC subject was seen by staff as the straightforward and easy choice, it was surprising to hear that seven out of ten of the students thought thatchoosing their course was more difficult than choosing their university. Reasons given by students for this were related to the perceived importance of subject choice as opposed to institution. One way this was illustrated was that students seemed far more worried about regretting their subject choice than they did their selection of institution:

*“What course to take [is the most difficult choice] because you kind of know that that’s going to be the rest of your life, if you make one bad choice then that’s like you’re either going to be stuck doing something you don’t want to do or you’re just not going to have a job” (Nadia, Business, L-SES).*

The relative importance of subject choice may have partly arisen from the fact that more than half the students were choosing from more subject options than they were institutions, as they wanted to study locally. For example, a student choosing between two or three local universities, could still face a choice between approximately 50 business-related courses as there can be so many course variations available at individual institutions:

*“I’d say the initial [choice of] course was hard, especially being in business because there’s so many, I don’t think I realised how many there was” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

Students also commented that it could be difficult to ascertain exactly which of the large number of courses would be appropriate progression for an Applied Science or Business course (both broad-based courses compared to perhaps BTEC Travel and Tourism) with some students suggesting they felt a little restricted by their BTEC choice:

*“. . . the thing is, I wasn’t really sure what courses I could do related to my [BTEC] course, so I stuck to business with law” (Zak, Business, L-SES)*

Students’ framing of their subject choices supports previous studies in that it highlights the importance of subject interest and career and also builds on these studies by suggesting that subject choice takes precedence over institution choice. This latter point in particular potentially impacts not only on how students choose what to study but also how they choose where to study.

As identified in section 4.2, the majority of College BTEC students tended to remain in their local area for university; with 72% choosing to study at a university less than 5 miles from the College. There was a tendency amongst staff (particularly frontline) to characterise these local choices as “safe”, “comfortable”, “familiar” and/or “easy”, leading to the consideration of what exactly they meant by this and whether it implied the perception that the students should/could be choosing differently. For some staff, these sayings were used more as an explanation as to why students chose local rather than necessarily a judgement call:

*“I think a lot of the students go to Middleton because they know the building, . . . they have an awareness of what the staff look like, they know what the feel of the campus is like, they feel comfortable there ‘cos they’ve studied there, whereas I suppose it’s a different world going somewhere like [local pre-92] or [regional city Russell Group]” (Tutor B, Applied Science)*

However, other staff comments evoked the sense that students were inclined not to push themselves as hard as they could (and so the idea that they should/could be choosing differently):

*“. . . some of them will not give up time to get the better quality education, they won’t travel an hour, they think that’s an unbearable amount or an intrusion on their time, even though within an hour we can travel to some really good universities” (Tutor A, Business)*

The above comment makes assumptions about both the time available to students and the quality of local provision and potentially positions both students and local education providers as deficient (whereas, in fact, local providers are comparable to RG provision in certain subjects and for certain measures, see section 2.2.3). These type of staff views show similarities to those uncovered by Morrison (2009) who reported that FE teachers of vocational students characterised those students choosing to stay on at college as weak and poorly motivated. However, the idea of students taking the easy, comfortable choice was not necessarily supported by the students themselves.

Six out of the ten students interviewed had chosen to remain locally to study (with two more choosing universities within commuting distance). The reasons students gave for choosing to study locally were complex and differed between individuals. Included in these reasons were; wanting to stay near family/girlfriend, caring responsibilities for parent, moved around a lot when younger, feels is lazy and wants mum to look after him and parents do not consider student mature enough to move away. Several of these reasons (for example, close family ties, caring responsibilities and parental perceptions of maturity) mirror those identified in the literature as relating to working-class habitus (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Reay et al., 2005), providing support for the idea that working-class/low SES students can face a large number of constraints restricting their university decisions. It was usual for a student to give more than one reason for their decision to remain local, further emphasising the complexity of such decisions and broadly supporting literature findings that choosing to stay local involves the interaction of several factors (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Finn, 2017):

*“. . . my dad’s got a bad illness, I’ve got a younger sister as well and obviously I work quite close to home so I’d also have to be leaving my job” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

The existence of such multiple constraints, however, does not necessarily have to equate to students making “safe” choices in the sense of not pushing themselves or by prioritising risk aversion (Reay et al., 2005) at all times.Instead, students here seemed to be making “realistic” choices which took into account what might be necessary in order to access and successfully complete university and saw different individuals prioritising different aspects of “safety” at different points in the process. Exploration of exactly which aspects of safety were prioritised/risks were averted and at which times potentially provides a more in-depth consideration of the students’ “safe” choices and so offers a way to build on the previous literature.For example, a common way in which students used the term “safe”, was in relation to entry requirements, which could be a particular issue in relation to GCSEs as several students were re-taking English and/or Maths alongside their BTEC studies. Nadia appeared to be choosing the risk-free option when she accepted an unconditional offer purely because she would not have to pass these GCSEs. However, although this decision was arguably “academically safe”, it was actually more geographically risky as the university was further away than her initial choice. Further, despite the concerns of OfS (2019), many other students chose to reject the “academic safety” of a guaranteed university place regardless of GCSE/BTEC performance, choosing to prioritise other factors and claiming that unconditional offers were mostly insulting or irrelevant:

*“I was quite happy that I got unconditional offers but I don’t think I’m going to them unis so it doesn’t matter” (Zak, Business, L-SES)*

In some circumstances, financial or emotional “safety” became key. These notions of safety were recognisedby both students and staff, revealing some staff to have a rather conflicted perspective in that they dismissed choices as easy whilst still recognising structural barriers. Although financial barriers did not form the dominant discourse for either low or high-SES students, they became key under certain conditions (for example, several students cited cost as a reason for not considering London universities) or at specific times in the decision-making process (for example, after making final choices, Zak decided it would be a waste of money using university accommodation as he lived so near whereas Jade decided to move as she was concerned about the cost of transport if commuting). Rejecting only the highest financial risks or considering finance after institution choice, again, seems to indicate balanced consideration rather than trying to find the easiest option. Issues of cost perhaps appeared to be more indirect than those, for example, found by Baker (2019; 2020) whose research highlighted finance as a very important factor for several students. This may be because, unlike Baker’s students, many students here had made an early decision to study locally.

Consideration of “emotional safety” was also evident in the student interviews. For example, a surprisingly large number of students found the idea of studying in a large, busy city particularly daunting, suggesting that they valued a level of familiarity in their surroundings:

*“[Middleton] seems more relaxed than going to [non-local post-92] was, ‘cos it’s in the middle of a city, like middle, slap-bang middle of the city . . . [it] wasn’t calming ‘cos you turn a corner and there’s a group of people just doing something” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Further, two students, chose to study locally and live at home partly because of mental health concerns; one because her anxiety made going to a completely new university more stressful and the other because his autism made for some challenges in sharing accommodation. It was clear that these students felt that staying in familiar, comfortable and known surroundings would enable them to undertake university study alongside managing their condition, an idea supported by recent literature which identified living independently/developing new support networks at university as potential strains on mental health (Thompson et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2021):

*“. . . with my anxiety issues, already knowing a campus and knowing where I’m going is better. . . . if I was to go Greene or [non-local post-92] I don’t know any of the campus, I wouldn’t know what building I was going to, I wouldn’t know where my lecturers would be, whereas with that one [Middleton] I kind of know where I’m heading and if I needed support off anyone I’d know where I was looking for it” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Findings here support the idea that non-traditional students may control the riskiness of university study by retaining familiar support networks (for example, Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) and suggest that mental health concerns in particular may lead even traditional students of HE to seek the support of the familiar. Again, these considerations seem to be more about what will make university possible for a particular individual rather than elimination of all risk.

The students’ approach to “safe” HE decision-making was epitomised by the fact that students choosing local did not suggest that their only option was to stay local. They suggested that, on balance, the local option was the best one for them but that they would have moved had they judged the local course to be inadequate (for example, did not cover a favoured topic in sufficient depth). Four out of ten students also suggested that they would be likely to move out of the area after university, perhaps indicating that maturity was a factor in local choices:

*“. . . it’s like I can move away when I’m a lot older, it will be easier and stuff for work and different things” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

*“[students choose local because] it’s close to family, it’s that support network that they still need and I often think they’re quite young when they go off” (Tutor B, Applied Science)*

Kidd et al.’s (2017) research suggests that studying locally but then moving away for work would result in no opportunity disadvantage to students whereas, conversely, moving away to study and then returning to the home area would result in similar employment disadvantage to those who had never moved. Although, staff voiced concerns that moving away after university might be more difficult, it is certainly something that a small number of students do (Kidd et al., 2017). Consideration of the above supports the assertion that depicting mobility as a binary home and away choice is maybe limiting understanding of the HE choice-making process (Finn, 2017; Balloo et al., 2021). It also potentially challenges the notion that vocational students are making “deficient” HE decisions when instead, many seem to be carefully balancing their support needs against their subject/institution preferences.

*Cultural-discursive arrangements*

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* underpinning sayings regarding both what and where to study seemed to be underlying beliefs as to the purpose of attending university and as to the choices that would meet this purpose. Student reasons for choosing to attend university mirrored their reasons for choice of subject, with more emphasis given to study and career prospects as opposed to moving away or the whole student experience:

*“[I want to go to university because] the job I want to go into [Forensic Scientist/Investigator] requires university like qualifications” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

This focus may explain why subject choice was judged to be so important and why students chose to continue with a vocational subject. It may also reflect the dominant neoliberal discourse of individualisation in that students perhaps felt they needed to take responsibility for ensuring that their university choice translated into a measurable economic outcome such as a specific career path. Staff were more likely to emphasise the more intrinsic advantages of university study, for example, experiencing learning at a higher level and building confidence (although several also highlighted potential jobs/earnings) and so were perhaps more open to the idea of changing subject and, in particular, moving from vocational to academic areas of study (and also perhaps less wedded to individualisation in terms of its standard economic return):

*“[An advantage of going to university is] to learn at the highest level that your mind can cope with and to have the chance, the once in a lifetime chance to read the great thoughts of other people” (Tutor A, Business)*

There were also some staff who placed great emphasis on the importance of moving out to fully experience university:

*“I think if they’re going to get a real university experience they need to go away to university” (Tutor B, Business)*

These sentiments fit the idea of the middle-class ideology of university as a living away experience as described by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018), an ideology perhaps persisting more in the minds of the “old” (e.g. staff) compared to the “young” (e.g. students). However, this was not necessarily the dominant view of the staff as there were also staff who considered students were not disadvantaged by staying at home or who believed that it really depended on an individual’s circumstances

In relation to the government rhetoric of HE for economic growth there would seem to be a closer match with the students’ career motivations, rather than the staff ideas of academic and personal growth. However, whereas government policy perhaps assumes that choice of institution will be a vital factor in making choices driven by economic or career motivations, the students here seem to feel that subject choice is likely to be more predictive of future success and so concentrate their energies here. A dominant interest in subject choice seems logical from both a financial and motivational perspective and it is interesting that both WP policy and research focus more on choice of institution. This focus is presumably underpinned by the idea that institutions are significantly different to each other. This was not a notion that the students here generally subscribed to, believing instead that each course was the same at each university and that attendance at a local university would offer the same educational experience as one 100 miles away. It was not that students were unaware of minor differences in courses such as module choices and/or assessment methods and of the existence of course rankings. However, most did not seem to consider that studying business at one university as opposed to another would lead to a substantially different academic experience and to substantially different future opportunities. This could be because students expected HE to be standardised in a similar way to FE and lacked a full understanding of the likely opportunities, as described in 2.2.3, that various universities offer (as McGrath and Rogers, 2021, suggest many FE BTEC students do). Alternatively, it could be that they just did not consider these to be significant in terms of their own cost/benefit analyses. The above raises questions in relation to the rationality of student decisions. For example, if a student believes that the main purpose of university is to get a qualification and that each university will provide the same academic experience, a local choice begins to look like the rational one (particularly if a student is anxious to reduce the financial and emotional risk of university). These type of considerations can be seen reflected not only in the way students framed their decisions but also in the way the students chose to actually research their options (what they did).

### **4.3.2 Doings: Methodical comprehensive search, a minimalist random approach or a targeted efficient process?**

The literature tends to imply a deficit in the research both vocational and low SES students do in order to make university choices, whether through the amount of research undertaken (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Menon et al., 2007), ability in understanding/evaluating sources (Smith, 2011) or access to/utilisation of a range of sources (Ball et al., 2003; McGrath and Rogers, 2021). There was some support for these ideas from staff, particularly in reference to the quantity of research completed:

*“. . . for the majority of our business students they don’t look hard at what’s involved [in university] before they get there” (Tutor B, Business)*

The HE research activities of the interviewed students, however, did not fully support the idea of this deficit. The Applied Science students, in particular, all seemed to have researched extensively. As high SES students with family histories of HE, Applied Science students Josh and Dan would perhaps be expected to complete comprehensive research. However, Cara (L-SES) had looked at 20-plus universities and used a variety of sources, working methodically through her list of priorities and comparing course attributes in order to select her favourites:

*“I think I spent weeks just going through loads of different universities. . . . . . I got some of them [prospectuses] and I was looking through them for ages and I had lists upon lists of just stuff everywhere” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Although Cara ultimately decided to study her BTEC subject at a local university, this did not seem like a decision made with only minimal research or thought. Similarly, Layla (L-SES) explained that she had been researching into courses and universities since Year 10 and was able to speak in detail about the various courses she was considering. Layla had made an early decision (partially motivated by mental health concerns) to focus on just her local university but this did not mean that she was minimal in her research, using a variety of resources and, like Cara, seeking to compare the attributes of the various variations of her course on offer. The activities of these two students seemed to challenge the discourse of low SES/vocational students as struggling to research and also further challenge the idea of local choices being selected as the easy choice rather than the well-thought-out option.

In contrast, the Business students seemed to have spent less time and energy researching, despite the fact that they had all selected five options. For example, Anna found a course she liked on the local pre-1992 university’s website and then made her other choices of university mainly by checking they did a similarly named course and were less than an hour away:

*“I just was finding the close unis and then see if they offering the course . . . I just stopped [when I had five] and I didn’t look for any other unis” (Anna, Business)*

Similarly, Nadia (L-SES) claimed that she did all of her research at the last minute, mostly after she had already received offers. This was perhaps reflected in the numerous changes she made to her choices after the initial application; for example, changing from policing courses to law and changing her first choice university from Middleton to another local post-1992 university and then back to Middleton again. Often the Business students found it difficult to explain why they had made certain choices, and explanations often seemed unconnected to the actual course/university and more likely to involve their social networks or to be more or less random; for example, Zak chose universities because he had family living in the city, Jade because she heard a friend talk about one and Anna and Nadia both claimed that they selected at least one university because they could not think of anywhere else. Taken together, the findings from both BTEC courses seem to support the idea of intra-class differences (Reay et al., 2005; Morrison, 2011) rather than a straightforward binary division between low and high SES students. They also suggest that the course factor (e.g whether they were Applied Science or Business) may be over-riding the factor of class.

The resources which tended to be used by all interviewed students and were often cited as most useful were university websites and prospectuses. These were used primarily to determine course content (again perhaps underlining a predominant interest in subject choice) and entry requirements. The participants’ reliance on these “cold” formal information sources (Ball and Vincent, 1998) is in keeping with Baker’s (2020) findings with regard to her BTEC students and less in support of Ball et al.’s (2003) idea of the contingent chooser (low SES) with their heavy reliance on informal sources (section 2.4.2). One reason for this may be that cold formal information sources such as websites are far more accessible in the late 2010s/early 2020s (readily available on any smartphone) than they were in the early 2000s when many students would have had to visit libraries or universities to access such data. The advantages of such ease of access to information are that students are much more likely to be able to make very well-informed “rational” decisions than they are if important information is inaccessible. However, an issue with this abundant access is information overload, where there is so much potentially useful information that it ends up becoming a hindrance rather than a help, causing, for example, general anxiety or time-wasting and providing more opportunities for misinformation (Bawden and Robinson, 2020). These ideas connect with the idea of the paradox of choice which suggests that too many options can lead to choosing becoming a struggle (Schwartz, 2004) and can cause disengagement or even withdrawal from making decisions such as choosing a university (Diamond et al., 2012).

As previous research (Davies et al., 2010; Baker, 2020) has found, students valued open days but often did not attend them:

*“I regret the fact that I didn’t go and look at them before I chose ‘cos I just, I think I was stupid not going to them” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

Several of the Business students had only attended the open days that the College organised. Students often commented on how useful the open day had been; for example, Nadia said that it had helped her to realise that the local pre-92 university was not the right environment for her, but this did not tend to encourage students to attend further open days.

There was little acknowledgement from the students interviewed that university websites or prospectuses might present an overly positive view of the course or university. There was slightly more acknowledgement from students that open days might not show the whole picture, with Tom and Dan (both H-SES) commenting that visiting unofficially allowed a more realistic look at the universities and that official open days did not necessarily represent the whole story. One non-university produced resource that was discussed with most students was the resource of league tables (for example, Guardian League Table or Complete University Guide). These were more important to some students than others. Three students (Cara, Jade and Zak, all L-SES) were aware of league tables but did not feel they were useful. For example, Cara was confused as to how a university could be highly rated for forensic science when they did not seem to offer this:

*“It’s just how they’re set out, a lot of stuff was like, I looked for forensics, then you look at the universities but they don’t actually do it but they’re in the tables and then the ranks were just like what makes them good, they don’t actually explain what’s so good about them so it’s like I didn’t understand why they were so good it they didn’t do what they were asking about” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Those that were aware and considered them useful tended to look at league table positions in relation to their course subject rather than to the university. Those that used them tended to have a healthy scepticism towards them and to be concerned about using them in conjunction with other sources:

*“I didn’t really want them to judge too much cos obviously there’s so many different aspects to what makes them first, last, all different things like that . . . it would play a part in my decision but if they were at the very bottom of the barrel then I probably wouldn’t have even looked at them but if* *they were looking somewhat good or better or the best I’d have looked at them” (Josh, Applied Science, H-SES)*

Detailed scepticism about league tables perhaps came particularly from high SES students but low SES students also had some misgivings about relying too heavily on league table positions. These findings differ from those of McGrath and Rogers (2021) who suggest that many BTEC students are unaware of hierarchical positioning.

*Material-economic arrangements*

One of the *material-economic arrangements* holding in place a seeming lack of research on Business students’ part could be that Business students were encouraged to conform to the physical structure of the UCAS form and make use of all of their five options. Whilst, on the face of this, this could have led to students exposing themselves to brand new courses leading them to find a better match, in fact it often led them to making choices with no research to back them up and with no intention of ever attending them:

*“. . . obviously I had to apply to them because you have to have five or four choices but they weren’t like, I knew I wasn’t going to go back to them ‘cos it just wouldn’t be an option” (Nadia, Business L-SES)*

Overall, this could make it appear as if students had not done much research whereas in reality it may just be that they had focused their research efforts on only some of their options. In relation to Rational Choice Theory, it could be said to be rational not to research choices if one has no intention of going to that particular institution (or think it will not be significantly different to another). However, it could also be said that making a choice without fully researching the alternatives could lead to students failing to select the best match for them. One way to describe the way in which these students were researching is “satisficing”; searching for a good enough solution (as discussed by Mangan et al., 2010a). In this case, this meant students researching enough to present five choices but not wasting time and energy researching all of the choices thoroughly if the first one researched seemed to meet their needs. For students such as Josh and Cara it was important to thoroughly research as many options as possible before compiling a shortlist. For other students, the real research did not seem to start until a shortlist had been compiled, often on somewhat vague but potentially time and resource-efficient (satisficing?) grounds that were likely to reduce the cognitive overload of numerous course choices. Rosie, for example, selected two universities on the basis that her lecturer suggested them and one because her boyfriend lived there, commenting:

*“. . . don’t think I looked at that many, I didn’t want to sort of overface myself and keep looking for ages . . . because I’m really indecisive so I knew I’d struggle, so once I saw one, I like that, I’ll add that to my list until I sort of had my five” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

However, once she had her shortlist, she researched these options with relative care. This leads to questions as to whether a student can be judged to have made a fully rational decision by researching one course and one university very thoroughly. The use of a “satisficing” approach to decision-making does not necessarily need to indicate that a student has done very little research, it all depends on the individual’s criteria for satisfaction. For some students, a brief look at a prospectus may suffice, whereas others may only feel satisfied after a prolonged and lengthy examination of all possible aspects of a particular choice.

The tendency of many students to research more after they already had a shortlist of universities and to “satisfice” can also perhaps partially account for the reliance

on university websites/prospectuses. It meant that when students started researching fully they already had university names which would make a university website/prospectus an obvious starting point. Those students who spent longer looking at a large number of universities (for example, Josh and Cara) also tended to have spent more time looking at universal references such as UCAS. This may further explain the uneven use of non-university produced resources such as league tables.

The students’ lack of attendance at open days (despite valuing them) can be explained by a number of practical reasons. Cara, for example, considered that she could get all the information she needed online:

*“. . . ‘cos like open days I get the idea of going and walking around it but to me I don’t really care, a lot of it’s like look at the campus but I don’t care what the campus is like but the courses I can find out online quite easily so that’s more what I did mainly” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Time spent travelling, cost and missing college work were also mentioned as barriers to attendance but the issue that came up the most was the fact that students struggled to get to open days because of part-time jobs:

*“Travel and trying to get there. Getting time off work . . . travelling down there ‘cos people recommend staying overnight and it was just finding the time and money to do it” (Dan, Applied Science, H-SES)*

*“. . . open days are on Saturdays and I work all day Saturday” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

This was an issue for five out of ten students and affected both low SES and high SES students. However, the fact that more low SES students as a whole may have to take part-time jobs maybe suggests that this could be more of a factor for this group. This could act as an example of finance impacting decision-making in a less obvious way than outright fear of loans, with the need for a part-time job leading to students being unable to look at as many universities as they might have otherwise. This finding links with Reay et al.’s (2001b) earlier findings that part-time jobs taken up by low SES students had an effect on grades and so university choice (see also Dennis et al., 2018, for evidence of the effect of term-time working on achievement). The struggle to attend open days combined with a heavy reliance on university-produced paper/web resources and the tendency to satisfice could leave some students vulnerable to making under-researched choices and could also potentially elevate the importance of the relatings they had with family, peers and universities.

**4.3.3 Relatings: Family/peer influence, variable HE networks and the local university as default**

Family expectations of university study were explicitly mentioned in four student interviews. Dan’s comments on his expected progression to university can perhaps be seen to exemplify the idea of the middle-class habitus, with its predisposition towards university, as described by Reay et al. (2005):

*“. . . unis kind of – it’s kind of a stupid thing to say but like, inbred in my family sort of thing, like everyone goes to uni, so it’s that state of mind that I was in when I went to college like it’s always been go to university” (Dan, Applied Science, H-SES)*

Expectations of university mentioned by those students with low SES backgrounds showed perhaps more of a sense of the working-class habitus in that they highlighted the idea of university as a preferred option rather than the unspoken assumption apparent in Dan’s comment:

*“. . . my family just wanted me to go to uni so they expected me to go really” (Nadia, Business, L-SES)*

Parental support for university appeared across the classes, as even those students who did not mention university expectations, characterised their families as excited and supportive of their endeavours to reach university:

*“. . . they’re really happy and pleased that that I’m the first person that’s going in the family” (Zak, Business, L-SES)*

Further, a preference for family rather than peer approval also appeared regardless of socio-economic background, with Rosie, Tom and Nadia all considering that they would be unlikely to make a decision that their family disapproved of:

*“I think parents’ input is really important to me so it’s like if my mum or my dad didn’t, thought what I was doing, I’d be better off in another route then I’d sort of take that quite heavily into consideration” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

Parental influence on actual choices, however, did appear to show a class effect, with most low SES students admitting that their parents were supportive but left course decisions up to them. These findings support previous research which reported that emotional support rather than course advice tended to be offered by both low SES students’ parents (Ball et al., 2003; Reay et al. 2009) and BTEC students’ parents with no family experience of HE (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012). One student (Nadia) mentioned parents restricting choices (for maturity reasons), with most other students considering that their parents would be supportive of distant university choices if the student felt it was the right choice for them:

*“I didn’t really talk to them much about what choice, they were just happy with whatever choice I would make” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

This extends the findings of previous studies, where some parents of BTEC students were seen to encourage their children to stay locally due to financial and/or career opportunity considerations (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Gartland and Smith, 2015).

Students were unlikely to consider peers as a major influence on their choices. There was little sense of collective decision-making (as identified in FE sites by Reay et al., 2001a and Baker, 2017), with students tending to describe their decision-making as an individual process. Tutors’ perceptions were inconsistent, with Business tutors considering their students were not influenced by peers and Applied Science tutors suggesting their students were influenced in this way. One reason for this might be that within the Applied Science group were three peers who were all going to Middleton University to study the same course. Two of this group were Cara and Layla who, whilst acknowledging that having someone they knew on the course made things easier, were both adamant that they had come to their decisions individually (perhaps reflecting dominant neoliberal ideology) and would have been prepared to choose differently to each other had this been appropriate:

*“I find it difficult trying to make friends so it’s kinda like, already got two people there but it’s not been a massive thing, like they’ve only looked around here and I’ve looked a lot further away” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Zak pointed out that although other students on his course were applying/would be studying at the same university, this was more because they were all interested in studying locally rather than because they wished to study together: Nadia commented that although, at first, she and her peers had wanted to attend the same university, this was not the case anymore:

*“I think we matured a bit, I mean we obviously knew that we needed to go to different places to do, to get the best for ourselves and as friends you kind of have the other person’s interests, best interests at heart” (Nadia, Business, L-SES)*

There was little evidence of students comparing themselves with peers and selecting universities accordingly (as in Brooks’, 2003 study). In fact, although Josh was seen to compare himself to the more academically able students in his class, it was only to wonder why they did not apply further afield, rather than a restriction on his own ambitions:

*“. . . in my class, there’s people who are getting much better grades than me . . . and they’ve only applied to Middleton or Greene or both; in my head, you can do much better than staying at home, you can go much farther than I could and you’re staying home” (Josh, Applied Science, H-SES)*

The majority of students interviewed (seven) had some sort of personal links with people who had attended universities and/or people involved in the students’ future careers of interest. For example, Layla had a neighbour and a work colleague working in forensic science, Rosie knew several people who had attended different universities and both Nadia and Zak had relatives who had degrees in and now worked in law:

*“. . . my old neighbour, who’s now moved, actually did the forensics course at Middleton and then went, was offered a job with Middleton police so she’s kind of just been helping me through it” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

This is perhaps a change for Ball et al.’s (2003) “contingent choosers” (see section 2.4.2), who were not envisaged to know many people who had university experience, and more in line with more recent research considering the HE links of BTEC students (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Baker, 2017). However, the high SES students in the study (the “embedded choosers”) could be said to retain an advantage as they were more likely to have contact with people who had professional links to a university; for example, Dan’s mother was a psychologist who was a guest lecturer at both local universities and Josh’s family circle included university lecturers. The potential advantage of these type of relatings could be seen in that Dan’s mother organised for him to have a special, behind-the scenes trip to the local pre-1992 university. The high SES students also seemed to have links to a wider variety of universities; for example, Dan had friends studying at two large pre-92 universities in northern cities and was able to unofficially visit both of these universities by visiting those friends. These findings support those of Slack et al. (2014) who found that high income/second generation students generally had more university links and more links at “elite” universities:

*“I went to Nottingham to visit my friend, he was living in accommodation . . . I stayed for a couple of nights and just experienced uni life when it wasn’t set up for an open day” (Dan, Applied Science, H-SES)*

Both low and high SES students had a number of links with local universities, particularly Middleton which was also the first university students tended to mention when discussing local options. For example, students from Applied Science studied some of their BTEC lessons at Middleton University. This relationship had a differing impact on students, with some feeling that the familiar atmosphere of the university was a big influence on them choosing to continue to study there:

*“. . . going there [Middleton University] and learning there definitely kind of helped with that [making a final decision] ‘cos it’s like I already know the building I’m* *going to be in, it’s just a couple of storeys up and I’m going to be in like exact same building, my lecturers are still actually going to be there if I need them” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

These feelings perhaps held some similarities with those of the students in Morrison’s (2011) study who choose to continue with HE study at their FE College partly as a result of strong teacher-student relations. Other College students, mirroring some of the thoughts of the students in Bathmaker and Thomas’s (2009) study, considered the familiar atmosphere of Middleton to be off-putting:

*“. . . obviously I do a lot of my studies in Middleton Uni anyway . . . cos this college course entails it, so I didn’t really want to be studying in the place I’ve spent my college years, I’ve wanted to move on from college” (Josh, Applied Science, H-SES)*

However, despite several students claiming that Middleton University in particular was “boring”, applying locally was often seen as a sort of default or habitual position. Students spoke, for example, of always assuming they would go to Middleton or Greene:

*“. . . even before I started looking into unis I, in the back of my head, I always thought of Middleton because we go down to Middleton, I know the area, I know the* *environment, so, without thinking about it, Middleton was the uni I’d go to” (Dan, Applied Science, H-SES)*

Nine of the ten students interviewed applied for either Middleton or Greene. Even Josh who felt very strongly about moving away, chose Middleton and Greene as two of his five options, claiming that these were “an obvious” and his “safe” choices due to their lower grade requirements. For those students (including Josh) whose first choices involved moving away from the area, choices of Middleton, in particular, acted as a safety net, in some cases conceptualised as a last resort, somewhere that would be easy to get into if all else failed:

*“I think Middleton for me was like I just, I really don’t want to go there but I put it as my back-up. . . because it’s right where I live . . . and it was unconditional so I know it was a good back-up because I’d definitely be able to go there” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

*“Middleton to be honest, Middleton was like a Plan BB . . . just because if all else fails then that would have been my option” (Josh, Applied Science, H-SES)*

Tom, in particular, exemplified this perception, suggesting that he thought Middleton would probably accept him for a Business course, despite his lack of interest in the course and his current struggle to cope with the content of his BTEC course:

*“I don’t know what I’m going to feel in August, I might want to go uni but it’s probably going to be too late then isn’t it? I might have to go Middleton or somewhere like that”*

*“I think they’d probably let me do business to be fair” (Tom, Business, H-SES)*

This perception of Middleton University as a safe back-up plan perhaps links to the idea of local choices managing the risk of HE (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Abrahams and Ingram; 2013), although in this case, the risk is the academic one as identified under sayings and it was both low and high SES students considering they needed this back-up.

*Social-political arrangements*

One *social-political arrangement* holding family relatings in place can perhaps be seen as the relationship between lower SES families and HE in general. With the growing normalisation of university progression, it has perhaps become more usual that low SES parents will expect and/or be happy for their children to attend university, despite the fact that they may not have attended themselves and may struggle to offer detailed advice and guidance (Apps and Christie, 2018). The difference, however, between expectation and approval means that those without the expectation may be less likely to explore and commit to the path of HE. It may be worth noting that the two students from typically working class backgrounds whose parents had expectations of university were of British Pakistani ethnicity, an ethnic group which research has shown to place particular emphasis on the value of higher education (for example, Shah et al., 2010). The *social-political arrangements* holding relatings with universities/future careers in place appeared also to relate to class constrictions. The social networks of the lower SES students have perhaps increased compared to Ball et al.’s (2003) student participants as more people attend and graduate university. However, this new social capital (see 2.3.2) perhaps differs in that it may not involve a wide range of experiences. Consequently, the social capital of the high SES students retains an advantage in not only the “quality” of its university links but in the variety of universities it encompasses.

However, considerations of peer and local university relatings suggest a more complex picture that one purely delineated by class. For example, the *social-political* *arrangements* holding peer relatings in place seem to be connected to the relationship between College students and the local universities and the normalisation of local study for College students. Staff reiterate what the data in the first part of this chapter shows, that most students go to Middleton and Greene and Josh commented that students and staff at the College found it weird that he was going so far away (an interesting comment, given that staff, in general, seemed to hold a deficit view of local choices). With this normalisation in place, students naturally found synthesis between their decisions and the decisions of peers without having to discuss it. In turn, the *social-political arrangements* holding relatings with the local universities in place are perhaps relationships between the local universities and other educational institutions. For example, some students suggest that they assumed that they would go to Middleton or Greene after early exposure to these universities whilst at school. This ties in with staff comments that students arrive at college with a number of set beliefs:

*“. . . some of the awareness raising and motivating has to be done before college as well, I think it’s what’s done in schools is actually, probably shapes a lot of what students do when they’re here” (Careers and HE Coordinator)*

Further, the close relationship between the universities and the College then potentially reaffirms these beliefs due to an abundance of contacts, especially with Middleton University (see section 5.2.3 for further details). The suggestion of, particularly Middleton, as a last resort perhaps comes from historical perceptions of the university (i.e. its status as a post-1992 university compared to Greene as a pre-1992 university). It may also come from general familiarity and the fact, for Applied Science students that they have already studied there which may appeal particularly to those students looking for emotional “safety”.

### **4.3.4 Summary**

College staff showed a tendency to describe student decisions to study locally and, to a lesser extent, to continue studying their BTEC subject, as safe, easy, familiar and comfortable. To some extent, what staff meant by this was that students were choosing their local option with little thought and with little research of other options and could/should push themselves further. Evidence from the students themselves seemed to challenge this “deficit” framing, a staff view which seemed to reflect the particular “deficit” discourse of low-SES/vocational students with low aspirations and inadequate research skills. The majority of students considered alternatives to their BTEC subject and spent time weighing up a number of course possibilities (albeit often from the same subject area). Their reasons for local choices were complex (for example, family ties and caring responsibilities, reasons reflective of working-class habitus) and their “safe” choices often appeared to be about consideration of what might make access to/completion of a degree possible for the individual rather than what would be the easiest way to do it. Applied Science students, in particular, seemed to research in a comprehensive, methodical manner, even though some students chose to thoroughly research only a small number of institutions. Differences in either framing or researching university choice did not consistently seem to relate to a student’s SES, although class effects could be noted in relation to constraints on where to study and also on familial influence, in that high SES parents were more likely to assume their children would go to university and to provide more practical help with actually deciding where to go.

Students’ framing of their HE decisions was underpinned by the belief that the purpose of university was to develop subject knowledge and enhance career opportunities. Subject choice rather than institution choice was judged paramount as HE institutions were not considered to be substantially different to each other (a belief which could be seen as either reality or fallacy depending on the individual student’s level of research and their future priorities). Student processes of research reflected these beliefs and were also underpinned by practical constraints, with students often using the time and energy-efficient process of satisficing and looking for “good enough” solutions (Mangan et al., 2010a). This use of satisficing did not have to mean that students researched poorly (as highlighted above) but those that favoured minimal research could be left vulnerable to ill-informed decisions, particularly if they also faced practical constraints such as a part-time job preventing open day attendance. One concern, in the instance of minimal satisficing, was the potentially overwhelming influence of having a university next door to the College (as this was often seen as the default option). This influence was held in place by Middleton’s various relationships with educational institutions in the area, including the College. The Middleton-College relationship is one aspect that will be considered in the next chapter, which looks to further explore student decisions by examining them particularly within their College context.

# **Chapter 5 Findings and Analysis: How an FE College shapes the university choices of their BTEC students**

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the role of the College in shaping the university decisions of its BTEC students and is designed to answer the remaining three subsidiary research questions:

SRQ3: In what ways does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by the BTEC students?

SRQ4: Does the organisational culture of the College influence the HE decisions made by their BTEC students and, if so, in what ways?

SRQ5: What is the relationship between College organisational culture, College practice and the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

The first section of the chapter (5.2) aims to answer SRQ3 and SRQ4 and reveal the sayings, doings and relatings by which College culture and practice enables and constrains its students’ HE choices. The second part of the chapter (5.3) aims to answer SRQ5, revealing the sayings, doings and relatings which illuminate the College’s positioning in relation to the wider widening participation/fair access (WP/FA) agenda.

## **5.2 College organisational culture and practice and its effect on student HE decisions**

The previous chapter highlighted some mismatches between the ways students and staff conceptualised the students’ HE decisions and the ways in which they thought about and researched their choices. This first section of this chapter aims to explore the College-student relationship further by considering wider College culture and its effect on the College’s HE Support Programme and the students’ choices.

### **5.2.1 Sayings: Competing priorities of employability, local regeneration and recruitment/achievement**

This section focuses on three main sayings, “employability”, “local regeneration” and “recruitment/achievement”, primarily emerging from the analysis of College documents (see section 3.5.1), which were then explored further in staff interviews. The sayings reflect the ethos of the College as a whole but also influence the way in which HE support is prioritised and so the support that is given. The first saying is the idea that the College is primarily about employability rather than HE progression, or even learning in general (see 2.2 for European comparison). For example, the strapline underneath the College logo was: *“Professional and* *Technical Education”* and its mission statement was: *“To provide an inclusive professional and technical education to energise and grow our city region”[[5]](#footnote-5);* both seeming to downplay the College’s academic/vocational offer and so its pathways to HE. Much of the introductory text in both the prospectuses and on the website focused on the route into employment rather than the route into HE and case studies featured in both focused on students who had found employment rather than those who had moved on to university. This focus on employability could also be seen within the College’s Career Education Programme (College website), which seemed to focus very closely on the world of work, listing activities such as work experience, job search and CVs, with no mention of university at all.

The idea of College as a route to employability rather than university was also substantiated by the Deputy Principal who remarked:

*“I mean the analysis that we’ve got is that most of our learners do go to jobs rather than HE . . . so that needs to be borne in mind when we’re putting additional things in place . . . for the few rather than the many” (Deputy Principal)*

This comment suggests that HE choice support within the College is affected by the fact that the majority of College students do not require it, a finding further supported by several staff interviewees who felt that the route to HE did not get the attention it deserved:

*“. . . we talk a lot about work readiness and see a lot of our courses as being vocational and therefore geared at going to work but actually we need to also think about university readiness in the same kind of importance that I don’t think we necessarily do at the moment” (Head of Learner Support Services)*

For some staff, the College’s tendency to focus on employability rather than HE had its advantages for Level 3 students:

*“When I worked at a sixth form it was very much from the get-go it was hammered in to them . . . university is the end-game and that actually forced a lot of students to not want to go . . . so, I think it’s important that they know it’s a thing from kind of day one . . . and that’s a progression route from day one but I don’t think it’s kind of rammed down their throat here which is good” (Tutor A, Applied Science)*

This lack of coercion towards university was also appreciated by the students:

*“. . . you didn’t feel that they [tutors] were pushing you towards a certain thing” (Dan, Applied Science, H-SES)*

However, the tendency to focus on employability rather than progression to higher education could mean that the HE assistance available was a little piecemeal and inconsistent (see 5.2.2 for further discussion). Further, ambiguous expectations and/or messages sent about HE could affect the number of students applying and also where they might choose to apply, as elucidated by the literature review (Dunne et al., 2014; Donnelly, 2015a; Smyth and Hannan, 2007) (see section 5.3 for further discussion).

The College’s mission statement (see above) highlights not only a preoccupation with employability but also a preoccupation with local employability, an emphasis which simultaneously sits in harmony with the close links existing between the College and local universities and conflicts with some of the deficit views expressed about local universities (see section 4.3.1). The College’s Strategic Plan (a document aimed at and available to the staff within the College), in particular, contained many references emphasising the localism of the college and how its mission and vision are intertwined with that of the city it serves. For example, aims include: *“helping employers raise productivity and contribute to a flourishing city”, “contributing to the economic and social development of the region” and “enhancing communities by supporting regional growth”.* This is important in relation to HE choice support as supporting the local economy to grow could potentially clash with efforts to persuade students to take up HE places and/or employment outside of the area, a conflict commented on by the Executive Director of HE:

*“. . . there’s messages that come politically from within the city from, you know, councillors or MPs that will openly say don’t move out of the city, stay in the city and help fix our city, so I think there’s mixed messages” (Executive Director, Adults, HE and Curriculum Support)*

Within the Strategic Plan, there was a strong emphasis on making local links and partnerships which potentially reinforced the ethos of the College as grounded in the local area, an ethos potentially in contrast, for example, to a private school (or even a school sixth form) which may not be embedded in the locality in the same way and so may prioritise developing links based on, for example, elitism rather than localism (Reay et al., 2001a; Dunne et al., 2014; Oliver and Kettley, 2010).

A further saying is the idea that the College is primarily concerned with recruitment and achievement rather than progression (achievement refers here to whether or not a course is successfully completed whereas progression refers to the destination of the student following completion of the course). This is not to say that progression (with HE progression as part of this) did not feature at all, as the Principal suggested:

*“. . . progression for learners is, you know, one of the top three [College priorities], you know, it’s how do we get you to come in, how do we get you to achieve when you are in and you don’t leave here until you’re progressing onto something valuable” (Principal/CEO)*

However, other staff commented that this tended to take a back seat, with other needs taking precedence:

*“. . . it’s about getting the numbers on to the programmes and making sure we get as many of those through as possible . . . and the niceties and where they’re actually ending up has probably not been as much of a focus” (Head of Faculty)*

There was, further, some substantiation from College documents. For example, the College’s Strategic Objective 1 was “Build Brand Central College”, an objective which focused on customer conversion and internal progression rates, satisfaction ratings and achievement rates. Although destinations were mentioned, these just needed to be 90% “positive”, without any specific discussion as to what a positive destination might be or any particular mention of progression to HE.

*Cultural-discursive arrangements*

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* behind the view of College as a means to employment are perhaps related to language used particularly within government policy documents as to the exact purpose of FE. As discussed in the literature review, FE is often seen as having an important role to play in economic growth (Foster, 2005; Wolf, 2011; DfE, 2016). For example, the Foster Review (2005) envisages FE’s primary purpose as improving employability and supplying economically valuable skills and reviews of vocational/technical qualifications, such as the Sainsbury Review (2016), have tended to be critical about those qualifications which do not have strong links to employment. In a 2020 speech, the former Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson’s comments suggest that these views are still prevalent:

*“. . . further education is vital if we want our country to grow economically and our productivity to improve . . . Its ability to offer flexible, practical training that leads directly to jobs is exactly what this country needs” (Williamson, 2020)*

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* behind the view of College as a means to regenerate the local area are also perhaps related to language used within government documents discussing the exact purpose of FE. In the literature review (section 2.2.3), the dual economic and social purpose of FE was discussed. The College’s role in area regeneration seems to relate to its social role. For example, The Foster Review (2005) sees the purpose of FE as improving employability and skills particularly within its local area and links this purpose not only to economic growth but also to social inclusion. Williamson, in his 2020 speech, seems to uphold this obligation of FE colleges to contribute not just to employability, but specifically to local employability:

*“Local colleges firmly tapped into local business needs will get Britain working again . . . If you want to transform many of our left-behind towns and regions, you don’t do it by investing more money solely in universities. You invest in the local college – the beating hearts of so many of our towns” (Williamson, 2020)*

In this speech, Williamson seems to position FE as an alternative path to HE rather than one leading to the other. The danger of this approach is that those students attending FE colleges as a route to further learning in university may get forgotten and pushed aside and potentially receive HE choice assistance which is less comprehensive than those following the perhaps more traditional route by staying on at school to complete A levels.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* holding in place the idea that recruitment and achievement are more important than progression are related to language used within the College’s Strategic Plan and College Ofsted reports. This language underlines the financial and structural (leadership) issues that the college has had and uses them as a launching pad to look at what the College should focus on now. For example, phrases such as *“period of turbulence/change” “financial issues/strain” “drift in standards”* and *“significant period of restructuring”.* The effect of this narrative is perhaps to remind staff of the difficulties that the college has faced so as to ensure that they are focused on such issues as recruitment/achievement which will more directly address the financial issues from the past. This situation reflects that of many FE colleges; for example, many principals reported that their biggest issue was funding (Savours and Keohane, 2019). It also illustrates an FE culture which, since incorporation, has been about day-to-day survival, related to reducing costs and enhancing student outcomes (Simkins and Lumby, 2001; Lucas and Crowther, 2016; Orr, 2020).

### **5.2.2 Doings: The College HE Support Programme and issues of inconsistency, tailored individual support and reliance on local universities**

The HE Support Programme within the College involved several different parties: tutors, who provided HE support primarily within their tutorial programmes, College careers staff who delivered HE support sessions, organised HE Careers events and provided 1-to-1 support, and university staff who occasionally attended College to deliver one-off sessions. There did not seem to be one overarching document detailing the HE support that students could expect; rather, aspects were recorded on a variety of documents including the Tutorial Scheme of Work and the College Careers Strategy document (which no frontline staff had read). Frontline staff interviewees often perceived the HE Support Programme to be an add-on, rather than an integral part of the study programme, with some staff commenting that it was not as developed as in sixth form colleges they had worked in:

*“Oh, it is a massive bolt-on and I think that’s with this college and this is the difference between previous places I’ve worked where, like I said, at sixth form where university was an expectation, that time [for HE choice support] is not questionable because it’s so important . . . for the sixth form that those students go to university” (Tutor A, Applied Science)*

Exact requirements for in-class support sessions were vague, with tutors being expected to make their own choices as to the exact make-up of their tutorial programmes:

*“. . . they’ve got to use their common sense and professionalism, you know, to decide where to weight what goes on in the tutorial which is why we’ve got cross-college support for things like that as well . . . so they can take advantage of that or they can do it themselves” (Deputy Principal)*

The result of this informal programme of HE support meant that content was largely dependent on the efforts of individual tutors, with a large number of staff commenting that this made support efforts very inconsistent. As evidenced in the Deputy Principal’s quote above, tutors had choices as to whether they led some activities themselves or left these to Careers and/or university representatives. Some tutors were reluctant to pass too much responsibility onto others (as they felt they knew the students best), whereas others preferred this model. For example, the quote below illustrates the differences between departments when helping students with their personal statements (the section of the UCAS application where students express in detail why they want to study a certain course):

*“. . . as I say, other departments, the IT department, their view is, as far as I know, if it’s still as it used to be, well the personal statement is [the careers adviser’s] job and they send them down, they will get them, they’ll introduce them to [the careers adviser] but they won’t look at them and get involved in the same way that I do with it” (Tutor A, Business)*

All four tutors interviewed had high numbers of their students considering HE and so prioritised HE support sessions. However, despite this seemingly similarly high level of tutor support, differences could still be seen in the level of input received by the two groups. For example, students in Applied Science spoke of having five or six UCAS sessions whereas Business considered they had probably had about 20. Further, all Business students had been on two College-organised university trips whereas Applied Science had not been on any. There could even be inconsistency within the same course, as Business tutors admitted that although the current second year cohort had completed two university trips in their first year of the course, the current Business first years had completed none. This was attributed to a lack of invitations from the universities.

Management conceded that responsibility for the HE Support Programme was left in the hands of individual tutors and that the support programme was not particularly well monitored:

*“I think, at the moment, it’s probably down to the relationship between the learner and the tutors on the course” (Principal/CEO)*

On one hand this could be a good thing as it gave tutors the chance to assess the need of their individual groups and to act accordingly. However, it could also mean that certain student groups had less support and that this was not necessarily visible as monitoring systems were not in place to ascertain who had done what:

*“Many groups of our BTECs do have university or [local UniConnect programme] speakers in and some do go, are taken to local university for subject specific master classes, for tours and looks around but that should be every single BTEC group . . .* *goes to at least one in my opinion and I thought that, I think that that was an aim of the college but I don’t think it’s necessarily been strongly enough pushed to happen consistently” (Careers and HE Coordinator)*

This image of FE College HE support seems in line with Pugsley’s (2004) description of FE as poorly resourced, with patchy and inconsistent HE choice support. It also aligns with the findings of Reay et al. (2001a) and Dunne et al. (2014) who both found that state HE choice support tended to be less well-resourced and prioritised than support at private institutions. An interesting point, however, is that, although College staff of all levels were somewhat critical of their programme, this was not so much the case for the students.

Despite the lack of a formal, consistent system, student interviewees did not seem to consider that they were poorly supported in their applications to university, with several students considering that their main source of assistance was the College and one commenting:

*“I think without the college I wouldn’t have – I would’ve applied eventually but it would have been a last-minute thing, maybe the night, the day before, I would’ve applied and then I would have been struggling” (Nadia, Business, L-SES)*

For many students, this support consisted of help completing the application form rather than direct assistance in making choices about individual courses and universities, as this was often considered to be more of a personal choice:

*“. . . College hasn’t really influenced a lot. They got me to actually apply UCAS, I didn’t do that – I hadn’t thought of doing that until they came in, it’s like, do it and I did it in the lesson . . . that’s about as much as college has helped” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

The idea of plentiful help with the actual application was in contrast to the FE college students in Gartland and Smith’s (2018) study who said they did not get much help with UCAS (perhaps because many followed a straightforward path on to HE courses within the college). A disadvantage of a UCAS-focused approach could be that application support is taking place at the expense of discussing the finer points of course selection. However, given several students’ consideration that course selection is a personal choice, it may be that application support was the support that they most valued. Further, the flexibility of the College’s support system meant that there was scope for students with different needs to be supported in different ways. For example, whilst Cara seemed to value the primarily bureaucratic support of help with her UCAS form, Jade found the more immersive experiences of a Level 3 university mentor scheme and the college-wide work experience scheme most useful.

The interviews revealed that College also supplied indirect assistance through the curriculum and mode of delivery of the BTEC programme (see section 3.4.2 for details of the BTEC qualification). For example, Applied Science students commented on the usefulness of studying some lessons at a local university and several students revealed that studying a particular subject module as part of their BTEC course had given them the idea as to what to study at university. Students also considered the time spent with their FE tutors and the subject expertise of these tutors a great advantage (see 5.2.3 below for further discussion). Unlike the students in previous studies (Atkins and Flint, 2015; Gartland and Smith 2018), students did not seem concerned that their BTEC qualification might be judged as inferior to A levels, generally speaking only of the positives (although, admittedly, they were not asked a direct question on this topic). This may have been due to several factors; for example, that BTEC provision (rather than A level) was the norm at the College, that several students had GCSE grades that meant they could have chosen A level study and that few students had entered into discussion with selective universities about BTECs and entry requirements. Tutors confirmed the possibilities of enhancing subject exploration within BTEC study, commenting that the BTEC curriculum could be tweaked to match student interests (Tutor B, Applied Science) and that often the BTEC course covered quite a lot of first year university content (Tutor B, Business). As identified in section 3.4.4, positive student reviews of both the College BTEC provision and the College HE Choice Support Programme should be considered in conjunction with the possible impact of my role within the College.

One area that was a point of discussion for both students and staff (and where students had some criticism) was the issue of university visits. These assumed a particular importance for the students as open days were something that most found difficult to attend independently (as highlighted in section 4.3.2). When discussing university contacts students referred to both visits to universities and to university representatives visiting the College, both of which tended to involve local universities and so perhaps increased the likelihood of students choosing a local option. However, several students mentioned that contact with local universities through the College had been useful:

*“I found the [local] open days really useful because that really helped me to see which university I would be more suitable in, I thought I’d like. And if it wasn’t for, like, the lady being down here, I wouldn’t have applied to Middleton because I wouldn’t have known I’d be able to get in” (Nadia, Business, L-SES)*

The College Careers Strategy stated that by the age of 18, students should have had two visits to universities and staff generally agreed that this would be a good idea. However, as mentioned earlier, although Business students had visited both local universities, all four Applied Science students said that they had received no input from universities in lessons and had not been on any trips. The issue of BTEC students’ lack of access to institution-supported university visits supports the findings of Gartland and Smith (2018) who found that sixth forms were likely to offer more university visits than FE colleges and Baker (2020) who found that BTEC students were not involved in as many outreach university visits as A level students. It also adds to the research by identifying that access to university visits can differ between specific BTEC courses.

Several students interviewed said that they would like more university visits, with several commenting that they would appreciate visiting universities further afield (or alternatively having these universities come in to College):

*“I think in terms of getting people in from unis, I think the college, it would be good for them to go a bit further afield and get like, I’ve not seen someone from [regional city university] come in or it’s very much people from Middleton and Greene, very local unis which obviously I get ‘cos you’ve got to support your local area and that but I think for the students it’d be nice to have a bit of that variety” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

*Tom: I mean we’ve been Middleton and Greene but . . . I mean if perhaps more unis came from like farther, more further away came.*

*I: Why do you think that would be useful?*

*Tom: ‘Cos it’d help you decide if you want, like if they came to us and talked about how good it was, you’d want go there wouldn’t you so it’d help you decide (Tom, Business, H-SES)*

Staff, however, expressed concerns about the enthusiasm of students for such trips when it actually come down to it. Tutor A, Applied Science, for example, had tried to organise a trip to a university on the Welsh coast but ended up abandoning this, not only because of time and cost issues but also because of a lack of enthusiasm from the students:

*“It was money, the cost of the coach . . . and then I said to them about it and they were, like, some of them were moaning that they don’t want to go to Wales, I know I don’t want that uni, so I thought this is a bit of a useless trip and then honestly time as well . . . with obviously the curriculum shrinking and the time we’ve got, just to have a whole day out to Wales with some who might not want to be there wasn’t ideal” (Tutor A, Applied Science)*

Tutor B, Business, made similar comments in relation to student enthusiasm as she recalled a successful trip to a university in a nearby big city; she believed that the success of the trip had relied on the fact that students wanted to go and had organised it themselves, commenting:

*“. . . it’s all very well saying we need to do more . . . but you’ve got to get the students to take it up” (Tutor B, Business)*

In support of these tutor concerns, it is perhaps relevant that the student quotes above are not particularly vehement, using phrases such as “it’d be nice” and “if perhaps more unis came” to frame their suggestions.

*Material-economic arrangements*

The *material-economic arrangements* holding the College’s HE Support Programme in place related largely to the structure of both the BTEC qualification itself (e.g., timetabling and assessment demands) and also the structure of the College (e.g., staff organisational structure and general attendance expectations). For example, the weekly timetable of the BTEC students did not seem to be designed with much room for in-class HE support or external HE visits. All four tutors and the Careers and HE Coordinator spoke of the difficulty in finding enough time and having to perhaps prioritise HE at the expense of other activities; such as one-to-one talks between students and tutors. Several staff compared the time available now unfavourably with that available in the past (prior to student-tutor time reductions driven by funding cuts), pointing out the complications in particular in organising trips to universities:

*“. . . a lot of it‘s down to time because they’ve, when we used to do two or three visits – we used to do two or three maybe four . . . universities, we had twice as much* *contact time with the students, as soon as you start cutting that it gets, it’s eroded isn’t it” (Tutor B, Business)*

*“. . . it’s like a jigsaw piece, whenever you think, oh we can do it that day, no you can’t we’ve got GCSE Maths . . . you’re just, everything gets blocked and on the days they’re not in we’re normally fully teaching anyway” (Tutor A, Business)*

Attending and organising events could also be problematic due to the different nature of the BTEC yearly timetable as compared to the A level calendar. For example, the timing of a big HE Fair at the local post-1992 university (end of June) suited the A level calendar (according to Tutor B, Applied Science, who taught both BTEC and A level students) as students had a bit of breathing room here before the start of their second year. However, for BTEC students this was a busy time, with the focus on achievement rather than progression, ensuring that students had completed the necessary coursework to get their grades for that year:

*“. . . after Easter, you should just leave us alone because the kids have got to get the passes out . . . at that stage and I think the time becomes so precious because we’ve got [course monitoring] visits and things like this and we can’t give an afternoon off . . . because otherwise the students will fail the course” (Tutor A, Business)*

One potential answer to this problem could be for students to attend events during non-term-time or weekends. However, one issue that arose with tutors was the difficulty in persuading students to attend events when they were not scheduled to be in college. Tutors explained that students did not generally expect to have to come in on their days off and that many had part-time jobs that fitted around their study:

*“I know the college arranged, it was at least twice this year, for student finance to come in but they were times when either my students weren’t in or they were in lesson time so I didn’t manage to get them over there . . . and it’s not a mandatory thing, it’s an optional thing and at the time money to them isn’t an issue” (Tutor A, Applied Science)*

Issues with FE timetabling (compared to, for example, a school sixth form) were also mentioned by Tazzyman et al. (2018) in their NCOP evaluation, illustrating that this proved a barrier for both internal and externally organised events.

College structure could also be seen to impact in that there was some disagreement between staff as to whether visits to HE institutions would be best coordinated centrally or by department. Some staff, for example the Head of Learner Support Services and the Head of Faculty, considered that visits were best conceived within departments as their subject and student knowledge would enable them to tailor trips accordingly. The Head of Learner Support Services also felt that departments would then take ownership and so students would be more likely to attend. The Deputy Principal and the Executive Director of HE felt that centrally coordinated trips would have the advantage of relieving busy teachers of another responsibility and ensuring that activities could be easily monitored. Several tutors agreed, claiming that this could solve some cost and timing issues but also counselled against plans being made without thought:

*“I do think there needs to be more central coordination from within the college . . . someone saying this is what we want to do and this is when it’s going to be but they need to give thought to what the students are doing” (Tutor A, Business)*

Further, past experiences of centrally coordinated trips did not suggest these were completely successful. Although both the Careers and HE Coordinator and the Head of Faculty agreed that a recent trip to a regional city RG university had been a good experience for the students who attended, only 14 out of 28 students actually turned up and the Careers and HE Coordinator considered that organising the whole thing had been logistically challenging. The difficulties regarding central or departmental responsibilities outlined above mirror the larger conflict between an easily monitored, consistent programme for all and allowance for tailored, individual support.

### **5.2.3 Relatings: Tutor Support and “convenient” College-university relationships**

All tutors interviewed recognised the difficulties in fitting a full HE Support Programme into the BTEC/FE timetable (as highlighted above) and were flexible about supporting students informally, despite the fact that this could dramatically increase their workload. For example, even though Applied Science students had experienced less in-class support than Business students, both Applied Science tutors had spent several hours outside of class time assisting students with HE choices/applications. This kind of tailored, individual support was one that students really valued and many spoke of the close relationships they had with their tutors and of how approachable they were. If any students felt short-changed by the brevity of the “official” HE Support system in place, they generally felt close enough to tutors to ask for further advice:

*“. . . it was kinda like, with [Tutor A], can always go up to [Tutor A] and just casually talk to her about [HE choices] . . . and [Tutor B], when I’ve spoke to [Tutor B] about my options and everything coming back that was just in lesson, we didn’t have a set time, you can just go up to them and ask them anything” (Dan, Applied Science, H-SES)*

Tutors were seen by students to be useful sources of information and/or support in two main ways; as subject experts able to offer more insights into university courses and as student experts with a good knowledge of the capabilities of the individual students. This latter point was given as the main reason for taking tutor advice:

*“. . . because he was teaching us for two years, he knew what type of learners we were, if we’d be able to do law or nursing or something . . . if he thought that we were just wasting our time, it would’ve been too hard for us, he would have told us, he would’ve just been honest” (Nadia, Business, L-SES)*

The close relationships between students and tutors mirrored previous findings that BTEC students benefitted from the support and motivation of individual tutors and used tutors as vital “hot” sources of information (Morrison, 2009; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Gartland and Smith, 2018). The impact of tutor influence seemed particularly evident with Rosie who admitted that she had made several institution choices due to tutor recommendation, commenting:

*“. . . having approval off my lecturers was quite a big thing for me ‘cos I was like, well, if he thinks it’s a good choice then it must be good” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

However, Rosie’s final decision was to opt for a different university than any of those recommended. Further, the majority of students, although keen to gain tutor approval as to their general capacity for university, did not seem to be unduly swayed by their institution recommendations. For example, not one Business student put in an application for a particular RG university frequently recommended by Tutor A for its “elite” status. This finding builds on previous studies by both Gartland and Smith’s (2018) and Rouncefield -Swales’ (2012) which noted that a number of BTEC students did tend to follow tutor recommendations. One reason for any discrepancies may be that the strong desire of many of the students in this study to stay local (see section 4.3.1) was overriding tutor advice, which in this case was to attend a non-local option. It may have been that the tutors in the studies mentioned above were recommending institutions which already had some resonance for the students.

Several staff interviewees remarked on the importance of impartiality whilst assisting students with HE choice. and staff genuinely seemed keen to open students’ eyes to different ideas of where to go to university. However, in reality, as highlighted above, visits (either to a university or from a university representative) were most likely to involve their two local universities (and particularly Middleton). One of the main reasons given for this reliance on local universities was the lack of time available to organise and conduct university visits and the relative ease with which a local university visit could be organised:

*“I think that the reality is about time . . . see Middleton is easy because we can instruct the students to meet us there . . . Greene is easy because you can take minibuses up from here which isn’t a difficulty to do, you can do an afternoon visit, I think the problem is the moment you start going to places like [two regional city universities], the transport becomes a bigger issue because not only do you need to get them there but also, if we took them, where on earth do you park?” (Tutor A, Business)*

Local universities were also the most likely to approach the College and offer their services, saving staff the time necessary to track down appropriate contacts/organise appropriate sessions at other universities. When asked why activities had been booked with Middleton University, Tutor B, Business, commented:

*“. . . it’s just who’s on offer (laughs), she was there . . . and offering to do it . . . really if Greene were there and offering to do it then that’s who we’d take” (Tutor B, Business)*

Further, in a catch-22 type scenario, staff knew that the majority of College students were considering applying locally and so could be presumed to be interested in viewing their local universities:

*“. . . we could do more to universities and perhaps we need to look at it again, it’s, for us, the problem is that most of our students are going to Greene and Middleton anyway . . . where do we take them?” (Tutor B, Business)*

This links back to the issues of student enthusiasm discussed in 5.2.2. Although many of the students interviewed were keen for trips further afield, it was unclear, for example, where exactly they would want to go and also whether they would accept this instead of a trip to the local universities rather than as an extra.

Tutor A, Business, considered that in the past, particularly when Aimhigher (see section 2.2.3) was active, they had undertaken a greater variety of trips and he felt that more varied invitations had come into the College. In general, tutors felt that the impetus needed to come from universities in terms of them approaching College:

*“I’d like it if more universities would be willing to do a bit more . . . so, like, if universities were willing to invite us to their places, ‘cos it’s all well and good getting a lecturer from university to come and stand in our room but they’re [College students] in their comfort zone and they’re where they know . . . and they’re in their usual seats and I’m in the room” (Tutor A, Applied Science)*

The College’s relationship with Middleton University in particular supports the literature that suggests that FE colleges are more likely to have built relationships with and to rely on arrangements with local post-1992 universities (Reay et al., 2001a; Pugsley, 2004). Reay et al. (2001a) comment that FE colleges often built relationships with post-1992s because of the alignment between state curriculum subjects and post-92 provision. Other reasons might be that the College and Middleton align in their aims of supporting local industry and employment and that Middleton approaches the College more frequently (than Greene) due to its status as a recruiting university. The literature provides support for the idea that a culture promoting certain universities will translate into students attending those universities (Dunne et al., 2014; Donnelly, 2015a). The close relationships with local universities could perhaps be seen as promoting these institutions and so setting up a culture of expectation that students would attend a local university. This would be in contrast to an area such as the East of England or the South West where lack of university provision is more likely to promote a culture of migration (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018).

*Social-political arrangements*

The strong relationships between students and tutors are likely to be held in place by the particular way in which the BTEC course is organised, with just two tutors for the whole course, as opposed to A levels where there are likely to be numerous tutors. The development of strong student-staff relationships can also perhaps be seen to relate to the nature of the FE College with its emphasis on support for students. For example, the Careers and HE Coordinator spoke of the high level of support she felt the BTEC students received from their tutors and the Deputy Principal spoke of one of the advantages about HE in FE being the level of support offered. Students also commented on the amount of support they received, with both Nadia and Tom comparing it favourably to other institutions:

*“I thought it was really good, they gave us a lot of support, more than, like, my brother went to sixth form college and he was telling us that he had to do everything by himself” (Nadia, Business, L-SES)*

*“. . . if you come here they just give you, they have second chance don’t they really and they help you do the work and that” (Tom, Business, L-SES)*

However, it must also be recognised that several of the BTEC students were happy to proceed independently with their choices of university course (for example, Cara, Layla and Josh). These were all Applied Science students and so had less access to formal support than their BTEC Business peers. However, they seemed unfazed by any lack of college assistance, considering that it was their personal responsibility rather than the College’s to research and make decisions about what and where to study.

The practice architectures holding the close HE support relationship with local universities (particularly Middleton) in place are related to the other relationships the College has with these universities. For example, as mentioned previously, some College courses utilise Middleton University’s facilities for lessons and some College staff teach classes at the University. The College’s HE Strategy points out that Middleton University validates several university level courses at the College and accounts for the majority of the College’s FE in HE students. Further, the College and the university sign a Progression Agreement, a document in which College students are potentially given an advantage over applicants who are not local (for example, a guaranteed interview):

*“I think the reason, with Middleton Uni they do progression agreements with the local [colleges] and so it’s more or less as long as you pass your course at college . . . you can have an opening at Middleton Uni” (Deputy Principal)*

Progression agreements also existed with Greene University and another local post-92 university. These types of agreements were also referenced by Pugsley (2004) who found that they could define the relationship between FE colleges and universities. Comments from staff illustrated that there were some concerns that these close relationships might influence the students:

*“I think sometimes the fact that we have our own university courses and that we do work so closely in partnership with Middleton Uni doesn’t necessarily help us . . . in terms of promotion of university in its widest sense [meaning promoting a number of different universities]” (Head of Learner Support Services)*

*“. . . there’s only Middleton been in this year, we have had Greene in in the past so I suppose in some ways we influence because we, they’re the people that come and talk to them [students]” (Tutor B, Business)*

However, the existing relationships between College and the local universities plus the ease of organising interventions with them combined with the fact that many students professed an interest in attending these universities made it difficult to justify the additional time needed to organise alternative practices.

### **5.2.4 Summary**

The overall culture of the college tended to prioritise recruitment/achievement, employability and local regeneration as opposed to progression to HE (a range of disparate priorities which highlight the general conflicts and tensions within FE). This was likely held in place by government notions of FE as a means to both economic and social rejuvenation and by decisions to dramatically cut FE funding, which, in turn, led to an emphasis on outcomes in order to secure survival. Partly as a result of the above, the College’s HE Support Programme appeared deficient; it was informal, inconsistent and poorly monitored, held in place by the time-poor, optional nature of the BTEC/FE timetable and calendar. Despite this, students were generally happy with the support, benefitting from the structure of their BTEC courses and the expertise and helpfulness of their tutors who used the flexible system as an opportunity to provide more tailored, individual support. Four students did have some concerns about university visits, feeling particularly that they had excess contact with local universities and would like more contact with distant universities. Staff acknowledged that existing relationships and ease of organisation meant that many interventions were with local universities but commented that these were potentially of more value to students who had often already chosen to attend the local option. The strong reliance of the College on local university resources links to the various perspectives on the local option identified in section 4.3. Issues around choosing to study locally (and supporting such choices) appear as a recurring theme and will be further explored in the next section which examines College culture and practice in relation to the wider WP/FA agenda.

## **5.3 The College and the WP/FA agenda: “Raising Aspirations”, Ambiguity and Ambivalence**

Successive government’s widening participation/fair access (WP/FA) agendas have advocated for an increase in the number of disadvantaged students attending university, with a particular emphasis on increasing numbers going into “elite” provision (See section 2.2.3). This section aims to explore the relationship between the College and the WP/FA agenda, in light of the College cultures and practices identified in the previous section and the fact that most of the students in this study tended to opt to attend their local post-92 university.

### **5.3.1 Sayings: “Raising aspirations”: what does it really mean and to whom?**

The single phrase which featured repeatedly in management discussions of WP/FA was “raising aspirations” (see section 2.2.3), a concept which was also seeded throughout various College documents. Several key College documents, for example, contained the term “aspiration” and the related term “inspiration”. The strapline of the College was: *“Access, Achieve, Aspire”,* the college’s mission statement included the aim to: *“Promise learners that we will help them to access and achieve their aspirations”* and the College’s Strategic Plan further promised to: *“stimulate their [customers’] lifetime aspirations”.* Although these overarching statements do not necessarily imply *raising* aspirations, use of the term “inspiration” in College careers-related documents suggested that the College saw itself in this more proactive role. For example, the Learner Information, Advice, Guidance (IAG) and Support Policy promised that*: “IAG* *delivery will facilitate choice and inspire individuals”* and the Careers Education and IAG (CEIAG) strategy promised to: *“inspire and inform young people about the full range of education, training and employment opportunities available to learners”.* The notion of inspiring someone suggests adding input which perhaps opens up ideas not previously considered; invoking the idea of an environment where the College hopes to develop student aspirations rather than just to accept their initial aims (more like “raising” aspirations). The literature suggests that FE students may have “lower” aspirations than non-FE students and that FE colleges need to help to raise these (Baird et al., 2012), a challenge which College documents suggest, the College accepts. This apparent focus on students and their individual aspirations does, however, seem to contrast with the College’s commitment to community development (as identified in section 5.2.1).

Management interviewees used the phrase *“raising aspirations”* frequently and saw this as a key factor in the College’s HE choice support strategy. The phrase was often teamed with other related phrases such as *“broadening horizons”* and *“opening* *eyes”.* Interestingly, the phrase was used a lot less frequently by frontline staff, although their use of the words “comfortable”, “familiar” and “easy” to describe student HE decisions (see section 4.3.1) could imply the idea that students are not stretching themselves as much as they could and so aspirations need to be raised. The idea of “raising aspirations” was often initially raised by management staff viewing the statistics on the BTEC students’ university choices and was linked to the idea of encouraging students to move away and/or to consider RG/”elite” universities (which would also involve a choice outside the local area as the nearest RG university was over 40 miles from the College):

*“. . . because we want to try and promote higher aspiration, we’ll be including some Russell Groups as well” (Deputy Principal)*

The link tended not to be made between “raising aspirations” and subject choice; perhaps because students’ subject choices and the related careers they showed interest in (lawyers, accountants, forensic investigators and criminologists) seemed in line with traditional perspectives of high aspirations (i.e., well paid, well respected, useful contribution to society). This supports findings in the literature that low SES students do have high aspirations (Allen and Hollingsworth, 2013; Baker 2016; St Clair et al., 2013) and also suggests that staff were not claiming that students lacked all aspiration but that they specifically lacked the aspiration to apply for distant and/or “elite” universities. However, understanding the exact meaning of the saying “raising aspirations” could be difficult.

One of the difficulties in understanding staff interviewees’ conception of “raising aspirations” arose from the fact that staff often made contradictory statements around this phrase. For example, two management staff claimed in their interviews that the lack of diversity of university choices was not down to lack of aspiration or ambition as students were aspiring to university. In almost the next breath, they then spoke about the necessity to raise aspirations in order to increase the numbers looking at a wider range of universities:

*“. . . something that we hear said quite a lot [is] that people prefer to stay more local . . . whether that’s to do with the young people in the area and whether that’s to do with, it’s not to do with aspiration because they’re aspiring to university”*

*“I wonder whether it [pie chart shown in interview, illustrating College BTEC students’ choices of university] actually shows us that perhaps there’s something that we need to do in terms of raising aspiration and the advantage of living away at university, for example” (Head of Learner Support Services)*

There could also be some confusion in understanding the exact role staff believed aspirations to be playing in students’ choices. For example, two members of management staff felt very strongly that cost was the main factor in preventing students from looking beyond local choices for university:

*“It’s a pity not many go external to the, to here . . . but I think that’s to do with cost” (Deputy Principal)*

*“. . . used to be that when you went to university you went away to university but finance has changed all that. I think it’s much more difficult for people to go away to university nowadays” (Head of Faculty)*

However, they were also then both quick to assert the necessity to raise aspirations in order to encourage students to consider other options. Similarities can be drawn here with the secondary school staff in Spohrer’s (2016) study who acknowledged the structural issues students faced but still said that the most important thing to do to raise aspirations was to change attitudes. Further literature identified that although low SES students had high aspirations, they had low expectations, in that they were not sure whether they would actually be able to achieve these aspirations (Harrison and Waller, 2018). The concession of the College’s CEIAG Strategy that it will enable learners to *“make informed choices whenever choices are open to them”* seems to carry connotations of restriction, recognising perhaps the structural barriers some students face and perhaps how this might impact on their aspirations. However, neither member of staff quoted above seemed to believe that students had strong desires to go to distant and/or RG universities which were being thwarted by cost considerations. Instead, the Head of Faculty explained that he felt that the cost issue was preventing students from even looking at other options and that if students were exposed to other ideas then they might see a way to manage financially:

*“I think if a student gets bought into the idea enough of going to a university, the financial thing becomes, well I’m going to do it anyway . . . and they’ll take that financial burden on but if you’re not going out looking, you’re not seeing it and you’re not getting bought into it . . . I think if you really want to go somewhere, you’ll go there regardless but maybe we’re not getting them out enough to see those universities or pushing them to see those universities and therefore they’re not getting hooked if you like” (Head of Faculty)*

The above quote positions “raising aspirations” as more about raising awareness, perhaps falling more in line with the idea of broadening horizons/opening eyes and suggesting a more subtle reading of the “raising aspirations” agenda with the focus on exploration rather than relentless promotion. This is supported by the fact that staff tended to suggest that successfully “raising aspirations” would involve going on trips to RG and/or distant universities. This in turn, perhaps links back to issues involving information gathering and rational choice; for example, how many choices is it possible to be exposed to, who decides what those choices should be and how much pressure (if any) should be applied to students who are not interested in viewing other options as they feel that they have already made their correct choice in choosing local? The notion of “raising aspirations” inevitably frames some student choices as inadequate and there is a danger that high aspirations can be reduced to potentially narrow conceptions such as ambitions to become barristers or doctors or to study at Oxbridge/RG universities (Spohrer, 2011).

*Cultural-discursive arrangements*

The saying “raising aspirations” is possibly being held in place for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is likely to be prominent for policy reasons. As mentioned in 2.2.3, the notion of “raising aspirations” has been an educational policy staple for approximately 20 years, with particular dominance during the Aimhigher period (2004-2011). Many of the staff interviewed had worked in FE and education during this period and so would have been exposed to this rhetoric. Although the exact meaning of “raising aspirations” may have shifted over the years (for example, at times it has become more closely linked to attainment), the term itself has endured. For example, the term’s prominence can also be seen to continue in the recent policy document “Careers Strategy: Guidance for Colleges” (DfE, 2018), examples including:

*“. . . the college careers programme should raise the aspirations of all learners”*

*“Good career and labour market information can also support social mobility by raising aspirations and tackling stereotypical assumptions that certain jobs are “not for people like me” (DfE, 2018, pp. 14)*

Management staff acknowledged that they had been working closely with the strategy (at the time of the interviews) in order to prepare the College to meet the benchmarks of the National Careers Strategy (see section 2.2.3) and so it is likely would have consciously or unconsciously had “raising aspirations” embedded in their mind and in particular relation to CEIAG policy/practice.

Secondly, the term “raising aspirations” may be being held in place by its apparent history with the locality. Several staff identified the local area as one which historically had been seen to suffer from low aspirations:

*“. . . this area tends to have low aspirations” (Head of Faculty)*

*“I think our learners choose safe and what they know which narrows their horizons . . . and I think is possibly what people do in Middleton” (Principal/CEO)*

These views suggest a somewhat deficit view of Middleton, a view that was expressed by both locally raised staff and staff who had moved into the area. As the Principal’s quote suggests, staff also considered that one way in which the area’s low aspirations were expressed was in the general reluctance of people to move away from the Middleton region:

*“. . . some of it’s cultural . . . I think it’s parental influence as well, I think a lot of it’s their upbringing . . . ‘cos as I say, a lot of them never seem to move out of Middleton” (Tutor B, Business)*

*“. . . this is part of the Middleton culture that it’s not just about university choice, it’s about movement across the city and the infrastructure of the city and also about the tradition that previous generations didn’t have to leave the city or even their little locality for employment” (Careers and HE Coordinator)*

The potential danger of positioning the local area in this way could be that well-informed student university decisions could be unnecessarily questioned due to the automatic assumption that people in the area do not choose local because it is the best. On the flip side of this, is the situation alluded to in the Careers and HE Coordinator’s comment above, the fact that previously there was an abundance of jobs within the area but that now it is far more likely (particularly for highly skilled work in certain subjects) students will have to travel, a move they may find easier if they have already moved to attend university (see section 2.2.3 for graduate employability statistics). This deficit positioning of the local area is potentially reinforced by government focus on graduate employability outcomes as the primary measure of the value of attending university.

The idea of people within the geographical area lacking in aspiration was also upheld by the region’s Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)[[6]](#footnote-6) which commented on the need to: *“. . . work with our universities, schools and colleges to raise aspirations of all people here, whatever their age” (LEP, 2020)* and also by the area’s Social Mobility Delivery Plan (2017-20)[[7]](#footnote-7) with its focus on improving the choices young people make from 16. As with the staff interviews, both of these documents emphasised the structural issues for people in the Middleton area, yet still showed a tendency to portray the young people as somewhat deficit in their decisions. An important way in which they differed, however, was in that both these documents want people to raise their aspirations with a view to enriching the locality as opposed to raising their aspirations to want to leave. This framing of “raising aspirations” highlights a related dilemma for the College as the idea of keeping people in the area is aligned to both its fight for survival and its culture of local regeneration but at odds with its commitment to “fair access”, which would generally involve sending people away from the area.

### **5.3.2 Doings: The College’s WP/FA Strategies and issues of ambiguity, poor communication and the HE offer**

As highlighted above, the saying “raising aspirations” was one which was highly referenced by College staff speaking about “fair access” in particular and seemed to primarily translate into a conflation with student HE financial concerns and a need to raise awareness of opportunities to attend distant and/or RG universities. Activities relating to these issues are discussed below as well as the College’s development of its own Higher National Certificate (HNC) courses (vocational HE courses), another initiative connected to “raising aspirations” although perhaps in the broader sense of WP.

One example of a strategy in place to promote “raising aspirations”/”fair access” was an initiative that involved the College paying the accommodation deposit for any student planning to attend a Russell Group university, as described by the Deputy Principal:

*“Well, we’ve offered to pay for the deposit on accommodation if they go to a, if they apply to and get into a Russell Group university . . . so that’s one of our statements in our CEIAG strategy to try and raise aspirations – we want to see more students go to Russell Group universities and we acknowledge that, you know, they may not have the cash” (Deputy Principal)*

This initiative again illustrates the conflation between “raising aspirations” and structural barriers, perhaps suggesting that students are lowering their aspirations to match their financial context (both now and in the future as they potentially contemplate whether they can afford to move away to pursue certain careers). However, there seemed to be some confusion as to whether this initiative was aimed solely at those wanting Russell Group universities or whether this had, in fact, been extended to include all universities at a distance:

*“That’s in relation to Russell Group universities, I think we have modified it to say a university and I think we’ve put some kind of distance outside, so again, it’s a kind of distance thing rather than . . . a university standard thing, it’s just really about . . . if someone has/wants to try something different they’re not prevented from doing so because they don’t have the money to pay for halls of residence” (Principal/CEO)*

The above comment seems to embody some of the ambiguity around what College staff meant when using the phrase “raising aspirations”; in this case, did it have to mean encouraging students to apply for “elite” universities or could it just be about encouraging them to move out of the local area (the confusion was perhaps compounded by the fact that, in the College context, RG also meant distant)? It is also possible that the aims of the strategy had evolved over time, but, if so, it does not appear that there had been a clear re-branding of the initiative.

A further issue to this was that beyond the two senior managers quoted above, the offer to pay the university deposit did not seem to be widely known about. There was no mention of it from any of the students or frontline staff and the offer was also not promoted in the College’s CEIAG strategy. Even if the offer was well publicised (and by association, the idea of alternative universities), it might not be enough on its own to persuade students to go to RG and/or distant universities. None of the interviewed students mentioned particular concern regarding accommodation deposits, perhaps mirroring the students in Mangan et al.’s (2010a) study who did not look for financial information until they had committed themselves to a university. In adding this possibility to the idea that students will choose a local option without looking further if this meets their requirements, it seems likely that the bursary would have limited impact on students when making choices and would just become a welcome addition to those (possibly the more advantaged) already interested in RG and/or distant universities anyway.

In a second initiative, the College hoped to address the issue of lack of awareness with regard to “elite” and/or distant provision by organising trips to appropriate institutions. Trips to “elite” provision or universities any further away than Middleton and Greene did not seem to be a regular occurrence for the College (as described in section 5.2.2) However, there had been a recent (at the time of research) attempt to change this with a trip organised to visit a university in a nearby city, purely because of the fact of its RG status. Despite a number of organisational issues (discussed below), staff who had attended the trip, generally felt it had been worthwhile. They felt it had raised students’ confidence to attend “elite” universities, a consideration aligning with findings from the literature whereby low SES students (and BTEC students) showed concerns around feeling comfortable and fitting in at “elite” institutions (Reay et al., 2001b; Baker, 2020):

*“I think they saw it as probably less, once they’d been there, as less daunting . . . than they thought it maybe was . . . they’re probably going there with a view that, well they’re from Middleton . . . young people from Middleton don’t go to university . . . or no one in their family’s ever been to university . . . so maybe they don’t fit in but they do and they should do . . . maybe we haven’t prepared them enough to have that belief and to have that, what’s it called, (inaudible) confidence” (Head of Faculty)*

The RG trip only involved Applied Science students (1st year). Business tutors, though supportive of the idea of visits to RG universities in general, were unimpressed by the execution of this trip. Tutor A, Business, illustrated some of the conflicting priorities for the College, commenting on the day selected for the trip:

*“Completely the wrong day – it’s the last day of the year . . . we wouldn’t have any time to go with the students, we need to finish off [encourage the students to complete their coursework] . . . and get the highest grades” (Tutor A, Business)*

The Principal expressed concern that the current College system relied on too many ad-hoc, one-off opportunities benefitting only a small number of students and explained that she hoped to address this via a future initiative called University Challenge. This initiative was also discussed by the Deputy Principal and the Executive Director of HE and involved trips to RG universities which would be about*: “inspiring people and trying to raise their aspirations” (Executive Director of HE).* Again, this was not something that appeared to be generally known about by frontline staff (but perhaps this was because it was a future project). The overall aim of the University Challenge project also seemed to be perceived differently by different members of managerial staff. In answer to a question about who it would be aimed at, the Deputy Principal replied that it would be aimed at Level 3 high fliers as there would be no point taking students who could not meet the entry requirements. This idea fitted with the comments of the Head of Learner Support Services who, though not talking about the University Challenge project in particular, nevertheless equated promotion of/visits to “elite” universities with “able and talented” students and showed concern about possibly setting students up to fail. In contrast to these views, both the Executive Director of HE and the Principal viewed the project more broadly suggesting the visits could be open to anyone and that:

*“. . . it’s about trying to raise aspiration in that way, they might not end up at a Russell Group university but it might just open their eyes up to maybe different places in the country that they could go to and what a university is like anyway . . . and then they might just broaden their horizons and start getting them thinking about . . . opportunities.” (Executive Director Adults, HE and Curriculum Support)*

The continuing confusion as to whether “raising aspiration”/”fair access” initiatives were aimed at exposing students specifically to RG universities or to universities further afield in general seemed to indicate some degree of ambivalence to the aim of encouraging students towards “elite” universities specifically. This was also indicated by seeming contradictions such as the stating in the HE Strategy that the College would: *“Set and achieve year on year targets for the number of students accessing Russell Group universities” (College HE Strategy)* against the Principal’s comment that:

*“. . . it’s not about saying more learners have to go to . . . Russell Group universities, it’s about saying all learners have a choice to go where they want” (Principal/CEO)*

One of the further activities of the College that related to “raising aspirations” was the development of the College’s own HE courses. This activity could perhaps be seen as more about WP rather than “fair access”, as it was perhaps more about encouraging general participation in HE. However, there was also the question as to whether it might conflict with efforts to raise “elite” participation if current students saw this as an even safer, easier and more comfortable option than moving to the university next door. Similarly to the confusion regarding the target group of College “fair access” initiatives, there was some confusion as to who exactly the new HNCs were supposed to attract. For example, the Principal commented:

*“I mean predominantly, HNCs/HNDs are aimed at adults in work . . . so it’s part of that professional development suite of qualification rather than saying to 18-year-olds an HND’s the right route for you ‘cos actually, I don’t think it is, it doesn’t finish that level of education for you, you still have to then perhaps do a top-up” (Principal/CEO)*

In contrast, the Executive Director of HE detailed a current HNC development project which aimed to match the course to current BTEC student needs and the Deputy Principal seemed to consider one of the advantages of offering the HNCs was that it might persuade BTEC students to stay who otherwise might have gone elsewhere:

*“. . . it makes me wonder whether or not if we did HE they’d stay with us rather than go to Middleton Uni because I’m sure they’re only choosing Middleton Uni cos it’s local . . . so therefore if we were to offer HE would that amount, would that percentage stay with the college?” (Deputy Principal)*

When questioned directly, staff were adamant that students would not be “pushed” towards HNCs and would not be dissuaded from attending other universities, demonstrating a commitment to neutrality also seen in some of the staff interviewed by Oliver and Kettley (2010). One management member of staff, however, summarised the conflicting issues inherent here when commenting on whether College could help to address the financial barriers to HE:

*“. . . the things we can do as a college are, and it doesn’t help them get away from the area, is try and put higher education courses on ourselves . . . at a cheaper rate . . . but is that just compounding the issue . . . of them staying local and even more local. . . because they’re staying at the college they’ve already been at for two years rather than going to a different institute” (Head of Faculty)*

This comment serves to illustrate the double bind nature of such issues where staff can be criticised for whichever action they choose to take.

*Material-economic arrangements*

Many of the *material-economic arrangements* holding College “raising aspirations”/”fair access” initiatives in place were similar to those enabling and constraining the College’s general activities supporting HE choice (as discussed in Section 5.2.2). So, for example, the centrally organised *(regional city RG university)* trip was hard to fit into the BTEC/FE timetable, resulting in the choice of a day that Business tutors felt clashed with the College’s need to ensure that students’ achievements were high (a further example of conflict; in this case, achievement versus aspiration). The Careers and HE Coordinator identified a number of further barriers in organising this trip, including the difficulty in persuading students to attend a non-mandatory event and the complications resulting from the misalignment between FE and HE:

*“Okay, well it was small numbers, only about half the potential numbers that eventually selected did actually go but it was a non-timetabled day, many of our students work or [have] family commitments; initially we were trying to take gifted and talented students but we don’t, at the moment, have a current identification system for them and that proved to be quite problematic; choosing the university to visit wasn’t straightforward either because they don’t, a lot of them don’t do some of the vocational subjects that are relevant to our students” (Careers and HE Coordinator)*

The above comment can also be seen to highlight *material-economic arrangements* perhaps more pertinent to these particular types of “raising aspirations”/”fair access” initiatives, for example, difficulties in identifying the target group (and uncertainty about whether there should be one) and difficulties in identifying an appropriate university. These constraints can perhaps be seen as more of a problem for a college with a small number of students considering HE, as students with the requisite high GCSE grades are possibly spread across campus, studying different BTEC subjects and with different university interests. It is possible that some of these issues could be overcome with the idea that students sign up to initiatives voluntarily (as University Challenge suggests). However, past schemes had struggled when relying on students to attend when they did not have to and a previous similar scheme to University Challenge was abandoned when no students signed up.

The *material-economic arrangements* holding “raising aspirations”/”fair access” initiatives such as RG trips in place are notably different to those relating to the College’s HNC development. Development of HNC courses potentially benefits the College in that it provides a way for current and new students to study HE within college in a way which is financially beneficial to the College. In contrast, paying accommodation deposits or taking students on trips to distant universities is a cost to the College. The doings of the college, in relation to WP and in particular “fair access”, seem to highlight the everyday manifestations of some fundamental contradictions. For example, FE colleges must simultaneously be about offering more local/accessible courses to widen participation and about pushing current students to try for RG and/or distant universities. They must further regenerate the local area whilst promoting RG and/or distant universities, potentially at the expense of local options. These contradictions, in turn, link to a fundamental contradiction between the doings of the College in terms of trying to “raise aspirations” and the doings of students who make university choices by “satisficing”. Staff may have to choose whether they take a person or a region–centred approach, with the likelihood that frontline staff, with their knowledge of and access to individual students take more of the personalised approach whereas management are more likely to consider the overall benefits to the College and/or general region.

### **5.3.3 Relatings: Perspectives on “elite” universities and issues of ambivalence, impartiality and personal choice**

As highlighted above, College management in particular seemed to support the idea of “raising aspirations” to attend “elite” and/or distant universities despite the fact that this potentially conflicted with other aspects of College culture and practice and that “raising aspirations” seemed to mean different things to different people. Beneath the surface, however, lay a number of complex and often contradictory perspectives on “elite” universities which can perhaps start to explain the ambiguous, poorly communicated initiatives described above. On the one hand, staff were broadly supportive of students being exposed to “elite” universities, with some unquestioningly considering the RG/redbrick university system to be superior in terms of both “standards” and value for money:

*“. . . one of the disadvantages of the modern context is you have a lot of universities which in terms of standards are lower than the traditional redbricks that I would have gone to as a student . . . the students are having to pay an awful lot of money back in loans which may be for qualifications which perhaps aren’t worth that level of tuition fee” (Tutor A, Business)*

There were also examples of staff actively encouraging students to take an “elite” choice, seeming to take on roles similar to the facilitator teachers in Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) and Burgess’ (2021) studies who encouraged students to think beyond the habitual:

*“. . . she said, oh I don’t know, I think I’m going to go to Middleton University because [regional city Russell Group university) seems so far and I said you, are you kidding, it’s 20 minutes on the train and it’s a black letter law school and you can walk into any law firm of your choosing if you go to [regional city Russell Group university] to do law and that’s not to denigrate doing law at Middleton University” (Principal/CEO)*

Here, although the Principal expressly says she does not want to denigrate the Middleton option, comments of this nature are clearly likely to signal her belief in the superiority of the Russell Group option.

However, for each of these points of view expressed there was a counter-argument. For example, Tutor A, Applied Science, was not convinced that the distinction between RG and other universities was a helpful one, questioning the perceived superiority of RGs and the potential effect of promoting them on students applying to less prestigious institutions:

*“I understand them [College management] raising aspirations . . . I do but I just think, if you’re at university you’re at university and I don’t think in the long run it will matter as, like, what university you’ve been at if you’re going for the job you want”*

*“I don’t think we should actively be saying it’s a higher grade . . . because there is the thing, there’s the stigma of, oh, are you going to big (regional city RG university) or rubbish (regional city post-92 university) . . . like it happens and actually that then affects that student cos they’re like, I’m going to a lesser uni” (Tutor A, Applied Science)*

There was also a concern that an “elite” choice would not necessarily be the correct one for some College students due to a perceived lack of support at these institutions. The Careers and HE Coordinator, for example, suggested that some BTEC students attain their high grades due to the intensive support of the tutor and worried that these students would not have the independent study skills needed at some universities. Tutor B, Business, was similarly concerned that the level of support offered at College would not be replicated at “elite” universities, commenting:

*“. . . sometimes the best places, the best academic places aren’t the best places to give people support . . . I think it’s a good thing if the student’s able but I think . . . it’s also about, it’s a social change and cultural change for them isn’t it . . . and it’s that support, is that support going to be available? And I’m sure there’s a lot of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who do really, really well . . . but I think, for some, it probably actually be better off going to a perhaps a non-Russell Group university but they’d come out with a really good degree rather than maybe a low-level degree from a . . . from a top university” (Tutor B, Business)*

This perception of support seems to imply a wider definition that just academic, a concern shared by the Principal:

*“. . . if you’re going to go to [Oxbridge university] as a widening participation learner, how are you going to be integrated, where’s the mentoring, where’s the buddy system, where’s the navigating stupid dinners they have in the college halls, where’s all of that being so that when you join you’re not sitting in your room rocking in a corner ‘cos no-one’s talking to you (laughs)? I know young people that that’s happened to, went, yeah go to [Oxbridge university], gosh what a downer, you know, massive depression, anxiety, all kinds of things because they don’t fit in and so it’s not about just going to an “elite” university it’s about those universities understanding how to enable those learners to fit in to the wider culture of those universities” (Principal/CEO)*

The comments of the Principal (particularly in relation to fitting in) bring to mind Reay et al.’s (2001b) findings that low SES young people felt that “elite” provision was not for the likes of them (a finding that Baker, 2020, confirmed with BTEC students). They also mirror concerns of the “gatekeeper” teachers in Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) study who worried about keeping students “safe” and ensuring that students did not end up in a university environment that affected their abilities to complete the degree.

An important note to make after consideration of the above, is that staff could hold both positive and negative views about promoting RG and/or distant universities. For example, the Principal’s comments above show her actively promoting an RG option to one particular student whilst exhibiting reservations as to the overall support systems of “elite” universities. She also commented on the possible hypocrisy of heavily promoting RG universities as the Principal of an FE College:

*“. . . it’s one of these kind of challenging dilemmas, I think . . . for people in my position because that’s the equivalent of people saying, oh, go to the sixth form, don’t go to Central College because it’s got better . . . reputation and sixth forms are better than FE colleges, so why would I be doing that at the next stage of education?” (Principal/CEO)*

Similarly, Tutor B, Business, can be seen to simultaneously accommodate views of “good” universities as primarily academically strong or primarily supportive. The Head of Tutoring captured something of the dilemma for staff in trying to work out the best options for the students:

*“. . . is there something there about, in terms of widening participation and raising aspirations of our students, about either visits to universities or visits from more universities to give students more choice in terms of the courses that they may want to do or maybe it is that actually the best course for them because of the particular course that they’re studying is, for example, Greene University and it’s fairly local for them” (Head of Learner Support Services)*

Considerations of staff ambivalence perhaps differ to Kettley and Oliver’s (2010) notion of teachers as either facilitators or gatekeepers. Findings here suggest that individual staff could incorporate both facilitator and gatekeeper roles in one, able to simultaneously appreciate both advantages and disadvantages of “elite” university study.

Issues relating to RG and/or distant provision were far less prevalent in the student interviews, perhaps because the majority had chosen universities based on how near they were and that there was no “elite” provision in the immediate vicinity. As highlighted earlier (see section 4.3.2), students showed more interest in subject league tables than university ones. Even Josh, the only student to choose to study at an RG university reflected that the university’s RG status had not been that relevant to his decision. Rosie was the only student who showed a sustained interest in applying to “top” universities, something she defined as universities asking for high grades. However, her interest in “top” universities had waned by her second interview, when she considered that she had put too much emphasis on trying to select these types of universities and that her final decision had been made on the basis that this university felt the most comfortable for her. This decision could potentially protect her from a lack of belonging leading to drop out, as experienced by some low SES students in Quinn et al.’s study (2005):

*“I think because, like, the lecturers and stuff, as much as their hearts in the right place, it’s kind of when they say, oh, you’re predicted this, you should be aiming for these big unis, it is a bit of a what if I don’t want to go there? And you can, it kind of makes you think that if you don’t apply or go there then you’re doing something wrong or you’re taking the wrong path, whereas really, when I was thinking about it, I thought it doesn’t matter, like, I don’t have to go there” (Rosie, Business, L-SES)*

As Rosie’s example demonstrates, College staff were not alone in their ambivalence to the perceived superiority of RG universities. Both Rosie and Layla (who had been given advice about supposedly “better” universities) had questions about why these universities were so good and felt they needed to hear more what they had to offer:

*“. . . they kind of give you information on local universities and good universities away but didn’t specify why, other than the location, why they were good” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

Layla and Cara also expressed concerns about the likely atmosphere within a prestigious institution, comparing it to studying in a high-achieving school and the resulting pressures/lack of support they felt that these institutions embodied:

*“It’s almost, like, the higher they are up, ‘cos I don’t know if it’s the same with universities but whilst I was at school, we always found the ones who want to be the top of the table don’t care as much about the students, whereas the ones who are more towards the bottom of the table, although they haven’t got the best grades, they care a lot about what the students think” (Layla, Applied Science, L-SES)*

*“. . . [talking] to people who have looked at other unis and they go, we’re the best of the best, we only accept the smallest amount of people and they’re all the best – saying that, it puts you in a good place that yeah you’re the best, you’re great but then it also, like, people get really stressed and pressured, they have to be good and if they’re not good then they’re not worthy of going to the university so that does – it’s all right on paper and for the stats and for everything else . . . but for people it probably just wouldn’t be the best environment to, like, just put people in and go be the best, don’t be rubbish, we don’t want that” (Cara, Applied Science, L-SES)*

The above comments are interesting in relation to low aspiration as they do not suggest that the students have decided against RG because they are unaware of it or that they do not feel capable but that they are critically evaluating the university’s ability to support them and making an informed decision about what circumstances are best for them to successfully negotiate university. This directly contradicts the assertions of McGrath and Rogers (2021) who suggested that less-advantaged students (including BTEC students) are not applying for prestigious universities because they have insufficient knowledge of their hierarchical status. There is instead similarity here with the students in Spohrer’s (2016) study who questioned occupational hierarchies. The questioning of an “elite” university’s support may explain some of the disinterest students had in “elite” universities. In defining a “good” university, most of the students commented that a “good” university would be one that supported you rather than one which was necessarily at the top of the league tables. This concern about support mirrored the concerns of staff, as discussed above. Much of the previous research has identified the importance of factors such as locality or “fitting in” to low SES/vocational students searching for a “good” university (Hoeslscher et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2001b) and, although both of these featured in the general discussions as to why students had chosen their universities, it was the support they referred to when asked the direct question: “What makes a good university?”:

*“I want to go to uni where I know I can get the qualifications and have good teachers and everything, that they will help me” (Anna, Business)*

*“what makes a good uni is that they’re always there for their students, they’re willing to help them whatever they need” (Jade, Business, L-SES)*

A related theme that arose within both the College documents and interviews was that of “impartiality” and the personal choice and autonomy of students. For example, several College documents (particularly IAG ones) contained references to the importance of impartiality, with the CEIAG strategy stating that: *“Our IAG aims to be provided in an impartial manner”.* Further, several of the interviewed students remarked that they saw their choice of course and university as a personal choice and something that the college could not necessarily help with (perhaps reflecting the dominant neoliberal discourse of individualisation):

*“I: How much help do you think you had in making your choices?*

*Zak: No, that was really up to us because you just can’t really tell us what to do, where to go.” (Zak, Business, L-SES)*

This view was echoed by some staff who considered that issues such as living at home or away were just down to individual student preference. Whilst most staff felt comfortable speaking to students about a range of universities there was a lack of ease with the idea of promoting, for example, RG universities above others (as highlighted above) and a feeling that this might be ethically at odds with the various professional roles:

*“. . . actively promoting any university, I don’t think, is what a careers adviser does because we should be impartial” (Careers and HE Coordinator)*

Whilst this is an understandable stance, it perhaps struggles to take account of the fact that by mainly working with the two local universities, the College is inadvertently promoting these options. As discussed above, some staff felt strongly that student choices needed to be challenged and that there was too much acceptance within the College of what students told tutors they had decided to do but acknowledged that a balance needed to be struck between this type of challenge and impartiality.

*Social-political arrangements*

The *social-political arrangements* holding in place views about “elite” universities were personal and/or professional experiences of “elite” universities. These findings support the work of Rainford (2020) who similarly found that the experiences of the WP practitioners in his study affected their interpretations and enactments of WP policy. For example, several College staff mentioned examples of family or friends who had attended or visited “elite” provision and had a negative experience. For example, a senior manager’s daughter had withdrawn from a Russell Group university after finding that her additional needs were poorly supported, with the manager commenting that she was *“left to sink or swim”.* Other members of staff commented particularly on negative Oxbridge experiences:

*“. . . my niece went to Oxford or Cambridge . . . one of them anyway where there was an aspirational programme that was running at one of the schools locally and she absolutely loved it but it was, oh, you’re from that postcode, there was a lot of snobbery . . . and that really put her off and it was, like, no I aren’t going there for people be looking down their nose at me, so I don’t know, that might have just been a one off but I don’t know . . . I don’t know enough about ‘em really” (Executive Director Adults, HE and Curriculum Support)*

As the Executive Director of HE acknowledged, staff generally did not know much about/have much contact with the “elite” universities (in common with the gatekeepers in Oliver and Kettley’s, 2010, study) and so were forced to rely on a few personal experiences. When professional contact was made, this did not necessarily improve perceptions. For example, the Careers and HE Coordinator had had contact with local RG universities when inviting them to the College’s annual careers fair:

*“. . . the [RG] universities themselves, they’re polite, you don’t get the feeling that they’re wildly enthusiastic when they’re here and we had one where I think feedback was that they didn’t think it was suitable for them. The careers fair is more problematic because we get students from across the whole college . . . all levels and we’ve got quite a high number of foundation and level 1 learners, for example, who are not at the point where they would be looking at higher education in the short term, so I can see that that’s a struggle for those universities. However, they all get money for their widening participations agendas and we should be on that agenda and I think they could possibly be a little bit more keen when we are inviting them” (Careers and HE Coordinator)*

The above demonstrates the more difficult relationship between “elite” universities and FE colleges, compounded by the lack of personal contacts often enjoyed by staff at private schools (Reay et al., 2001a; Pugsley, 2004). When staff mentioned university contacts, they tended to be based at the two local universities and the local NCOP initiative brought together primarily local post-1992 universities, with no RG universities involved and just one link to an Oxbridge college. This meant that staff and students were unlikely to encounter “elite” provision without individual staff making a special effort to engage.

Concerns about impartiality were held in place by relatings between the College and the various professional bodies for IAG. For example, professional careers advisers were guided by the Careers Development Institute’s Code of Ethics which stated that:

*“Members must ensure that professional judgement is objective and takes precedence over any external pressures or factors that may compromise the impartiality of career development activities and services. In doing so, members must ensure that advice is based solely on the best interests of and potential benefits to the client.” (CDI Code of Ethics)*

This quote again raises issues of who decides what the best interests of learners are and how this is to be decided. Although most members of staff were not bound by this particular code, they were also under pressure to demonstrate impartiality as this is a requirement necessary for the College to meet in order to attain certain IAG quality marks such as MATRIX (which the College had achieved) and the IAG Quality Award (which the College was attempting to obtain). All of this raises issues as to the extent it is possible to be impartial and the extent to which “raising aspirations” is incompatible with impartiality.

### **5.3.4 Summary**

The government agenda of WP and, in particular “fair access”, is intertwined with the notion of “raising aspirations”; “raising aspirations” to attend university at all or “raising aspirations” to attend an “elite” university. Wragg et al. (2020) considers that “raising aspiration” in FE is often much lauded but that this does not often translate into actual strategies. In other words, “raising aspirations” tends to exist at the level of sayings rather than doings. The findings above suggest support for the idea that the phrase “raising aspirations” is still prevalent, particularly within the management of the College, perhaps because it is still evident at both national and regional government policy level. There also seems to be some support for the issue of a lack of actual strategies, in that many of the College’s activities were either proposed, one-off ad-hoc or invisible to most staff and students. One issue to be noted here is that these initiatives take time and cost money without necessarily directly benefitting the College, whereas, for example, development of an HNC can simultaneously widen participation and provide a College source of income, an important factor for an institution often focused on day-to-day survival. This fundamental contradiction of trying to simultaneously secure financial stability for the College whilst encouraging students to study elsewhere is not the only contradiction related to “raising aspirations”, as this concept also sits uneasily with the notion of regenerating the local area, the notion of students’ “satisficing” and the notion of impartially advising students. These contradictions likely underlie the extensive ambiguity and ambivalence found in relation to “raising aspiration” initiatives which could affect the success of such initiatives. For example, there was a lack of clarity as to what exactly was meant by a lack of aspiration and to the extent that individual deficits and structural barriers were involved. This then led to a lack of clarity as to how to address the issue in that it could be unclear who initiatives aimed to target and what exactly they would involve. Ambivalence further complicated the issue, with staff conflicted as to whether promotion of RG and/or distant universities was the right thing to do and whether promoting certain choices was really in the best interests of the students. The ambiguity of “raising aspirations” combined with an ambivalence towards possible activities that often take time and money meant that this aspect of the College’s HE Support Programme was perhaps under-developed and likely to remain so unless a clearer and less contentious rationale for pursuing a more involved programme emerged.

**Chapter 6 Conclusion**

## **6.1 Introduction**

This thesis posed the main research question: How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions? Five subsidiary research questions (SRQs) were explored across two chapters, with Chapter 4 exploring SRQs 1 and 2 and Chapter 5 exploring SRQs 3, 4 and 5. SRQ 1 was explored primarily through a statistical analysis of College BTEC students’ UCAS choices in order to provide contextual information for the rest of the study. SRQs 2 to 5 were explored through semi-structured interviews with students and staff, with SRQs 3 to 5 also supplemented with an analysis of College documents. Each research question will now be considered in turn and the main findings will be elucidated, integrated with the literature and any original contributions to the field will be highlighted. The main implications of the study will then be discussed in terms of who the findings might be of interest to and in what way, including recommendations for future practice and policy. Limitations of the study will be discussed along with possible directions for future research. Finally, I will reflect on my personal experience of the Professional Doctorate in Education and its impact on both my academic and vocational practice.

## **6.2 Revisiting the Research Questions**

### **6.2.1 SRQ1: Where do the College’s BTEC students apply and what for?**

The statistical analysis of BTEC UCAS choices showed that the majority of the College BTEC students applied to continue studying their BTEC subject at a local university. They were more likely apply to post-92 universities than pre-92 and it was unusual for them to apply for RG/ST30 universities. There were a minority of students on each course who deviated from this path and these students received more rejections than those who opted to continue their subject and/or study locally. Just under half of the students did not make full use of their application choices and many of those who did select a variety of choices often reverted back to the local option as their final decision. In making a final choice, 72% of students chose to study at a university less than five miles from the College, with 90% choosing a university less than 50 miles from the College. The statistics showed there was little discernible difference between the final destinations of the less and more advantaged BTEC students.

These findings add to the literature in that they identify a possible higher-risk of rejection for BTEC students applying for a different subject and/or pre-92 university. They support the work of Hoelscher et al. (2008) and Rouncefield-Swales (2012) in that they show vocational/BTEC students applying for particular applied subjects such as business. They also support the literature that suggests that vocational/BTEC students often choose a local university (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Rouncefield-Swales, 2012), often choose post-92 provision (Shields and Masardo, 2015; Kelly, 2017) and rarely apply for Russell Group/pre-92 provision (Rouncefield-Swales 2012). The consistency of these decisions over time is interesting considering 20 years of policy focusing on “fair access” and “raising aspirations”, suggesting that there are enduring underlying reasons for these decisions.

### **6.2.2 SRQ2: How do the College’s BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?**

This research showed the College BTEC students focusing more strongly on deciding “what” to “study rather than “where”, a perhaps unexpected finding given that most BTEC students (including the students in this study) tend to continue to study their BTEC subject or similar at university (UCAS, 2020). This focus seemed mainly to be predicated on the beliefs that subject choice rather than institution would determine the enjoyment and ultimate outcome of the student’s university experience and that different universities would not deliver substantially different academic experiences. The consequence of these beliefs, combined with the varied personal reasons students had for preferring local study (for example, family ties, part-time jobs and caring responsibilities, reasons reflective of working-class habitus), meant that many students started their search for an institution at their local post-92 university (perhaps accounting for the choices evidenced in 6.2.1). From this point, many students seemed to use the time and energy-efficient decision-making technique of “satisficing”, tending not to look much further if the local course seemed “good enough” (see sections 2.3.1 and 4.3.2 for further details). This did not, however, have to mean that students researched ineffectively, as there were examples of students (including low SES students) who spent considerable time researching a number of course variations at one local institution.

In contrast to the findings of previous literature (for example, Rouncefield-Swales, 2012, Gartland and Smith, 2018 and Baker, 2020), the College BTEC students did not seem to frame either their BTEC or FE College student status as a disadvantage in terms of applying to university (see section 3.4.4 for discussion of the possible impact of my College role). They spoke only of the positives of their BTEC course and of deficiencies in the universities they were rejecting rather than in relation to themselves. Further, they framed their (primarily local) choices as positive, well-considered decisions, suggesting that they would not attend a local institution at all costs but had decided, on balance, that a local institution would be the best fit for their various academic, financial and emotional needs. One concern about students opting to stay local is that they subsequently look locally for work which can reduce their earning and career opportunities (Kidd et al., 2017). However, the suggestion of four students that they would happily move for a job after graduation potentially challenged this assumption, suggesting that a life-stage perspective might be helpful for future research. The student framing of local choices as positive, well-informed decisions contrasted with the way local choices were framed by staff, who had a tendency to frame these as “safe” and so somewhat deficient. They were joined in this by three of the four students favouring more distant universities, who described local options as a last resort or a plan B. Despite this, those students often picked a local option for at least one of their choices, providing evidence for the strong pull a local choice is able to exert, even if this is not a particularly favoured one. In consideration of this and the fact that some students “satisficing” completed more research than others, a note of caution perhaps needs to be sounded in terms of ensuring that students are made aware of alternatives beyond those local choices, whilst still ensuring that local course decisions are not automatically denigrated.

The findings above support the literature in that they show the primarily low SES BTEC students making local decisions for a number of complex reasons, many indicative of working-class habitus (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). They also support the work of Mangan et al. (2010a) by finding evidence that many BTEC students are making HE choices by satisficing. These findings add a unique contribution to the literature in that they identify a BTEC student focus on “what” rather than “where” to study at university and show BTEC students positioning their course, their college and their university choices from a positive rather than a deficit position.

### **6.2.3 SRQ3: In what ways does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?**

The College BTEC students were enabled to make their HE decisions by the nature of their BTEC course in that it allowed them to fully explore their subject, to actually experience studying in a university (in some cases) and to develop the close student-tutor relationships that supported the application process in general. They were potentially constrained in that there was a lack of time and resources devoted to the College’s HE Support Programme, resulting in an informal, loosely structured programme underpinned by uncertainty/tensions over who should be involved and a BTEC/FE calendar that did not always align with internally and externally organised HE choice events. It is important to note that the above criticisms were largely generated by both frontline and managerial staff and that the students themselves seemed happy with their HE choice support (although it must be acknowledged that they may not have been fully aware of the benefits of further support and may have been erring on the positive side due to my careers adviser position). This demonstrates the potential power of good tutor-student relationships and also perhaps the tendency of even the staff within its own institutions to position FE colleges as deficient compared to other FE provision. One area of possible weakness that both staff and students commented on, however, was the tendency of the College to liaise almost exclusively with local universities. This was as a result primarily of convenience due to the lack of time allocated to these activities and was underpinned by the existing relationships between the College and local universities. This tendency, combined with the likelihood that students had already had previous school experiences of local universities, potentially affected those students disinclined to research thoroughly by sending the message that a local option was the standard, expected choice.

These findings support the literature in that they suggest the BTEC course can enable students making HE choices by the nature of its depth and close tutor relationships (Rouncefield-Swales, 2012; Gartland and Smith, 2018) but that FE support is inconsistent and poorly resourced (Reay et al., 2001a; Pugsley, 2004). This latter finding, in particular, has remained consistent over some time, suggesting that issues underlying this, such as lack of FE funding, remain unresolved. The findings also add a unique contribution to knowledge by emphasising the relative satisfaction of students with the service received and by considering the underlying tensions and conflicts underpinning FE College decisions on HE choice support (as further elucidated in 6.2.4).

### **6.2.4 SRQ4: Does the organisational culture of the College influence the HE decisions made by their BTEC students and, if so, in what ways?**

The espoused values of the College were focused on employability, local regeneration and recruitment/achievement, with the underpinning practice architectures seeming to relate directly to government policy as to the purpose of FE and to the daily pressures on FE colleges to survive. The main effect of this on HE choice support was that it was not prioritised, which resulted in the informal, time-restricted programme outlined above (and in section 5.2.2). This, in turn, led to an informal culture of tutor autonomy where tutors were expected to largely design individual HE choice support programmes to suit their particular student group. Although this culture was potentially risky in that less-engaged and/or over-worked tutors could essentially opt out or do the bare minimum, it generally appeared to be effective for the students in this study who particularly appreciated the tailored support their tutors were able to provide. The informality of the College’s approach to HE choice support, however, could create other tensions. For example, confusion regarding staff responsibilities combined with a lack of expectation of extra-curricular attendance meant that it was not clear who should organise university visits (especially to “elite”/distant universities) and, when these were arranged, attendance could be poor. Lack of prioritisation of HE choice support, alongside prioritisation of local regeneration, also led to a culture of relying on “convenient” local universities. These strong ties to local universities were subject to somewhat conflicting views, with some staff and students very positive about the advantages of local links and others tending to position local offerings as deficient (as described in 6.2.2). Finally, the College’s prioritisation of achievement over HE progression led to prioritisation of class attendance over attendance at events promoting HE, although this tendency may actually have been preferred by those students focusing primarily on subject choice (as outlined in 6.2.2).

These findings add a unique contribution to knowledge in that they consider how the particular tensions and conflicts inherent in FE college culture might influence college decisions about HE choice support and so what would need to change in order for students to be supported differently. In particular, they highlighted tensions between the stated purpose of the College and HE progression and between management preference for an easily-monitored consistent programme and the desire of the students for personalised HE choice support. These findings support the literature in that they recognise an FE culture driven by recruitment/achievement targets in order to secure the funding needed for survival (Feather, 2016; Orr, 2020).

### **6.2.5 SRQ5: What is the relationship between College organisational culture, College practice and the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?**

This research found that senior College staff were likely to react to student choices of local universities by suggesting that work needed to be done to “raise aspirations” (a phrase that was also evident in College documents). It is likely that this commitment to “raising aspirations” was held in place by the practice architectures of staff exposure to both past and present government policy and to historical perceptions of the Middleton area as being one of low aspiration. The link between local choices and “raising aspirations” seemed (at least, initially) to indicate that College management were supportive of the government policy of “fair access” in that mention of “raising aspirations” was quickly followed by comments about encouraging students to apply for/attend “elite” universities.

Despite these espoused values, however, actual strategies for encouraging students to look at “elite” universities were lacking, tending to be either proposed, one-off ad-hoc or invisible to most staff and students. One reason for this may have been underlying ambiguities in relation to the understanding of “raising aspirations” as some staff conflated it with structural issues (such as cost), some related it more to encouraging students to move to a distant (rather than necessarily “elite”) university and there was some uncertainty as to which students should be targeted. Further, staff often displayed ambivalence about the idea of promoting “elite” and/or distant universities, questioning the reconciliation of this idea with the concept of impartiality and wondering whether these institutions were really right for (and could support) their students. Factors underpinning these concerns included professional codes of ethics in relation to impartiality and personal and professional experiences of “elite” universities. Both staff and students identified academic and emotional support as being an issue when considering “elite” institutions. For students, the level of support was a major factor in determining what made a university “good” and was not something they necessarily associated with universities at the top of the rankings system. This concern is warranted according to the 2020 Whatuni Awards which found only two RG universities were positioned in the top 50 institutions for support (Whatuni, 2020). The College practice of attempting to raise aspirations in relation to choices of HE institution is one that potentially clashes with both this scepticism regarding “elite” universities and with students making choices by satisficing, as it is asking staff to challenge the “good enough” strategy and to encourage careful examination of all alternatives in search of the “best”. It also potentially clashes with the College’s wider goals of survival and local regeneration (as highlighted in 6.2.4).

These findings support literature on “raising aspirations” which has identified practitioner difficulties with interpreting and enacting this policy (Spohrer, 2016; Rainford, 2021). They also build on the previous work of Oliver and Kettley (2010) who identified staff “facilitators” and staff “gatekeepers” to “elite” provision, by identifying a third category, that of ambivalent staff who are simultaneously both for and against the idea of “fair access”. Further, the findings add a unique contribution to knowledge in that they consider “raising aspirations” in the context of BTEC HE choice in an FE College, identifying that whilst “raising aspirations” to meet the aims of the “fair access” policy is an overall strategic goal, in reality, conflict between this and various other aspects of College culture can make enacting this difficult on practical, ethical and moral grounds. The identification of particular practical and ethical barriers such as differing understandings of “raising aspirations” and differing perspectives on “elite” provision has also enabled recommendations to be made as to how these might be overcome.

## **6.3 Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The findings elucidated in Section 6.2 will now be considered in relation to how they might inform policy and practice. These recommendations have been separated into three categories; National (Policy-makers), Institutional (Colleges) and Institutional (Universities) in order to be specific as to suggested responsibility for particular actions.

### **6.3.1 National (Policy-makers)**

* *Emphasise the “what” to study narrative as well as the “where”*

The competitive marketplace of HE, where institutions must fight for student choice, has led to a policy emphasis on “where” students study rather than “what”. For example, the “fair access” policy recommends encouraging WP students to apply to “elite” universities but says little about encouraging them to apply for any particular subjects, although subject chosen can also have a dramatic effect on future earnings and so social mobility. For the students in this study, the most important decision seemed to be “*what”* to study, a decision they believed would be the most predictive of a successful university experience in terms of their enjoyment and future opportunities. Policy that takes greater account of the “what” narrative could lead, for example, to WP students (including BTEC students) being encouraged to consider a wider range of subjects which would then also involve those students who do not have an “elite” university nearby and do not have/do not want the option of moving away from home. A greater emphasis on “what” to study would also be useful if the Covid-19 pandemic precipitates an expansion of distance learning opportunities, increasing the number of subjects home students could select and so increasing the need for support in evaluating these options. Initiatives could involve greater emphasis on subject in evaluations of different institutions and specific reference to HE subject focus in the Careers Strategy.

* *Emphasise the narrative of the home/commuter student*

Media reporting during the Covid-19 pandemic reinforced the pervasive image of university students as people who move away to study; for example, reporting of concerns that student migration would increase a university city’s infection levels (Ferguson, 2020) and images of students confined to their halls of residence after Covid-19 outbreaks (BBC News, 2020). A recent UCAS survey of 20,000 university applicants, however, suggested that the student commuter is a growing phenomenon, with 23% wanting to study close to home (UCAS, 2020), a figure which may be set to increase as a result of the pandemic. This study shows three out of six students making well-researched decisions to stay local; acknowledging personal factors which mean it is preferable for them to stay in the area but insisting they would not stay if they thought the local course was inadequate. Despite this, the research also revealed an undercurrent suggesting that local choices are seen as somewhat deficit by the majority of staff and by some students, an undercurrent likely to be at least partially influenced by the continuing presentation of moving away to university as the standard path. If home/commuter students were represented more visibly and positively and their needs prioritised by policy it would help students and staff to feel more confident about choosing or promoting local opportunities and to ensure that home/commuter student needs are more fully considered during the time they actually attend university.

* *Limit continual FE reform and be wary of branding FE as an “alternative” to HE*

One finding that was evident from this study was that supporting BTEC students with their HE choices was one small task in a myriad of competing priorities for Central College. For example, developing HE choice provision was seen as a luxury when compared with ensuring that the College recruited sufficient numbers of students and that these students attained the necessary level of achievement in order for the College to survive. In order for FE colleges to provide more consistent HE choice support across their colleges and perhaps to collaborate with other providers in order to offer their students a more varied diet of HE experiences, they would need to be released from the constant pressure of day-to-day survival which has dogged FE for a number of years. The recent government white paper, Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth (DfE, 2021) suggests that government once more is looking to revolutionise FE, with the emphasis on a system which will offer an alternative to HE and be a conduit to employment, with employers at the heart of the system. This may be positive in terms of investment but may once again involve huge changes which then leave little time to attend to “luxuries” such as developing HE choice support. One further danger of the current government’s rhetoric is that those students needing HE choice support will be neglected or forgotten in the attempt to portray FE as the direct route to employment and as an alternative to HE. In particular, the prioritising of employer needs potentially neglects the needs of individual students, especially if their needs are more in line with applying for a university degree rather than employment/technical certificates or that they just need the opportunity to reflect on their needs. Ensuring that FE students applying for HE are equally prioritised within policy should help ensure that their HE choice support needs are met. Further, ensuring that any changes to FE align with the Careers Strategy and WP policy could also help to safeguard this group’s needs.

### **6.3.2 Institutional (Colleges)**

* *Develop resources that support the choice of “what” to study*

As highlighted above, the decision that most of Central College BTEC students found most difficult was course subject choice, with several students suggesting that the College could increase support here. The tendency of the College practitioners to view BTEC subject choice as “natural progression” (see section 4.3.1) may have worked against the students here as it may have been assumed that less subject choice input was needed or that the subject input from the actual BTEC course was sufficient. This perception seems likely to be held by other FE practitioners as it stems from a seemingly logical belief that choosing to continue studying a subject is easier than opting for a new one. However, students here spoke of struggling to understand exactly which subjects and which combinations they could do with their subject, something that could perhaps be addressed in more depth if, for example, college staff were able to liaise with university staff on the transferability of individual subjects. Students who were opting to change from their BTEC subject at university also commented on the lack of support available to facilitate this change (for example, support with interview preparation, see section 4.3.1). This is also an area that could be developed, taking advantage of the expertise of cross-college staff or even those in alternative colleges or universities if the subject is not one a college offers. In order for colleges to take advantage of the expertise of other institutions, it will be important that the role of collaboration is emphasised and incentivised within FE policy in order to overcome the default to rivalry that a marketised FE sector encourages.

* Develop a *consistent approach to HE choice support that also allows for the role of tutor autonomy*

Although the students in this study were generally happy with the HE choice support provided by Central College, the majority of staff were quick to comment on the inconsistency of it and its reliance on individual tutors. In order to safeguard the HE choice needs of all FE BTEC students it would be useful for colleges to ensure they have robust programmes of HE choice, which are monitored by senior staff in order to ensure that every student is receiving at least the agreed minimum level of input. However, this should not mean that individual tutors have no scope for adjustment as the study showed that the BTEC tutors’ knowledge of their individual students could result in some excellent support. One of the main advantages of the BTEC programme is that the quantity of tutor and student contact is such that tutors potentially have time and flexibility to learn and so meet the specific needs of their students. Allowing for some flexibility in a programme of HE choice would ensure that this advantage can still flourish. This may be particularly important in colleges with large A level contingents as whilst they may have detailed and comprehensive HE choice programmes, these may fit the needs of their A level students better than their BTEC contingent.

* *Undertake staff development to explore individual meanings of “raising aspirations” in relation to HE choice and to identify the ethical implications of “raising aspirations” strategies in this context.*

This study revealed that although College senior staff spoke of raising student aspirations in relation to HE institution choices, underlying this commitment were a number of ambiguities in terms of where staff thought they were supposed to be encouraging students to apply. Further, staff seemed ambivalent in terms of whether they thought they should be interfering with students’ decisions, and whether distant and/or Russell Group universities were likely to be appropriate choices. In order for FE college “fair access” strategies to be successfully designed and enacted and for staff to feel ethically and morally comfortable with the impact their actions have on students, a full and frank discussion on “raising aspirations”, impartiality and “elite” universities would need to take place. Issues discussed could include how to promote other opportunities without denigrating local choices and what students really want out of university and how their choices might differ because of this. Discussions would benefit from including both staff and students, although sessions would need to be timely as students are exposed to local institutions from an early age (see 6.2.3). Joint staff development sessions between FE and HE staff on these issues could also help as they would enable both groups to gain an understanding of each other’s positioning. If colleges are able to find time and space to work through the ambiguities and ambivalences seemingly prevalent in the “fair access”/”raising aspirations” agenda, then college will have more chance of succeeding, although they may be enacted differently to the way policy-makers originally envisaged. One way in which policy-makers could support this process is by ensuring that WP policy and IAG policy (see section 2.2.3) reference each other and that it is clear how they should work together.

* *Collaborate with other FE providers*

Incorporation forced FE colleges to become more marketised and so to compete against other local providers rather than collaborating. However, the desire of several of the BTEC students in this study to experience a variety of universities, the importance of this for those students satisficing with very little research and the lack of time, resources and contacts of the staff suggests that more could be done to share opportunities between providers. For example, a local sixth form could offer FE college students the chance to attend some of its trips to different universities in exchange for an FE college sharing some of its employment contacts This type of collaboration seems often to be regarded suspiciously and other FE providers seen purely as rivals. FE providers could potentially work together as part of the WP Uni-Connect partnerships, providing more of an official, possibly incentivised reason for the collaboration. Alternatively, in some disadvantaged areas, this could happen though Opportunity Area partnership boards which aim to improve educational and job outcomes and are generally attended by both FE and sixth form leaders.

### **6.3.3 Institutional (Universities):**

* *Help BTEC students to interpret university-provided information on subject choice*

BTEC students in this study focused more heavily on “what” to study rather than “where”, an area neglected by recent policy and literature. Areas that they struggled with included understanding exactly which courses they could do with their BTEC subject and coping with the huge number of variations on a subject choice available. University-provided information and/or visits from university representatives could help with this, for example, by clearly highlighting the similarities and differences between the variations they offer and by highlighting courses which would match well with particular BTEC subjects (maybe working in conjunction with BTEC tutors). This could also benefit the universities, as a marketing focus on matching the right course to the right student could reduce the number of students dropping out due to course dissatisfaction. The emphasis here would need to be on helping the students to interpret the information as much of it may be available already but in a way that students find difficult to relate to their own circumstances.

* *Take the nature of the BTEC timetable and specific FE college pressures into account when planning general HE events and specific WP initiatives.*

This study highlighted occasions on which BTEC students could miss out on university-led HE events due to the nature of their timetable (see section 5.2.2). Universities could bear in mind, for example, that BTEC students are generally under more pressure to achieve at the end of the first year of their studies (when big HE fairs often take place) than perhaps A level students due to the way the BTEC grades are calculated. Greater understanding of the BTEC timetable and the pressures facing FE in terms of chasing achievements at certain times/not being able to corral students in on days off may help to ensure BTEC students are not disadvantaged by their course or college situation. One suggestion may be a big HE fair aimed at BTEC students, perhaps targeting a larger regional area than a general summer one. Contact with universities other than local ones was something that students showed interest in and many found it difficult to attend open days due to their part-time jobs, meaning that opportunities through college took on particular significance. An alternative solution could be the continuation of virtual opportunities that have proliferated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, although these can sometimes be a poor substitute for a face-to-face encounter. It may also be useful for universities to consider the case of BTEC students with high BTEC grades but with lower GCSE English and Maths grades in that perhaps contextual offers could involve lowering these requirements as well or rather than just A level/BTEC grades.

* *Russell Group/pre-92 providers: Take into consideration how some BTEC students (and FE College staff) might position themselves in relation to your provision and the type of information they might value.*

BTEC students in this study did not frame themselves as deficient in relation to their qualification and/or to potentially matching with “elite” provision. Many of the students interviewed had experienced academic success with their BTEC qualification and although few had directly contacted “elite” universities (partly because there were no local “elite” choices), they did not seem to be intimidated by such provision, with some students questioning the legitimacy of the university hierarchies. For many of the students (and staff), the main criteria for judging universities was support, both academic and emotional. It could be useful for “elite” universities to be aware of this in that improving and/or emphasising the support mechanisms in place at the institution could help to encourage BTEC/low SES students to apply there and thus help to meet institution WP/FA targets and improve TEF performance. Similarly, the ambivalence felt by some FE college staff towards “elite” provision could also be targeted by “elite” universities by reassurance as to the quality of their support systems. For any of the above to take place, there will need to be increased contact between “elite” providers and FE colleges, something that could be facilitated by the current Uni-Connect partnerships.

## **6.4 Limitations of the Study**

This was a small-scale, in-depth study which revealed a significant number of interesting insights. However, in order to add more weight to its findings it would either need to be repeated on a larger scale or a number of small-scale repetitions completed and then a meta-narrative analysis conducted. Choosing to focus on primarily Applied Science and Business students meant that I could generate interview data from those who potentially could attend a large number of universities. However, it also meant that I was missing the voice of BTEC students from other courses (such as Performing Arts, Media or Sport) who due to perhaps more constraint from their initial BTEC choices (for example, they would likely have found it harder to access a range of Russell Group/pre-92 courses) would perhaps have offered different perspectives. Further, although choosing to focus on one college allowed me to explore the institution in a depth that would not have been possible with multiple colleges, it nevertheless meant that the study perhaps missed the voice of colleges within different contexts, for example, more financially secure or placed closer to an “elite” university, which may have generated different results. Although a comparative study would offer an additional way to establish how transferable findings from this study might be, the provision of rich detail on the specific context of this study does enable readers to consider its transferability to their own situations.

A consideration I found myself returning to throughout the research was the way in which my position as a College employee influenced the study. I was specifically concerned that my own perceptions about the students’ HE decisions and the support the College offered could unduly influence the direction of the interviews and my subsequent analysis of them, potentially closing off useful or unexpected lines of enquiry. Although complete elimination of this influence was not possible (or even necessarily desirable), I made conscious attempts to control its extent. For example, I stuck closely to both my interview questions and to the actual words of the students (see section 3.5.3 for further details). The emergence of two themes that I would not necessarily have predicted (the importance of subject choice and the dominance of “raising aspirations”) seem to offer additional evidence of my ability to be open to unexpected findings.

## **6.5 Further areas for research**

* *Research with a wider range of BTEC students and with T level students*

In-depth research (perhaps particularly focusing on university subject choice) with BTEC students studying subjects other than Applied Science and Business would be useful in order to explore whether the perceptions of these students support or challenge the findings of this study. Further, research with students studying T-level (new alternative BTEC) qualifications would be beneficial. At present it is not clear exactly how either students, colleges or universities will react to T levels (for example, how many students will want to go to university and whether universities will accept the qualification and/or judge it comparable with BTEC/A level qualifications). In the coming years it will be useful to know how T level students position themselves in relation to HE and whether their related needs mirror those found here and/or those elucidated in previous research. This research could also be useful in light of possible changes to context following the Covid-19 pandemic. 2020/21 figures from UCAS suggest that the pandemic may have accelerated an already growing number of students wishing to attend university as a home/commuter student (which many BTEC students favour). Will this trend, for example, push subject choice further to the forefront? Will more universities offer distance learning? Further research could help to establish whether BTEC/FE perspectives remain the same under these possible changes to the HE context. Further studies of BTEC and/or T-level students would also benefit from consideration of a longitudinal approach covering the transition between FE, university and employment.

* *Research with a wider range of further education colleges*

Research with a wider range of FE colleges would allow the findings of this study to be supported or challenged within different college contexts. For example, it may be useful to explore reasons underpinning the support offered by FE colleges with a large A level contingent. In particular it could be useful to consider the different college perspectives in relation to “fair access” and “raising aspirations”. The FE staff in this study suggested that it is a difficult balancing act to promote “elite” university provision whilst simultaneously practicing impartiality and harbouring ethical concerns about the match between BTEC FE students and “elite” universities. Further research on this topic with FE staff could explore ways in which various institutions manage this issue and so open up the possibility of sharing good practice between colleges. This research would benefit from continued use of the Theory of Practice Architectures perspective as this could allow comparison between students and staff in different college contexts. Utilisation of the TOPA perspective proved particularly effective in this study as it enabled interrogation of the complex architectures (such as the historical context of “raising aspirations”) underlying beliefs, activities and relationships that need to be closely examined and/or changed before any new strategies can be implemented at surface level. The theory was particularly useful at illuminating the relationship between theory and practice, as it showed how applying theory to underlying issues can potentially unravel entrenched beliefs which, if left unchallenged, would block changes to practice.

## **6.6 Personal Reflections on my EdD**

At the start of the EdD, I had not anticipated that I would be completing the latter stages of it as an ex-employee of the college nor that the writing up stages would also involve several months of home-schooling my son. However, I feel that this context really helped me to achieve some distance from the study and to be able to look at the overall picture of the research. For example, distancing myself from the site of my research meant that I was able to view the students and the College from more of an outsider perspective and to start to develop the wider themes of the research without the distraction of the day-to-day minutiae of helping to deliver the College’s HE Support Programme. Further, the periods of home-schooling ensured that I had to slow the pace of my writing-up process which (though frustrating at times) actually allowed me to reflect over a longer period of time and so helped again to see the bigger picture.

As I reflected on the wider themes of my research, I began to re-examine my own practice in light of them. I began to see that I tended to adopt different approaches to HE choice support depending on whether I was assisting students individually or as a group. When assisting individuals, the practice architectures underpinning my practice were more often related to my careers training, with the focus on the individual needs of the student and the belief that they were best placed to make their own decisions. When designing groupwork, however, the practice architectures were much more likely to involve policy rhetoric such as “fair access” or “raising aspirations” and the awareness of the students as FE College students likely to have multiple academic, financial, social and emotional needs. So, for example, I would find myself conflicted as to how much I needed to encourage students to research a wide range of universities and to apply to “elite” and/or distant institutions when I knew that the majority were looking locally. These differences in my practice contexts seemed to mirror the differences between the tutors dealing with their individual tutor groups and management planning college-wide strategies. Considering my practice in this way has not necessarily led me to “the answers” but it has given me more confidence to challenge policy rhetoric and to prioritise the idea of BTEC FE students as individuals first rather than as part of an anomalous group whose HE decisions are in need of shaping.

## **6.7 Concluding Comments**

Initial reading on the topic of HE decision-making painted a picture of BTEC students (particularly low SES) struggling to access necessary information about HE decisions, making decisions restricted by finance and geography and feeling that they did not “fit in” academically or socially at “elite” institutions (Reay et al.,2001b; Hoelscher et al., 2008; Baker, 2020). Policy relating to “fair access” schemes or “raising aspirations” contributed to the idea that WP students (and the many BTEC students who fall into this category) struggle to make the “best” HE choice decisions for themselves (DfE, 2003; DfES, 2011; 2016). For BTEC students studying at an FE College the picture appeared even bleaker, with FE HE choice support judged to be patchy, inconsistent and under-developed compared to other institutions (Pugsley, 2004; Gartland and Smith, 2018). To an extent, initial FE College staff perspectives explored in this study seemed to support these ideas, with staff judging local choices of university to be somewhat deficient, student aspirations to be in need of raising and College support to be inconsistent and poorly monitored. However, the BTEC students themselves did not seem to fit this deficit picture. Although many made potentially default local post-1992 choices, they had often thoroughly researched these decisions, focusing on subject choice and support as opposed to hierarchical status of universities, for example. Similarly, further exploration of FE College HE choice support revealed generally satisfied students, supportive tutor-student relationships and thoughtful and well-reasoned consideration of the moral and ethical conflicts existing within the “fair access”/”raising aspirations” agenda. The overall picture and the main contribution to knowledge illustrated that many of the College’s HE choice support decisions were made as a result of tensions within FE. Examples of such tensions included the relative importance of recruitment /achievement against progression to other institutions and the importance of both local regeneration and professional impartiality against raising aspirations to encourage students to attend “elite” universities. This study is not claiming that all of the students participating researched thoroughly, that a local choice was never selected without thought and that the HE choice support offered by the College had no issues. However, by hopefully framing BTEC student HE decisions and FE HE choice support in a more positive light and by providing further understanding as to why certain support decisions might be made, focus can shift to ensuring that the actual needs and priorities of all BTEC students in FE are better interpreted and that FE colleges are supported by policy/universities to harness their strengths in order to meet these needs.

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# **Appendix A: Letter of College approval**

F.A.O *(name of),* Principal and CEO, *(name of)* College

Dear *(name of Principal/CEO)*

I would like to request permission to conduct a research study in *(name of)* College. I am currently enrolled in the Professional Doctorate in Education programme at *(name of)* University and am also employed by the college as a careers adviser. I am currently studying towards the second part of the doctorate and in the process of completing my thesis proposal.

The study is entitled: Deciding what and where to study: How do BTEC students at an FE College make their HE choices and how does the College shape these decisions?

I am hoping to use three types of data within the study:

1. College UCAS database: I would like to use BTEC students’ UCAS applications (from year 2018/19) to ascertain the types of subjects/universities they apply to.
2. Student/staff interviews: I am hoping to recruit 12 Level 3 Year 2 BTEC students to be interviewed twice (January 2019 and May 2019). I would also like to conduct 10 staff interviews (ideally, Careers Coordinator, tutors x 4, Principal, Vice-Principal of Curriculum and Quality, Director of Curriculum, Director or Head of Learner Support and 1 x Head of Faculty). Students and staff will receive participant information sheets and consent forms prior to interview and will only be interviewed if their full consent is given. Parental consent forms will also be sent out for any students who are under 18 at the time of the interviews.
3. College documents: I am hoping to look at documents relating to HE choice support within the college; for example, HE Strategy and CEIAG Strategy.

Ethical approval will be sought and received by *(name of)* University before any part of the research goes ahead. The identity of the college and any students taking part will be anonymised in the thesis and also in any future publication of parts of the thesis. Copies of the thesis are usually available in *(name of)* University but the thesis can be made confidential (and therefore not available) if required. Data collected will be stored securely whilst the research is being undertaken and will be destroyed in accordance with University procedures when the project is completed.

If you have any further questions I can be contacted on *(researcher phone number)* or *(researcher email).* If you are happy to do so, please could you sign below to indicate your permission and consent for me to conduct this research in *(name of)* College.

Regards, Diane Atkinson, Careers Adviser, *(name of)* College

Approved by: Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name and Title: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

# **Appendix B: Demographics of College BTEC Students applying for University**

Gender, Age and Ethnicity:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Males** | **Female** | **Age 17** | **Age 18** | **Age 19** | **Age 20** | **21+** | **White** | **Asian Pakistani** | **Black African** | **Mixed – White and Asian** | **Asian Other** | **Other Ethnic Background** | **Mixed** | **Prefer not to say** |
| 28 | 32 | 17 | 25 | 13 | 3 | 2 (21 and 24) | 46 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Parental experience of HE:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Parents have HE qualification** | **Parents do not have HE qualification** | **Do not know if parents have HE qualification** | **Did not answer** |
| 13 | 23 | 14 | 10 |

Parental Occupation (of parent/guardian who makes the most money) – or own job if over 21 (only applied to 2)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **NS-SEC Category** | NS-SEC Cat. 1.1 | NS-SEC Cat. 1.2 | NS-SEC Cat. 2 | NS-SEC Cat. 3 | NS-SEC Cat. 4 | NS-SEC Cat. 5 | NS-SEC Cat. 6 | NS-SEC Cat. 7 | NS-SEC Cat. 8 |
| **Number of parental occupations\*** | 1  (Facilities Manager) | 2  (Pharmacist, PG Teaching Assistant) | 9  (e.g. Teacher, Construction Planner) | 6  (e.g. Medical Secretary, Cashier) | 9  (e.g. Taxi Driver, Builder) | 6  (e.g. Chef, Maintenance Engineer) | 13  (e.g. Care Worker, Security Officer) | 10  (e.g. Warehouser, Cleaner) | 0 |

\*4 students could not be coded (2 answered “Prefer not to say”, 1 answered “Self-employed” and 1 answered “Retired”)

NS-SEC Categories:

* 1. Employers in large establishments/Higher managerial and administrative occupations (1)
  2. Higher professional occupations (2)

1. Lower professional and higher technical occupations (9)
2. Intermediate occupations (6)
3. Employers in small organisations/own account workers (9)
4. Lower supervisory occupations/lower technical occupations (6)
5. Semi-routine occupations (13)
6. Routine occupations (10)
7. Never worked/long-term unemployed

Student situations in relation to GCSE Maths and English:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Has both English and Maths GCSE at A\*-C** | **Has English GCSE at A\*-C but not Maths** | **Has Maths GCSE at A\*-C but not English** | **Has neither English nor Maths GCSE at A\*-C** |
| 38\* | 11 | 4 | 7 |

\*One student has Level 2 Functional Skills English (a qualification equivalent to GCSE A\*-C) but not accepted by all universities as an alternative

Student Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma predicted grades:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Predicted D\*D\*D\*** | **Predicted D\*DD** | **Predicted DDD** | **Predicted**  **DDM** | **Predicted DMM** | **Predicted MMM** | **Predicted MMP** | **Predicted PPP** | **Predicted MM\*** | **Predicted PP\*** |
| 24 | 3 | 9 | 1 | 6 | 10 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 |

\*Student not completing Level 3 qualification. In both cases, student is in Year 1 of the qualification and does not need the second year in order to move onto their chosen university course.

# **Appendix C: Pre-Interview Questionnaire (students)**

**Deciding what and where to study at university: Pre-interview Questionnaire**

1. What course are you studying?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Are you: (Please tick)

Male □

Female □

Other □ Please state: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you describe your ethnic origin or personal identity? (please tick)

White □ Mixed/multiple ethnic group □

Asian/Asian British □ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British □

Other □ Please state: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Where are you currently living? (please tick)

In the family home □

Independently □

Other □ Please state: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Which of the following describes your family income? (please tick)

Under £25,000 □

£25,000 - £60, 000 □

£60, 001+ □

Don’t know □

1. What is the occupation of the parent/guardian in your household who earns the most money?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you have a part-time job? (please tick)

Yes (1-15 hours per week) □

Yes (16-30 hours per week) □

No □

1. Do either of your parents/guardians have any Higher Education qualifications? For example: degree, HNC/HND, HE Diploma? (please tick)

Yes □

No □

Don’t know □

1. Are any of your brothers/sisters currently studying/have studied Higher Education qualifications? For example: degree, HNC/HND, HE Diploma? (please tick)

Yes □

No □

Don’t know □

Don’t have any brothers/sisters □

# **Appendix D: Pre-Interview Questionnaire (staff)**

**Deciding what and where to study at university: Pre-interview Questionnaire**

1. What is your role at the college?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your age?

18 - 24 □

25 - 34 □

35 - 44 □

45 - 54 □

55 - 64 □

65+ □

1. Are you: (Please tick)

Male □

Female □

Other □ Please state: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you describe your ethnic origin or personal identity? (please tick)

White □ Mixed/multiple ethnic group □

Asian/Asian British □ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British □

Other □ Please state: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. How long have you worked at the college?

Less than 5 years □

5 to 10 years □

10 years+ □

1. Where have you worked previously? (please tick)

Other FE/vocational Colleges □

6th Forms □

Schools □

Other educational institutions □

Outside of education □

1. What is your highest qualification?

Level 3 or below □

HNC/D, HE Diploma, Foundation Degree □

Degree □

Masters/EdD/PhD □

1. Which university/universities have you attended and which subjects did you study?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

# **Appendix E: Interview Questions (students – first interview)**

**Deciding what and where to study at university: Interview Guide (Student – First Interview)**

Main Research Question: How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

* Where do the BTEC students apply and what for?
* How do the BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?
* How/in what ways does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their students?
* How does the organisational culture of the College influence the students’ HE decisions?
* In what ways and to what extent does the College’s organisational culture and practice support the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Framework of organisation for interview | Main questions (followed by prompts) |
| About the student | Student to complete pre-interview questionnaire |
| Icebreaker question | **Why do you want to go to university?**  (What do you hope to gain from university? What are you looking forward to at university? What made you think about applying?) |
| Where have they applied and why? | **Can you tell me what you have applied for and at which universities?**  **How did you decide what to study at university?** (Did you consider more than one subject? What was it about studying X that appealed to you? Who did you talk to to help you make a decision? What research did you do that helped you to make a decision? Did you talk to tutors/careers advisers/parents/friends? Who did you feel was most helpful? Why? Did anyone push you towards certain subjects?)  **How did you decide on your universities?** (How many universities did you consider? What was it about going to X that appealed to you? What were the key factors you considered in making your decisions? Why do you want to stay local/move away?)  **Looking back, what do you think about the HE choices you made?** (Would you choose differently if you chose again? If so, what would you choose? What do you think led to you making the “wrong” decisions? What do you think helped you to make the right decisions?) |
| How has the college assisted them in making their HE choices? | **How did the college help you in making your HE choices?** (What did the college do to try and help you? What did you think about the help that was offered? What do you think about the amount of help that was offered? What do you think about the timing of the help offered?)  **How useful was the help you received from the college?** (What was the most useful help you received from college? Where else did you receive help from? Why do you think this help was particularly useful?)  **What other help would you have liked?** (How did you find making your decisions? Which decisions were the most difficult? What would have helped to make these decisions easier? What could college have done to assist with your decisions?) |
| Anything else to add? | **Do you have anything else you would like to say?** |

# **Appendix F: Interview Questions (students – second interview)**

**Deciding what and where to study at university: Interview Guide (Student – Second Interview)**

Main Research Question: How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

* Which courses and universities do the BTEC students apply for?
* How do the BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?
* How does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?
* Does the organisational culture of the College influence the students’ HE decisions and, if so, in what ways?
* In what ways and to what extent does the College’s organisational culture and practice support the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Framework of organisation for interview | Main questions (followed by prompts) |
| How have they decided what and where to study at university? | **Can you tell me about the university offers you have had?** (How do you feel about the conditions that were made? How do you feel about any rejections? How do you feel about any unconditional offers?)  **Have you done any further research since the last interview?** (Have you researched anything more about the courses? What? Where? Why? Have you researched anything more about the universities? What? Where? Why? Have you attended any further open/offer holder days? Have you looked further at websites/prospectuses etc? Which ones? Have you spoken to anyone about your final choices? Who have you spoken to - and why them? Why have you chosen not to do any further research? When did you do the majority of your research? Before or after shortlisting courses? Why?)  **Can you tell me about your final university choices and how you selected them?** (What firm/insurance choices have you made? What were the main factors that influenced your choice? Is your final choice different to what you thought it would be in January? How seriously did you consider all of your offers? Had you made any original choices that you had no intention of selecting? Why is X the right choice for you?) |
| How has the college assisted them in making their HE choices? | **Has the college helped you to make a final decision?** (What further information/guidance was offered? Did you talk to any college staff about your decision? Which ones and why those?) |
| Questions for individual students | For 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10: **What do you think makes a good university?** (How do you think a good university is generally defined? How would you judge whether a university is good or not?)  For 1 and 4: **Do you think your course’s close links with Middleton University has influenced your decision? In what way?**  For 9: **Do you think the close proximity of Middleton University has influenced your decision? In what way?**  For 6 and 8: **Do you think the close proximity of Greene University has influenced your decision? In what way?**  For 1, 2, 3, 7: **Have you decided whether to live at home or live on your own and how did you decide?** (What influenced this decision – for example, parents? Finance?)  For 1 and 4: **How important is a university’s dyslexia support for you and have you looked any further into this?** (Did you know where to look? Is there anyone in college you are able to ask to help with this?)  For 6 and 9: **Did GCSE conditions have an influence on your decisions? In what way?**  For 3: **How did you decide whether to pursue a full-time degree or a degree apprenticeship?**  For 10: (In the event he decides to re-apply) **What will you do differently when you re-apply next year?**  For 5: **You mentioned at the end of the last interview that you thought your research and choices would be different to most of the other interviewees, Why do you think that is?** |
| Anything else to add? | **Do you have anything else you would like to say?** |

# **Appendix G: Interview Questions (tutors/careers coordinator)**

**Deciding what and where to study at university: Interview Guide (Staff)**

Main Research Question: How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

* Which courses and universities do the BTEC students apply for?
* How do the BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?
* How does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?
* Does the organisational culture of the College influence the students’ HE decisions and, if so, in what ways?
* In what ways and to what extent does the College’s organisational culture and practice support the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Framework of organisation for the interviews | Main questions (followed by prompts) |
| Preliminary details | Member of staff to complete pre-interview questionnaire. |
| Icebreaker | **What do you think the advantages and/or disadvantages of going to university are?** |
| Thoughts on student HE choice-making | **What are the main factors that you think have influenced your students/the College BTEC students when choosing what SUBJECT to study at university?**  (Do they research and, if so, what sort of research do they do? WHEN DO THEY RESEARCH/FOR HOW LONG? What reasons do they give for selecting a subject? Why might they choose a subject other than their BTEC subject? DO THEY CONSIDER THAT THE SAME SUBJECT COULD BE DIFFERENT AT DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES?)  **What are the main factors that you think have influenced your students/the College BTEC students when choosing universities?**  (Do they research and, if so, what sort of research do they do? DO THEY RESEARCH BOTH LOCAL AND DISTANT UNIVERSITIES – WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS? HOW DO THEY FEEL ABOUT MOVING AWAY? Do they visit universities? If not, why do you think they don’t? WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK ENTRY REQUIREMENTS PLAY? What reasons do they give for preferring some universities to others?)  **What do you think about the HE choices your students/the College BTEC students made?**  (Do you think they make informed decisions? What/who do you think they are most influenced by – EG FRIENDS/FAMILY? How do you think they feel about their choices as they go through the year (TEND TO STICK OR CHANGE – WHY?)?) WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE FINAL DECISIONS THEY MADE?  **WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE OFFERS YOUR STUDENTS/THE COLLEGE BTEC STUDENTS HAVE RECEIVED?** (What do you think about the conditions – BTEC and GCSE? What do you think about unconditional offers? What do you think about any rejections students have had?) |
| College support of students | **What support does the college offer students who are trying to choose subjects and universities?**  Are there specific sessions for students? How much tutorial time is spent on HE? Have students been on university visits/had talks from the universities? WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE IMPACT OF THE COURSE’S CLOSE LINKS WITH MIDDLETON UNIVERSITY? DO STUDENTS APPROACH YOU FOR HELP AND WHAT KIND OF THINGS DO THEY ASK? HOW WOULD YOU ADVISE THEM ON CHOICE OF COURSE/CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY?  **What do you think about the support offered to help students choose what and where to study?**  Is it not enough/enough/too much? Does it cover the right activities? Which activities do you think the students find most useful? WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE WAY COLLEGE PROMOTES PROGRESSION TO UNIVERSITY?  **Is** **there any other assistance you think could/should be offered to students?**  What sort of activity do you think would be useful? Why do you think this would help? Why do you think this isn’t offered at the moment? |
| College strategy (link to How does the college enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their students? And How does the organisational culture of the college influence the students’ HE decisions?) | **What are your thoughts on the college’s CEIAG strategy?**  Are you aware of this document? Have you read it? If so, what are your thoughts? If no, here are the relevant sections – what your thoughts (students attending local HE Fair, progression assemblies, 2 x tutorial sessions, inviting past learners in, HEON activities – is this NCOP?) |
| Government policy (link to In what ways and to what extent does the College’s organisational culture and practice support the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?) | **What are your thoughts on government policy towards HE choice?**  What do you think of widening participation (ask staff for their definition/show definition if needed?) and fair access (ask staff for their definition/show definition if needed?)? Do you think college is supportive of these aims? Should it be? |
| Anything to add? | **Do you have anything else you would like to say?** |

# **Appendix H: Deciding what and where to study at university: Interview Guide (Staff - Management)**

Main Research Question: How do BTEC students at an FE College decide what and where to study at university and how does the College shape these decisions?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

* Which courses and universities do the BTEC students apply for?
* How do the BTEC students decide what and where to study at university?
* How does the College enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their BTEC students?
* Does the organisational culture of the College influence the students’ HE decisions and, if so, in what ways?
* In what ways and to what extent does the College’s organisational culture and practice support the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Icebreaker | **What do you think the advantages and/or disadvantages of going to university are?** |
| Thoughts on student HE choice-making | **What do you think of the choices the College BTEC students have made when choosing what to study at university?** (Show pie chart of final choices: Is this what you expected to see? What do you think might be influencing the students to make these decisions? Is this anything you want to/think should change?)  **What do you think of the choices the College BTEC students have made when choosing where to study at university?** (Show pie chart of final choices: Is this what you expected to see? What do you think might be influencing the students to make these decisions? Is this anything you want to/think should change?) |
| College support of students | **What do you think of the current support that the College offers the students when they are choosing their university choices?** (What do you know about it? If nothing, what do you think it should look like/contain? Do you think it’s enough/not enough/too much? Does it cover the right activities? What do you think works well? What could be improved? Do you think that A Level and BTEC students should have the same programme?)  **Is** **there any other assistance you think could/should be offered to students?**  What sort of activity do you think would be useful? Why do you think this would help? Why do you think this isn’t offered at the moment? |
| College strategy (link to How does the college enable and constrain the HE decisions made by their students? And How does the organisational culture of the college influence the students’ HE decisions?) | **How big a College priority is assisting students with their university choices?** (What would you say the main college priorities were? How does assisting with university choice fit in with these priorities? What do you think will be the impact of the introduction of the A level offer? How do you think promotion of college HNCs/HE offer can be balanced against informing students of all their university options?)  **What are your thoughts on the college’s CEIAG strategy?**  Are you aware of this document? Have you read it? If so, what are your thoughts?Were you involved in developing this policy? How was this policy developed (in relation to HE choice support)? What do you think the main challenges are going to be in delivering this policy?) If no, here are the relevant sections – what are your thoughts (students attending local HE Fair, progression assemblies, 2 x tutorial sessions, inviting past learners in, HEON activities – NCOP/Higher Horizons) |
| Government policy (link to In what ways and to what extent does the College’s organisational culture and practice support the government’s widening participation/fair access agenda?) | **What are your thoughts on government policy towards HE choice?**  What do you think of widening participation (ask staff for their definition/show definition if needed?) and fair access (ask staff for their definition/show definition if needed?)? Do you think college is supportive of these aims? Should it be? |
| Anything to add? | **Do you have anything else you would like to say?** |

**The university subject and institution choices of current BTEC students at 19/6/2019 (BTEC Applied Science, Business, IT, Sport, Public Services, Travel and Tourism and Construction):**

**Other university subjects chosen:** (Events Management (1), Medicine with a Gateway Year (1), Music Production (1), Architectural Technology and Practice (1), Interior Design (1), English Literature and Creative Writing (1))

**Other local unis (within 50 miles): Name of post-92 university (1), Name of post-92 university (1), Name of post-92 university (1) Unis outside a 50 mile radius: Name of pre-1992 university (1), Name of post-92 university (1), Name of Medical School (1), Name of pre-92 university (1), Name of post-92 university (1), Name of post-92 university (1), Name of RG university (1)**

# **Appendix I: Participant Information Sheets**

**Participant Information Sheet (Students)**

**Participant Information Sheet**

**Title of Research Project**

**Deciding what and where to study: how do BTEC students at an FE College make their HE choices and how does the College shape these decisions?**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you are happy to take part, it is important that you understand what the project is about, why I am inviting you to take part, and exactly what is involved. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

**What is the project about?**

The aim of the research study is to look at the university choices that BTEC students at an FE college make and to explore how they make these decisions and how the institution they attend influences these decisions.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because you are a Level 3 BTEC student who has recently applied to university and so can provide information about your own experiences of making university choices and the support you received from your institution.

**What does it involve?**

Taking part would involve you taking part in a face-to-face interview with the researcher who is working on the project. The interview would last for approximately 45 minutes, and would take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. You will initially be asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire which will gather a few general details about you. You will then be asked the main interview questions which will be about how you made your university choices and the help you received in making them. A follow-up interview would take place after you have made your final decision about your university place.

**Are there any risks or benefits?**

There are no anticipated personal risks or disadvantages involved in taking part in the research. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form to make sure that you fully understand what you are agreeing to. It is recognised that participation in research projects may cause emotional distress and anxiety in some individuals. If you feel that your psychological wellbeing has been affected, the college has a free counselling service which you can access by calling *(College* *counselling number)* or emailing *(College counselling email).* The research has been approved by the University Ethics Committee at *(name of university).*

There are no personal benefits for the people who take part. Any knowledge that is gained as a result of the study will be made available to the college advice teams involved in supporting your HE choices, to consider how things could be done differently in order to improve the experience of future BTEC students.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you change your mind at any point, you can withdraw at any time up to the point at which the data becomes aggregated for analysis purposes and you don’t have to give a reason for doing so. If there are any questions in the questionnaire or any subsequent interview that you would prefer not to answer, you do not have to answer them.

**Will I be identified in the report?**

No. None of the information that you provide will identify you, or be attributed directly to you in the final report (pseudonyms will be used). The anonymity of everyone who takes part will be protected in the final document. The thesis will be confidential and therefore not available to view in *(name of* *university)* library to protect against those with local knowledge identifying the college/participants.

Any personal information that you provide will be confidential and accessed only by the researcher. Transcripts of the interviews will be stored securely whilst the research is being undertaken, and will be destroyed in accordance with University procedures that are in force when the project is completed.

**General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR).**

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR). The data controller for this project will be *(name of university).* The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined in this information sheet. The legal basis for processing your personal data for research purposes under GDPR is a ‘task in the public interest’. You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this study by completing the consent form that has been provided to you. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the GDPR. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the *(name of university)* Data Protection Officer. If you wish to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner’s Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

This research is being undertaken for the purpose of completing a dissertation for a professional Doctorate in Education at *(name of university).* If you have any queries or questions related to this research, please contact me on *(researcher phone number)* or by email at *(researcher email).* If you have any concerns or complaints about this research, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr Kim Slack. Her email address is *(supervisor email).*

If you would like to receive a copy of the summary of the study findings please leave an email address on the space provided on the Consent Form.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

**Participant Information Sheet (Staff)**

**Participant Information Sheet**

**Title of Research Project**

**Deciding what and where to study: how do BTEC students at an FE College make their HE choices and how does the College shape these decisions?**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you are happy to take part, it is important that you understand what the project is about, why I am inviting you to take part, and exactly what is involved. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

**What is the project about?**

The aim of the research study is to look at the university choices that BTEC students at an FE college make and to explore how they make these decisions and how the institution they attend influences these decisions.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because you are member of college staff involved in either supporting Level 3 BTEC students making choices about university or in designing/implementing the strategic direction of IAG college support.

**What does it involve?**

Taking part would involve you taking part in a face-to-face interview with the researcher who is working on the project. The interview would last for approximately 45 minutes, and would take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. You will initially be asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire which will gather a few general details about you. You will then be asked the main interview questions which will be about the ways in which BTEC students make choices about university and the ways in which the college supports them.

**Are there any risks or benefits?**

There are no anticipated personal risks or disadvantages involved in taking part in the research. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form to make sure that you fully understand what you are agreeing to. It is recognised that participation in research projects may cause emotional distress and anxiety in some individuals. If you feel that your psychological wellbeing has been affected, a free telephone counselling service can be accessed by calling *(service number).* Contact college HR (*HR phone number) if* you would prefer a referral for face-to-face counselling. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form to make sure that you fully understand what you are agreeing to. The research has been approved by the University Ethics Committee at *(name of* *university).*

There are no personal benefits for the people who take part. Any knowledge that is gained as a result of the study will be made available to the college advice teams involved in supporting HE choices, to consider how things could be done differently in order to improve the experience of future BTEC students.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you change your mind at any point, you can withdraw at any time up to the point at which the data becomes aggregated for analysis purposes and you don’t have to give a reason for doing so. If there are any questions in the questionnaire or any subsequent interview that you would prefer not to answer, you do not have to answer them.

**Will I be identified in the report?**

You will not be named in the thesis or any papers arising from the thesis, as identities of everyone taking part will be anonymised (pseudonyms will be used). The thesis will be confidential and therefore not available to view in *(name of university)* library to protect against those with local knowledge identifying the college/participants.

Any personal information that you provide will be confidential and accessed only by the researcher. Transcripts of the interviews will be stored securely whilst the research is being undertaken, and will be destroyed in accordance with University procedures that are in force when the project is completed.

**General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR).**

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR). The data controller for this project will be *(name of university).* The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined in this information sheet. The legal basis for processing your personal data for research purposes under GDPR is a ‘task in the public interest’. You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this study by completing the consent form that has been provided to you. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the GDPR. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the *(name of university)* Data Protection Officer. If you wish to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner’s Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

This research is being undertaken for the purpose of completing a dissertation for a professional Doctorate in Education at *(name of university).* If you have any queries or questions related to this research, please contact me on *(researcher phone number)* or by email at *(researcher email).* If you have any concerns or complaints about this research, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr Kim Slack. Her email address is *(supervisor email).*

If you would like to receive a copy of the summary of the study findings please leave an email address on the space provided on the Consent Form.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

# **Appendix J: Letter to parents/guardians**

Dear Parent/Guardian

I would like to invite your son/daughter to take part in a research project at *(name of college).* The title of the research project is:

**Deciding what and where to study: how do BTEC students at an FE College make their HE choices and how does the College shape these decisions?**

In order for you to decide whether you would like your son/daughter to take part, it is important that you understand what the project is about, why I am inviting your son/daughter to take part and exactly what is involved. I have attached the information sheet that students taking part will receive. This provides more details on the project and I would be grateful if you could take the time to read it carefully.

This research is being undertaken for the purpose of completing a thesis for a professional Doctorate in Education at *(name of university).* If you have any queries or questions related to this research, please contact me on *(researcher phone number)* or by email at *(researcher email).* If you have any concerns or complaints about this research, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr Kim Slack. Her email address is *(supervisor email).*

If you are happy for your son/daughter to take part in this project, please fill in the tearaway section and return to Diane Atkinson at the college by 15th January, 2019.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and information sheet.

**Yours faithfully**

**Diane Atkinson**

**Careers Adviser**

***(name of college)***

**✂ - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -**

I agree to my son/daughter taking part in the research project outlined above.

Name of son/daughter: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of parent/guardian: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature (parent/guardian): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

# **Appendix K: Demographics for students interviewed (10)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **BTEC course** | **Age** | **Gender** | **Ethnic Origin** | **Currently living** | **Family income** | **Parental Occupation** | **Part-time job (hours?)** | **Parental HE** | **Siblings HE** |
| Cara | Applied Science | 18 | Female | White | Family Home | Under £25, 000 | Benchmark Technician (2) | No | No | Don’t know |
| Dan | Applied Science | 21 | Male | White | Family Home | £60, 001+ | Psychologist and Trainer (1.2) | Yes (1-15 hrs a week) | Yes | Yes |
| Rosie | Business | 18 | Female | White | Family Home | Don’t know | Carer (6) | Yes (1-15 hrs a week) | Don’t know | No |
| Layla | Applied Science | 18 | Female | White | Family Home | Under £25, 000 | Unemployed | Yes (1-15 hrs a week) | No | No |
| Josh | Applied Science | 18 | Male | White | Family Home | £60,001+ | Don’t know | Yes (1-15 hrs a week) | Yes | No |
| Anna | Business | 18 | Female | Other (Polish) | Family Home | Don’t know | Engineer | No | Don’t know | No siblings |
| Jade | Business | 18 | Female | Other (African) | Family Home | Don’t know | Taxi Driver (4) | No | Don’t know | Yes |
| Zak | Business | 18 | Male | Asian/Asian British | Family Home | Don’t know | Taxi Driver (4) | No | No | No |
| Nadia | Business | 19 | Female | Asian/Asian British | Family Home | Under £25, 000 | Taxi Driver (4) | Yes (1-15 hrs a week) | No | No |
| Tom | Business | 17 (18 at interview) | Male | White | Family Home | Don’t know | Teacher (2) | Yes (16-30 hrs a week) | Yes | Yes |

# **Appendix L: Participant Consent Form**



**Participant Consent Form**

**Project Title**: Deciding what and where to study: How do BTEC students at an FE College make their HE choices and how does the College shape these decisions?

Please read each statement, and tick the box next to it to indicate that you are in agreement with the statements

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I have read and understood the participant information sheet and the nature and purpose of this research has been explained to me. | □ |
| I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that if I change my mind, I can withdraw up until the data has been aggregated for analysis purposes. I can do this without prejudice and without giving a reason. | □ |
| I understand that I do not have to answer every question if I do not wish to and I don’t have to give any explanation. | □ |
| I understand that confidentiality will be maintained throughout this project, and that I will not be identified in the final report. | □ |
| I confirm that quotations may be used in the report, provided that the quotations are anonymised and do not reveal my identity. | □ |
| I confirm I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation in it. | □ |
| I understand that my data will be securely stored in accordance with *(name of)* University protocols and current data protection guidelines. | □ |
| I confirm that I agree to take part in this research project. | □ |
| I agree that any interview that I take part in may be audio recorded. | □ |
| I have read the information sheet regarding the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and I give my consent for my data to be processed in accordance with GDPR. | □ |
| I understand that my data may be used (in anonymised form) in research publications, conferences and/or teaching. | □ |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Should I wish to receive a copy of a summary of the study findings I will provide my contact email in the address box below | |
| **Participant Name** (please print) |  |
| **Signature** |  |
| **Date** |  |
| **Researcher Name** |  |
| **Participant Email Address \* optional** |  |

# **Appendix M: Demographics for staff interviewed (10)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Job Title** | **Age** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** | **Time at SOTC** | **Other employment** | **Highest level of qual** | **Unis attended and subjects studied** |
| Staff 1 | Lecturer (Applied Science Tutor A) | 25-34 | Female | White | 5-10 years | Other FE/6th Form | Masters | 2 x pre-92 outside of 50 miles (Criminology) |
| Staff 2 | Lecturer (Applied Science Tutor B) | 35-44 | Female | White | Less than 5 years | Other FE/Outside | Degree | Middleton (Midwifery, Education) |
| Staff 3 | Lecturer (Business Tutor A) | 45-54 | Male | White | 10 years+ | Outside | Degree | Pre-92 within 50 miles, post-92 within 50 miles (Management Science, Education) |
| Staff 4 | Careers and HE Coordinator | 65+ | Female | White | 10 years+ | Outside (LA Careers) | Degree | RG, Polytechnic within 50 miles,2 x post-92 outside of 50 miles (distance learning)  (English, Careers Guidance) |
| Staff 5 | Advanced Skills Teacher (Business Tutor B) | 45-54 | Female | White | 10 years+ | 6th form/school/outside | Masters | Middleton, post-92 within 50 miles, post-92 outside of 50 miles (Business, Education) |
| Staff 6 | Head of Learner Support Services | 35-44 | Male | White | 10 years+ | None | Degree | Post-92 outside of 50 miles, RG (distance)(Computing, Careers Leadership) |
| Staff 7 | Deputy Principal | 45-54 | Female | White | Less than 5 years | Other FE, other ed, outside | Degree | Post-92 outside of 50 miles |
| Staff 8 | Head of Faculty – Science, Health and Sport | 45-54 | Male | White | 10 years+ | Other FE/voc colleges | Masters | Middleton, post-92 within 50 miles (Sport, Education) |
| Staff 9 | Executive Director Adults, HE and Curriculum Support | 35-44 | Female | White | 10 years+ | Outside | Other PG Diploma | Open University, Middleton, post-92 within 50 miles, post-92 outside 50 miles (Education) |
| Staff 10 | Principal and CEO | 55-64 | Female | Mixed Ethnicity | Less than 5 years | Other FE/voc colleges | Masters | Polytechnic outside of 50 miles, post-92 in London, RG outside of 50 miles (Management, Social science) |

# **Appendix N: Themes and supporting codes/categories**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Theme | Related codes/categories |
| Importance of subject choice | Reasons for subject choice:   * Subject interest * Career/job preparation * Natural progression * Choices are safe/only option (staff)   Reasons for going to university:   * Subject interest * Career/job progression * Higher learning/confidence (staff)   Additional:   * Subject choice most difficult * Universities offer same experiences * Importance of academic support |
| Local universities as safe choices or complex thought-provoking decisions | Local choices as deficient:   * Local choices: safe, easy, familiar, comfortable (staff) * Local choice as default, back-up, last resort   Local choices as complex, thought-provoking decisions:   * Local choices for many complex reasons * Concerns about entry requirements - GCSE (making university possible) * Concerns about costs (making university possible) * Importance of academic/emotional support (making university possible) * Local choices not set in stone (could move if needed)   Over-exposure to local universities?   * Reliance on local universities * BTEC- local university link * Convenience of College/local university relationships * Want more non-local university visits   Additional:   * Universities offer same experiences * Moving away (not paramount for most) |
| Processes of HE choice research | Ways of researching:   * Comprehensive, methodical search * Minimalist, random search * Targeted efficient search   Information sources:   * Used mainly university-affiliated resources (not seen as biased) * League tables (use for subject/scepticism) * Valued ODs but did not attend * Most had HE/Careers personal links * Parental expectations of university * Parental support for university * Most say not influenced in choice of subject/institution by parents * Most say not influenced in choice of subject/institution by peers * Influenced by peers (staff)   Additional:   * Options chosen just to have 5 choices * OD attendance barriers (p/t jobs + time + cost) * High SES: more varied HE/Careers links |
| HE choice support (within the overall College framework) | Other College priorities/drivers:   * Employability * Local regeneration * Recruitment/Achievement * College’s recent turbulent history   HE Choice Support Programme:   * HE choice not main priority * Inconsistency of support * Lack of monitoring * Tutor autonomy * Lack of time * BTEC/FE timetable/calendar restrictions * Central or departmental control confusion * Support mainly with application (as deficit) * Reliance on local universities * Convenience of College/local university relationships |
| HE choice support (on the ground/within the classroom) | Practitioner position re. HE choice support:   * Lack of monitoring * Tutor autonomy * Impartiality   Student view:   * HE choice support good * Support mainly with application (as positive) * Important to make own choices   Advantages of BTEC study/FEC?   * In-depth study of subject * BTEC-local university links * Close tutor-student relationships |
| Widening Participation (WP)/Fair Access (FA) and associated assumptions, understandings and values | Espoused values (College documents)   * Raising aspirations (RA) (aspiration + inspiration)   Underlying assumptions (from interviews)   * Link between RA and FA   Different understandings of RA/FA   * RA as financial barriers * RA as raising awareness   RA/FA strategies   * Strategies to tackle financial barriers (e.g., RG university bursary) * Strategies to raise awareness (e.g., RG university trip) * Strategies to WP in general (e.g. the College HE offer)   Issues:   * Ambiguity (who/what/where to target) * Poor communication (lack of knowledge for frontline staff) * Staff ambivalence re. elite universities * Student ambivalence re. elite universities * Importance of academic/emotional support * Elite universities not seen to be good provider of academic and emotional support * Impartiality * Important to make own choices |

# **Appendix O: Applying the Theory of Practice Architectures (using the Table of Invention as suggested in Kemmis et al., 2014)**

In this example, the Theory of Practice Architectures is applied in relation to the following subsidiary research question: What is the relationship between College organisational culture, College practice and the government’s Widening Participation/Fair Access agenda? This analysis followed the initial analysis detailed in Appendix N, utilising the codes/categories generated, with additional reference to the raw data.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Elements of Practice | Practice architectures found at or brought to the site |
| Project | Practice landscape |
| Deciding what and where to study at university or supporting students in deciding what and where to study at university. | This project takes place in a number of different environments (e.g., home, College, universities) but the main focus is the College environment. The College is an FE college offering primarily vocational courses to 16-19-year-olds and adults living in an economically-deprived urban area. The particular focus of the study is on its BTEC provision and the BTEC Extended Diploma students applying for university. The BTEC Extended Diploma course is a work-related course combining theory and practical content. It is a Level 3 qualification and is equivalent to A levels. |
|  |  |
| Sayings: | Cultural-discursive arrangements: |
| Raising aspirations (aspiration + inspiration) as espoused values in College documentation | National policy: Raising aspirations has been policy staple since Aimhigher (2004 start). Many staff have worked in FE for a number of years and so may have been influenced by this when writing documentation.  Historical/persistent vision of local area as one of low aspiration (staff). Frontline/mid-management staff in particular have worked in the local area for a number of years. Principal and Deputy Principal are new to area but have still picked up discourse of low aspirations in Middleton.  Conflict with College’s commitment to community development? |
| Link between raising aspirations and Widening Participation/Fair Access | National policy: Many staff familiar with raising aspirations from long association with FE. Raising aspirations is still prevalent in Information, Advice and Guidance policy (e.g. DfE 2017; 2018). Management staff recently been working on Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance strategy and so dealing with this language.  Historical/persistent vision of local area as one of low aspiration (staff): Staying in area is seen as one way to frame low aspirations thus moving away is seen as desirable. Idea of low aspiration supported by local area policy: Industrial Strategy/Local Enterprise Partnership. But: local documents want students to raise aspirations and stay in area (contrary to idea of Fair Access given that there are no elite universities locally).  Conflict as staff/local documents emphasise structural issues as well as low aspirations.  Conflict between students moving away for Fair Access and College’s daily battle for survival?  Conflict between idea of aiming for the “best” and student use of satisficing? |
| Lack of aspiration conflated with financial barriers | National policy/media: links made between rise of tuition fees/loans and likelihood of low-SES students to go to university/move away.  Local area one of economic deprivation – prevalent in staff minds as present in day-to-day discourse around College students/people in Middleton. |
| Lack of aspirations conflated with lack of awareness | National policy: UniConnect (local arm – HH+) focused more on awareness?  Local area: geography of local area (e.g., no immediate elite university in area) and perceptions of student knowledge of geography (poor) and likelihood of travel (poor). |
|  |  |
| Doings: | Material-economic arrangements |
| Fair Access strategies which address financial barriers to elite/distant universities (e.g., accommodation bursary for Russell Group universities) | Linked to understanding of lack of aspiration as conflated with financial barriers.  As with general HE Choice Support Programme, issues with time and resources (e.g. money to actually fund this type of support).  Centrally organised initiatives which were poorly communicated to departments. |
| Fair Access strategies which expose students to elite/distant universities (e.g. Russell Group university trip) | Linked to understanding of lack of aspiration as lack of awareness.  As with general HE Choice Support Programme, issues with time and resources (e.g., money to fund coaches/time away from teaching for staff).  Centrally organised initiatives which were poorly communicated to departments and clashed with alternative aims of department – e.g., to assist students with coursework completion (broader clash between progression and achievement).  Could be hard to fit into BTEC/FE timetable (e.g., Russell Group university trip at end of term when BTECs busy with coursework/hard to get students to attend non-mandatory events as these not usual at College and students often have family/work commitments)  Hard to decide who to take – e.g “gifted and talented”? and if so, how to identify and how to organise as students may be on totally different courses/have totally different interests.  Hard to decide where to go – e.g., elite or distant universities? Do elite offer relevant vocational courses? |
| Widening Participation strategies involving development of College HE offer (e.g., Higher National Certificates) | Linked to College’s response to Widening Participation rather than Fair Access and so more localised.  Higher National Certificate strategy potentially benefits College financially.  Different understandings of who is it for – working adults not currently at College or current BTEC students? Widening Participation for College students or wider community?  Higher National Certificate strategy potentially clashes with Fair Access/Raising aspirations strategies aimed at persuading students to attend elite/Russell Group universities. |
| Ambiguity of Widening Participation/Fair Access/Raising aspirations strategies | Linked to different understandings of Fair Access/Raising aspirations/Widening Participation. – what does it mean, who is it for, who should it involve?  Different staff approaches – frontline – more personalised, management more about general benefits to the College and/or region – held in place by amount of contact between students and staff? |
| Lack of (frontline) knowledge of Fair Access/Raising aspiration strategies | Poor communication between management and frontline (time/resources).  Ambiguity/uncertainty of understandings of Raising aspirations/Fair Access leading to lack of confidence/confusion in promoting? |
|  |  |
| Relatings: | Social-political arrangements: |
| Staff ambivalence about elite/distant universities | Personal experiences of elite universities (e.g., members with negative experiences of Oxbridge)  Professional experiences of elite universities (e.g., negative responses to the College Careers Fair from elite universities)  Little contact between staff and elite/distant universities. Strong relationships with local universities  Concern Russell Group promotion could denigrate student local choices. |
| Student scepticism/ambivalence about elite universities | Relationship with/interpretation of rankings systems (top universities associated with pressures/lower ranked with caring/supporting).  Emphasis on subject rather than institution.  Strong relationships with local universities. |
| Good universities about support/lack of support at elite universities? | Relationship with/interpretation of rankings systems (top universities associated with pressures/lower ranked with caring/supporting).  Staff negative experiences of elite universities often cited as lack of support/feel elite don’t have support Widening Participation students need.  Related to what students really value in an institution. |
| Impartiality | Part of Careers Code of Ethics (code of conduct related to professional relationship between careers practitioner and student).  Part of requirements to meet Information, Advice and Guidance quality awards such as MATRIX/IAG Quality Award (codes of conduct related to professional relationship between all deliverers of Information, Advice and Guidance – not just careers staff - and student).  To what extent is it possible to be impartial? |
| Important to make own choices | Linked to impartiality and wider questions in relation to Information, Advice and Guidance – what exactly is this and to what extent, if any, should it involve presenting some choices as “better” than others?  Power of relationship between tutor and student and how/whether/to what extent this power should be exercised. |
|  |  |
| Dispositions (habitus) | Practice traditions |
| Knowledge (Sayings/Cultural-discursive resources brought to site):  Dispositions in relation to understandings of raising aspirations/Fair Access and the role of structure and agency.  Dispositions in relation to understandings of the local area and the role of structure and agency.  Skills (Doings/Material-economic resources brought to site):  Dispositions in relation to reduced time/resources and/or timetable restrictions.  Values (Relatings/Social-political resources brought to site):  Dispositions in relation to elite universities/relationship with elite universities, whether these represent the “best” and what the “best” means to different staff/students.  Dispositions in relation to the role played by staff re. student university choices. | History of practice at local site:  Inclusion of Raising aspirations/impartiality in College documentation and staff comment suggest history of use/adherence/conflict.  Ambiguity re. understandings of Raising aspirations/Fair Access strategies needed suggests historical use has not resulted in shared understanding and so clear, focused strategies/targets  Broader history of this kind of practice:  Raising aspirations links back to AimHigher (start 2004) and persistence of Raising aspirations discourse despite criticisms.  Impartiality link to Careers Code of Ethics/Information, Advice and Guidance quality awards – historical issue so clash persistent?  Ongoing idea of university rankings as controversial and continued lack of interaction between FE College staff/elite universities.  Many conflicting College issues (e.g., funding, local regeneration) long-standing issues so problem is persistent/has not been satisfactorily addressed. |

# **Appendix P: Data supporting Chapter 4.2**

**Tables supporting section 4.2.1 Applications:**

**Number of applications made by each College BTEC student**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **No. in group** | **5 choices** | **4 choices** | **3 choices** | **2 choices** | **1 choice** |
| Applied Science | 13 | 4 | 2 (ACA1U\*: 1) | 2 (ACA1U\*: 1) | 3 (ACA1U\*: 1) | 2 |
| Business | 13 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Construction | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| IT | 14 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 2 (ACA1U\*: 2) | 6 |
| Public Services | 8 | 5 (ACA1U\*: 1) | 0 | 1 | 1 (ACA1U\*: 1) | 1 |
| Sport | 8 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 (ACA1U\*: 1) | 1 |
| Travel and Tourism | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 60 | 32 (53%) | 5 (8%) | 5 (8%) | 7 (12%) | 11 (18%) |

\*ACA1U – All Choices at 1 University

**Number of College BTEC students selecting a university course closely connected to their current BTEC subject**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **BTEC Group** | **Number in Group** | **Number selecting course closely connected to BTEC subject** |
| Applied Science | 13 | 11 |
| Business | 13 | 9 |
| Construction | 1 | 1 |
| IT | 14 | 13 |
| Public Services | 8 | 6 |
| Sport | 8 | 5 |
| Travel and Tourism | 3 | 3 |
| Total | 60 | 48 (80%) |

**Subject choices of College BTEC students who selected a university course that was different to their current BTEC subject**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **BTEC Group student belongs to** | **University Subject Choice** |
| Applied Science | Medicine (Foundation Year)\* |
| Applied Science | English Literature and Creative Writing |
| Business | Film Production (including Foundation Year courses) |
| Business | Law |
| Business | Policing/Law (including Foundation Year courses) |
| Business | Interior Design (including Foundation Year courses) |
| IT | Music Production |
| Public Services | Paramedic/Ecology/CGI and Visual Effects (as well as 2 x Criminology/Policing) |
| Public Services | Midwifery (Health Foundation Year) |
| Sport | Psychology |
| Sport | Paramedic |
| Sport | Occupational Therapy (including Foundation Year courses) |

\*This is considered unusual as the College’s BTEC Applied Science covers Forensics and Criminology and is not a university-recommended route to Medicine

**College BTEC applications by geographical distance**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **BTEC course** | **Applied only to**  **Middleton University** | **At least 1 application to Middleton University** | **At least 1 application to Greene University** | **At least 1 application to Middleton or Greene** | **At least 1 application more than 50 miles+** |
| Applied Science (13) | 5 | 11 | 5 | 12 | 4 |
| Business (13) | 0 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 8 |
| Construction (1) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| IT (14) | 8 | 14 | 2 | 14 | 4 |
| Public Services (8) | 2 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 2 |
| Sport (8) | 2 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 4 |
| Travel and Tourism (3) | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Total (60) | 18 (30%) | 52 (87%) | 21 (35%) | 54 (90%) | 24 (40%) |

**College BTEC applications by status of university**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **BTEC course** | **Applied only to post-1992 (only to local post-92)** | **Applied only to pre-1992s (only to local pre-92)** | **Applied to mix of post and pre-1992s (only pre-92 is local uni)** | **At least 1 application to RG/ST30\*** |
| Applied Science (13) | 8 (5) | 1 (0) | 4 (3) | 2 |
| Business (13) | 2 (0) | 0 (0) | 11 (5) | 5 |
| Construction (1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 |
| IT (14) | 10 (8) | 0 (0) | 4 (0) | 2 |
| Public Services (8) | 4 (2) | 1 (1) | 3 (3) | 0 |
| Sport (8) | 5 (2) | 0 (0) | 3 (1) | 0 |
| Travel and Tourism (3) | 3 (1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 |
| Total (60) | 32 (18)  53% (30%) | 2 (1)  3% (2%) | 26 (12)  43% (20%) | 10  (17%) |

\*Russell Group/Sutton Trust 30 (see Glossary for definition)

**Tables supporting section 4.2.2 Offers and rejections**

**Offers received by College BTEC students (4 students did not allow College access to university responses and students withdrew from 13 choices, leaving 196 application responses that were viewable)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **BTEC course** | **Unconditional Offers** | **Conditional Offers** | **Rejections** |
| Applied Science (41 application responses) | 17 (14 Middleton, 3 other post-92) | 19 (5 Middleton, 9 Greene, 2 other post-92, 3 other pre-92) | 5 (5 pre-92) |
| Business (60 application responses) | 13 (6 Middleton, 7 other post-92) | 43 (8 Middleton, 9 Greene, 22 other post-92, 4 other pre-92) | 4 (4 pre-92) |
| Construction (3 application responses) | 1 (other post-92) | 1 (other post-92) | 1 (1 pre-92) |
| IT (35 application responses) | 11 (9 Middleton, 1 other post-92, 1 other pre-92) | 19 (10 Middleton, 2 Greene, 5 other post-92, 2 other pre-92) | 5 (4 pre-92, 1 post-92) |
| Public Services (29 application responses) | 7 (5 Middleton, 2 other post-92) | 20 (10 Middleton, 4 Greene, 6 other post-92) | 2 (1 Middleton, 1 Greene) |
| Sport (22 application responses) | 6 (1 Middleton, 5 other post-92) | 11 (7 Middleton, 3 other post-92, 1 pre-92) | 5 (1 Middleton, 4 other post-92) |
| Travel and Tourism (6 application responses) | 0 | 4 (4 other post-92) | 2 (1 Middleton, 1 post-92) |
| Total 196 | 55 (35 Middleton, 19 other post-92, 1 pre-92) | 117 (40 Middleton, 24 Greene, 43 other post-92, 10 other pre-92) | 24 (3 Middleton, 1 Greene, 6 other post-92, 14 other pre-92) |

**College BTEC student acceptance of unconditional and conditional offers**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| BTEC course | Accepted UO | Accepted CO | NOT PLACED |
| Applied Science (12) | 7 (5 Middleton, 2 other local post-92) | 5 (1 had UO option) | 0 |
| Business (13) | 2 (1 Middleton, 1 other local post-92) | 7 (5 had UO option) | 4 |
| Construction (1) | 1 (Other local post-92) | 0 | 0 |
| IT (14) | 6 (5 Middleton, 1 other non-local post-92) | 8 (2 had UO option) | 0 |
| Public Services (8) | 2 (2 Middleton) | 5 (1 had UO option) | 1 |
| Sport (6) | 2 (1 Middleton, 1 other local post-92) | 2 | 2 (placed - Clearing) |
| Travel and Tourism (2) | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total 56 | 20 | 28 (9 had UO option) | 8 |

**College BTEC student offers by choice of matching or non-matching subject choice**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject Choice** | **Offers** | **Rejections** |
| Matches BTEC (161 choices) | 149 (93%) | 12 (7%) |
| Not matching (35 choices) | 23 (66%) | 12 (34%) |

**College BTEC student offers by choice of RG/ST30 university or non-RG/ST30 university**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **University Choice** | **Offers** | **Rejections** |
| Choice of RG/ST30 university (11 choices) | 4 (36%) | 7 (64%) |
| Choice of non-RG university (185 choices) | 168 (91%) | 17 (9%) |

**Tables supporting section 4.2.3 Final choices**

**College BTEC student final choices (by geographical distance)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **BTEC course** | **Middleton (local post-92)** | **Greene (local pre-92)** | **Another university less than 50 miles away** | **University more than 50 miles away** | **Not placed withdrew** |
| Applied Science (12\*) | 6 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Business (13) | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Construction (1) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| IT (14) | 12 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Public Services (8) | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Sport (6\*) | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Travel and Tourism (2\*) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Total (56 – 50 placed) | 29 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 6 |

**\***Numbers left after discounting students not allowing College access to university responses

**College BTEC student final choices (by status of university)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **BTEC Course (50)** | **Post-1992 university (local post-1992)** | **Pre-1992 university (local pre-1992)** | **RG/ST30** |
| Applied Science (12) | 8 (6) | 4 (2) | 1 |
| Business (9\*\*) | 6 (3) | 3 (3) | 0 |
| Construction (1) | 1 (0) | (0) | 0 |
| IT (14) | 12 (12) | 2 (1) | 0 |
| Public Services (7\*\*) | 7 (5) | 0 (0) | 0 |
| Sport (6) | 5 (3) | 1 (1) | 0 |
| Travel and Tourism (1\*\*) | 1 (0) | (0) | 0 |
| Total | 40 (29) | 10 (7) | 1 |

\*\*Numbers left after discounting withdrawals/not placed

**NS-SEC occupational codes for highest-earning parent of those with a final place (50\*)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1.1 | 1.2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| 1  (G: 1) | 1  (M: 1) | 8  (M: 4,  G: 1, OP92 within 50 miles: 2, RG outside 50 miles: 1) | 5  (M: 3, OP92 within 50 miles: 2) | 6  (M:4, G: 1, OP92 within 50 miles: 1) | 6  (M: 5, G:1) | 11 (M: 3, G: 2, OP92 within 50 miles: 4, OP92 outside of 50 miles: 2) | 9  (M: 8, pre-92 outside 50 miles: 1) | 0 |

\*3 not codable: Prefer not to say (G1, Medical school run by two pre-92 universities), Self-employed (M1)

Key: G = Greene, M = Middleton, OP92 = other post 92 university

**Parental HE of those with a final place (50):**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Parental HE | No parental HE | Don’t know | Did not answer |
| 10  (Middleton: 5, Greene: 3, other post-92 within 50 miles: 1, RG outside 50 miles: 1) | 20  (Middleton: 11, Greene: 3, Other post-92 within 50 miles: 3, Post-92 outside 50 miles: 1, Pre-92 outside 50 miles: 1, Medical school run by two pre-92 unis: 1) | 12  (Middleton, Greene: 1, Other post-92 within 50 miles: 3) | 8  (Middleton: 5, Other post-92 within 50 miles: 1, Post-92 outside 50 miles: 1) |

1. This is a pseudonym for the College. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Central College” ALI Inspection Report (2002); “Central College” Ofsted Inspection Reports (2009; 2012; 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was necessary in order to comply with the requirements of the University Research Ethics Committee. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Comparisons in relation to socio-economic background are solely related to occupational background rather than income as the UCAS form does not require students to enter information on income. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is still the case as of October, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Middleton” area Local Industrial Strategy, 2020, Local Enterprise Partnership website, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Middleton” area Social Mobility Delivery Plan (DfE, 2017-2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)