Student Voice on Higher Education in Further Education and Implications for Leaders in Dual Sector Institutions in England

by

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale study considers the student voice in relation to higher education and its delivery in further education colleges and the implications for leadership in the sector. It considers differences in perception and choice between widening participation students, using questionnaires, focus groups and interviews to compare two student groups undertaking full-time study of either a bachelors or a foundation degree, one group studying in a university and another group studying in a college setting.

The findings provide understanding of why some non-traditional students choose colleges and others university for their higher education. The mind-set at the stage of decision-making is already different and students are priortising whether the present or the future is most important.

Those students choosing university are future-orientated, risk-managers with a transformational approach to education. They have clear expectations of their HE experience and an understanding of the wider university experience and the delayed benefits. They are likely to be embedded choosers with a secure learner identity.

Those students choosing colleges are orientated in the present, risk-averse with an instrumental approach to education. They are accepting of a different experience, with fewer expectations. They are likely to be pseudo-embedded or contingent choosers with a tentative learner identity.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father **Norman Thompson** and my mother **Margaret Elsie Thompson** who has been my inspiration for my education and my interest in giving students from all backgrounds a fair chance at higher education.

My mother always wanted to be a primary school teacher but as the daughter of a seamstress and merchant seaman it was not easy to pursue this. Her school teacher told her she wouldn't be able to do it because she didn't go to the grammar school.

She left school at 15 and worked in clerical positions. She married my father at 21 and had me at 29. When I started school she took a part-time job in the Newcastle University Library and it was there she developed her love of literature. My father, a coach trimmer and later insurance salesman supported her to go to night-school and do O-Levels and then A-Levels and when her college tutor suggested she go and do a teaching qualification he was 100% behind her.

She went to Newcastle Polytechnic to do a BEd, validated by Newcastle University. Towards the end of her second year my father died suddenly of a heart attack but she still managed to graduate. I will never forget going to her graduation aged 11 and being so proud and knowing one day I also wanted to wear a gown and graduate.

My mother never taught in primary school, instead working in FE colleges teaching English and working with unemployed miners and ship builders to give them the skills to gain employment elsewhere or continue in education.

She is an amazing woman who on top of all this was looking after a very sick child, me, and would sit in my hospital room where she stayed with me at night, marking and preparing lectures ready for the next day. This was not a one off but throughout my childhood and beside preparing her own lectures she also made sure, when I was well enough, to support my school work so I didn't fall too far behind.

Without my Mum as a role model who showed that anything is achievable, even under the most difficult circumstances, and taught me never to give up I would not be writing this thesis today. I hope this makes her as proud of me as I am of her.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is for all those who work in the Higher Education sector and who hope to make a difference. To those in leadership positions in the sector who do what they believe is right and need the evidence to support their decisions. And finally to those who support potential students from every walk of life and aim to give each and every one access to the same choices, equal opportunity and the best possible experience of Higher Education.

I wish to thank all those who have contributed in any way to this study for giving up their time and for their continued support. This includes the academics who helped coordinate interviews and focus groups but especially those students who so willingly and actively engaged in the focus groups and interviews to make this thesis possible.

There are a number of people for whom I am particularly grateful for their assistance in the production of this piece of work

Dr Tom Bisschoff and Professor Ann-Marie Bathmaker, my supervisors, who were a real inspiration and willingly gave both their time and support. Their different perspectives really challenged me to give due consideration to what I was writing, what I actually meant and developed me as a doctoral student and researcher.

Damian Harty, my fabulous husband for his ongoing support and encouragement when things weren't going so well and for making the last year of this journey so much easier than it might have been.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CS	College Student
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DLHE	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education
FD	Foundation Degree
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
KIS	Key Information Sets
NSS	National Student Survey
PG	Postgraduate
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
REF	Research Excellence Framework
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
US	University Student
WP	Widening Participation

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis acknowledges a lack of the student voice in leadership research and how the views of these key stakeholders have not always been considered. It identifies a particular gap in relation to the views of students on the drive to widen participation in Higher Education (HE) and the delivery of HE in Further Education Colleges (FECs).

The aim of this thesis therefore is to consider and analyse differences in perception and behaviour between Widening Participation (WP) students selecting different routes to undertake their HE. The study compares two groups of WP students undertaking full-time study of either a bachelors or a Foundation Degree (FD), one group studying HE in a university and the other group studying HE in FECs.

The students participating in this study were the first cohort of students entering the HE system after the introduction of the new, higher, fee system. The thesis considers the choices students made and if the higher fees influenced those decisions; students' aspirations for the future; their perceptions of HE; their perceptions of the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to which they had access. Finally the thesis aims to use this information to consider the implications for education leaders and policy makers in relation to the provision of HE in FECs and recruitment of students to these programmes using the student voice to inform recommendations.

The work is set in the context of the student voice as a lens for leaders to better understand how different WP students perceive and experience HE, make decisions about their HE and use information to support this. Understanding the student perspective helps those leading the recruitment of WP students across the HE sector

to be more effective and gives a rationale for future policy and practice. This thesis will therefore conclude by making recommendations based on the findings of the study to support leaders in the sector to meet the needs of WP students in HE.

1.2   Background

With the previous UK Labour Government's drive to increase access to higher education and to widen participation with a target of 50% of 18-30 year olds entering HE (DfES, 2003) the subsequent years saw a change in the focus of FECs offering more HE level courses. This included increasing numbers of FDs which were first introduced by the Labour Government in 2000 (QAA, 2010). HEFCE reported 275 FECs in England offering FDs by 2006/7 (HEFCE, 2010). In 2015 there were nearly 1400 full-time FDs across nearly 200 FECs in England listed on the UCAS website, although some only offered one full-time course (UCAS, 2015).

A search of UCAS reveals the range of HE offered at FECs through FDs, although increasing, has more limited subjects than the traditional undergraduate HE offer in universities. This is particularly so in respect of full-time provision (UCAS, 2015) which could restrict the choices for some WP students. This thesis is concerned with honours degrees and FDs, a sub-bachelor level vocational award at level five that can be undertaken full-time or part-time, although FECs do offer other HE level qualifications.

While the FD is a qualification in its own right, there is an expectation that it must be possible on completion for successful students to have the option to progress to level six in order to complete a bachelors degree (QAA, 2010). This is usually by joining a

recommended bachelors degree at the partner university that validates the FD although some FECs are offering level six awards themselves.

The QAA describe a FD as an award which:

> '…integrates academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers. They build upon a long history of design and delivery of vocational qualifications in higher education, and are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers.'   (QAA, 2010, P4)

Following a change of Government in 2010 a White Paper on HE was published in June 2011, *Students at the Heart of the System,* outlining a changing approach and emphasis in relation to WP, where the emphasis moved to fair access (BIS, 2011). This drew heavily on the Browne Review (2010), which was already underway (having been established by the previous Labour Government but published in the October after the new Coalition Government took power), looking at the policy in terms of funding of HE and student financing, including fees.

The result was a new fees system, introduced by the Government, for students commencing HE study from the 2012-13 academic year. Despite the intention for a differential system, starting with a basic fee of £6,000, most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were granted permission by OFFA to increase fees to nearly £9,000 per year, which was the new cap. The fees would be covered by a loan system where repayment was based on annual salary after graduation (Parry et al, 2012). This was in contrast to the previous cap of £3,290 (Browne, 2010).

FECs, who were already charging different and lower fees, were not considered in the review despite the acknowledgement by ministers of the distinctive role of FECs

in offering choice for students, and efficiency to the HE sector (Parry et al, 2012). FECs have continued to charge a range of fees that are often lower than those at HEIs.

This study therefore is set against the introduction of higher fees for HE in 2012 and concerns about the impact of this and other changes the Coalition Government have made in relation to post-compulsory education policy on the WP student (HEFCE, 2013). The students participating in the research described in this thesis were therefore amongst the first to experience the new fee system and have had to consider this in making their decisions about their ongoing education.

1.3   Research Questions

The concept of WP in HE is not new, neither is the approach of offering HE in FECs in England in order to give opportunities to students who may previously not have accessed undergraduate HE. This has been a key strand of education policy in England for more than a decade (Parry et al, 2012).

The delivery of FDs in FECs potentially opened up a different route to achieve a bachelors degree for students who may not have traditionally accessed HE. (Baird et al, 2012). While offering an alternative route into HE, the delivery of HE in the FEC setting through FDs may mean that some students are not considering university as an option available to them so that while more WP students may be entering HE they may be deterred from choosing universities. This is of interest in investigating whether those students who opt to study HE at an FEC are making informed decisions about their HE and future careers; whether students are considering both

options and consciously selecting FECs or if they are considering it as the only option available to them and why some WP students select the traditional route directly into a university, and others elect to undertake their HE in an FEC. The first research question will focus on this.

1. What are the factors that influence a widening participation student to choose to undertake their higher education in a further education college as compared to those undertaking it in a university?

This builds on work already undertaken in the area of choice by authors such as Reay et al, (2005) Ball et al (2001) and Gilchrist et al (2003) but adds the comparative element Parry et al (2012) suggest is missing from previous research.

A second area of interest is if students have had differing experiences of IAG to support their decision-making and ultimate choice at appropriate times during their compulsory education and how this may impact on their decision-making processes which will be the basis of the second research question.

2. Do widening participation students' perceptions of the information, advice and guidance available to them differ between those undertaking higher education in a university and those undertaking it in a further education college?

In relation to this the classification of IAG as 'Hot', 'Warm' and 'Cold' knowledge as discussed by Ball and Vincent (1998), Hutchings (2003) and Slack et al (2012) will be used to support the interpretation of the findings in relation to IAG.

A third area for investigation is to compare the different aspirations these students have for their future, the third research question will concentrate on this in the context of Ball et als' (1999) work on imagined futures.

3. To what extent do widening participation students' aspirations differ between those undertaking their higher education in a university and those undertaking their higher education in a further education college?

Another area of interest is the different perceptions students may have about the HE offered in the different settings and the HE environment. This has drawn on the work of Parry et al (2012) and Kandiko and Mawer (2013) to inform the fourth research question.

4. What are widening participation students' perceptions of the differences between universities and further education colleges as providers of higher education?

In order to direct resources appropriately and assist students in reaching their full potential it is important that educational leaders and policy makers understand the student perspective on the debate regarding HE in FECs and attracting non-traditional students into HE. The fifth and final research question will use the concept of the student voice in leadership research and models of leadership in FE as described by Lumby (2001, 2010, 2012) and Briggs (2010) to consider the leadership perspective.

5. What are the implications of the widening participation students' perspective for managers, leaders and policy makers in the higher and further education sector?

From a personal perspective, having held a senior position within WP University (where the research has been conducted) with responsibility for partnerships with FECs and student recruitment, this research provides empirical data to inform strategy in relation to the development of future partnerships and increasing recruitment of WP students to the most appropriate course, at the most appropriate institution to meet their often complex needs. With ten years' experience in HE and having held positions as Head of School and Associate Dean in two universities, dealing with partnerships and recruitment I feel well placed to undertake this research and use the results to inform leadership approaches in relation to HE in FE.

At the time of commencing the EdD I was working as Associate Dean with responsibility for partnerships and recruitment and had limited contact with students after enrolment. I was very familiar with colleges and the student profile of their FD programmes, which led to my interest in this field of study. Following a restructure during the EdD, I became Head of School, so at the time of actually undertaking the research I had much closer contact with a larger number of students on a day-to-day basis. This inevitably changed my position within the research as I no longer had the distance from students my previous position afforded me and needed to be careful students, particularly from my own School, did not feel obliged to participate in the research as a result of my position.

My previous close contact with colleges made it easy for me to contact tutors directly to support the organising of focus groups while my more distant role from the partnerships meant I was able to ask from a more neutral position.

In summary this study sets out to explore WP students' perspectives of full-time HE delivered in the FE sector, through FDs with progression routes to a bachelors degree; to consider if they understand the implications of the decision they made and to make a comparison with WP students undertaking their HE in a university.

1.4   Research Justification

Research already undertaken in the area of HE in FECs focused on the FE student (Kingston, 2009) or the FEC (Harwood and Harwood, 2004; Griffiths and Lloyd, 2009) or the transition from level five in an FEC to level six in an HEI (Winter and Dismore, 2010; Pike and Harrison, 2011) but does not make any comparison between students undertaking HE in FECs with those undertaking it in universities and specifically those who could also be described as WP. Research into student choice and decision-making has been undertaken by Reay and Ball (1997); Reay et al (2001a, 2001b, 2002 and 2005); Ball et al, (2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) amongst others, however this work has focused on students progressing to HE in a university and has not looked specifically at those students selecting to undertake HE in an FEC. Parry et al (2012) did consider HE in FE students but there was no comparison with those choosing university study and they acknowledge this as a gap in the literature.

Work has already been carried out (Davies et al, 2008) in relation to the effect of fees and bursaries on student choice but this was before the introduction of the new system where fees are higher, the mechanism for paying those fees is more complex and seems anecdotally not to be well understood by some who could be considering entering HE.

The research reported in this thesis will use a number of frameworks based on the literature to explore the differences between the two student groups. It will draw on the Slack et al (2012) model of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' information in relation to their perceptions of IAG and decision-making; Ball et als' (1999, 2000) work on imagined futures in relation to their aspirations for the future; the concept of risk, how students assimilate it and its impact on their choice and decision-making strategy, based on the work of Gilchrist et al (2003), Archer (2006) and Shaw (2012) and finally their perceptions will be considered in terms of an instrumental or transformational view as discussed by Robinson (2012).

As illustrated in Figure 1.1 this thesis will place the values of students as a leadership model as the starting point to inform practice in relation to WP as described by Lumby (2001). It will also consider this in the context of the collaborative partnerships and leadership accountability Briggs (2010) suggests are important to achieve shared educational outcomes across dual sector organisations and finally it will use Rhodes and Brundrett's (2010) 'leadership for learning' concept as a model for using the student voice within leadership research.

Student Voice	Decision-Making	Leadership Implications
University Students	IAG - 'Hot', 'Warm', 'Cold' (Slack et al, 2012)	Instrumental Transformative (Robinson, 2012)
HE in FE Students	Imagined Futures (Ball et al, 1999)	Leadership for Learning (Rhodes and Brundett, 2010)
(Lumby, 2001)	Risk (Gilchrist et al, 2003)	Collaborative Partnerships (Briggs, 2010)
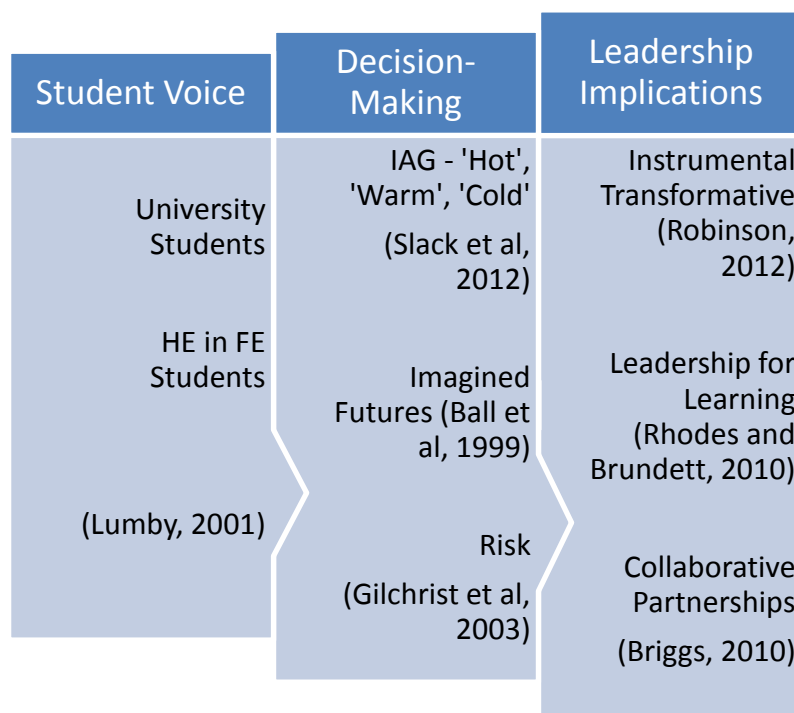
Figure 1.1 Theoretical models informing research

Although limited in scope this research is broader than some already completed in the area of HE in FECs, which have often focused on one cohort of students in one Faculty, for example Winter and Dismore (2010) and Fenge (2011).

The research on which this thesis is based, although set in one institution as the awarding university (WP University), includes input from its partner colleges and is drawing on students from across all faculties and subject areas across the university and its partner FECs. It also has a wider remit in terms of the breadth of the research questions.

The study is a survey using questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with WP students studying full-time on HE courses in a university and its partner colleges who were first years, in the 2012-13 academic year, when the new fee system first

applied. The data has been analysed using SPSS for the quantitative data and NVivo for the qualitative data collected.

The research presented in this thesis will add to the body of knowledge in relation to the delivery of HE in FECs. It should be of interest to those leading on the development of partnerships between HE and FECs to deliver HE in the FE sector as well as those already delivering and supporting HE provision in FE settings and those setting policy.

This work is important from a number of perspectives. Firstly this research will help the development of appropriate and timely information for all students with aspirations to enter HE whatever route they choose. It will facilitate both the FE and HE sector to better understand, and respond if necessary, with respect to the student experience. The key here is to understand the information that students feel would be useful to them and not just to focus on the ever increasing statistics sourced through the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), league tables, the National Student Survey (NSS) and Key Information Sets (KIS).

Secondly from the perspective of WP University and its leaders it is important to understand all of these factors to ensure the ability to plan and work effectively with FE and develop appropriate strategy. It will assist the HE sector to understand the importance of attracting and retaining a variety of students through a number of routes and the role of the FEC in achieving this. For an institution that values and encourages WP the better it understands its students the better all involved are able to support their needs.

This work is essential to those leading and managing partnerships between HE and FE and recruitment activities. These are the leaders who will be developing policy, practice and strategy going forward and the student voice is key to getting this right, as is access to supporting empirical data. Leaders need to employ a key skill of leadership and listen to their potential students. They need to then use their leadership skills to assimilate the research findings and recommendations, respond and influence if they are going to make any changes aimed at WP effective.

1.5   Thesis Structure

The thesis consists of six chapters, including this introduction. The content of each is briefly outlined below to give the reader a roadmap of the chapters ahead.

Chapter two is a critical review of the contemporary literature and relevant policy pertinent to this research. This has been used to support the overall aims, research design and develop the research questions and data collection methods in light of the existing published knowledge pertinent to the study. It has highlighted gaps in the literature that indicated areas for further investigation. Finally it has enabled the identification of key frameworks from other authors to provide models to interpret the results of the research.

Chapter three outlines the design of the research undertaken and justification for those decisions. In doing so consideration has been given to the research questions and the most appropriate strategy, design methodology and methods to answer them. As well as describing how the research has been undertaken it also identifies strengths and weaknesses of the study and therefore potential design issues along

with recommendations for improvement if similar research was to be undertaken in the future.

Chapter four presents the findings from the research undertaken in two sections. The first section presents quantitative data collected through questionnaires while the second section presents qualitative data collected through face-to-face interviews, focus groups and a workshop. It aims to present the findings in relation to the research questions from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective with discussion limited to a description of the results in relation to the research questions.

Chapter five discusses both the quantitative and qualitative findings and analysis from the study in the context of existing literature. It attempts to explain the findings and how they answer the research questions by identifying patterns and differences between the student groups.

The final chapter (six) presents the conclusions along with implications and recommendations. It also identifies the contribution to knowledge and includes suggestions of possible areas for further research.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the current literature associated with the research questions presented in the introduction. The search strategy and process of reviewing the literature will be outlined. Different types of literature from a range of sources, including key texts, will be considered and discussed in relation to the stated research questions. Hart (1998) describes the purpose of the literature review as facilitating the researcher to explore what has already been contributed by other researchers to the area of interest and gaining a thorough understanding of the topic.

Most of the reviewed literature is from England because of the different educational policy between different countries, even within the UK. The majority of the literature considered in this review is post-1997 as this is when HE in FE started to gain prominence as a concept.

A thorough review of the literature was undertaken giving a clear rationale for the study. The systematic approach to the literature review enabled an efficient way to identify the key literature, which was essential in identification of the conceptual frameworks that provide the foundations for the study and inform the research questions. The first step in the search strategy was to identify key words/phrases for the study, these included; *higher education, university, further education colleges, higher education in further education, choice, widening participation, aspirations, perceptions* and *information, advice and guidance*. These key words/phrases were used as the starting point for searches of the internet, online databases and library

catalogues. Once key authors were identified searches were also conducted by author to identify other work by these authors.

Searches have included accessing the educational databases: British Education Index and ERIC as well as using eJournal services such as SwetsWise. The second stage involved identifying key texts to access. The third stage included locating pertinent reports from government bodies and other relevant agencies. The reference sections of all relevant retrieved publications were searched for further studies, enabling identification of other work by the same authors or work that was often cited by different authors for follow-up. This was an important element in identifying relevant literature throughout, leading to the identification of a wide range of literature from policy documents and press articles, to scholarly journal papers and key texts often based on empirical data not initially identified through searches using key words.

The next step was to narrow down the wealth of literature returned via the searches to that judged to be of most relevance to this study. Most studies identified that were outside England were discarded as the different political and social contexts meant it was difficult to draw any useful information from them. Subsequently, following the original search, new literature has been identified throughout on an ongoing basis as the study has progressed to ensure currency.

Considering the leadership context of this thesis, with colleges now at the forefront of expansion of post-compulsory education as a result of policy and changes in the sector it is significant that research into FE as a whole and particularly leadership in the sector is lacking. Just as Lumby (2001) set out to give voice to the managers to

gain a better understanding of leadership within the sector, this thesis sets out to give voice to the students who are part of the expansion and diversification of the sector and key participants in developing the provision of HE in FE and its leadership.

The remainder of this chapter has been divided into sections based on the themes central to the main areas of the review which are: *HE in FE and Rationale for WP; Choice and Decision-Making; Information Advice and Guidance; Students' Aspirations and Students' Perceptions of HE.* Each section tries to present the different perspectives in the current literature to enable a thorough understanding and justification for this study. It sets the context with a critical review of recent policy around HE in FE and WP and how it relates to leadership within the framework of educational leadership.

2.2   Higher Education in Further Education and Widening Participation

2.2.1 HE in FE

The concept of delivering HE in FECs has been an important aspect of policies aimed at increasing, widening and diversifying participation in HE (Bathmaker et al, 2008). It has also been an area of interest because of the links FECs have with the workplace and their vocational nature. There was a belief that this provided a cost-effective way to expand the HE sector but also offered a more flexible and responsive approach. In addition it was felt that FECs were more accessible to those from WP groups that were being targeted by government policy (Parry et al, 2012). This was mainly through local provision, offering positive experiences in familiar

settings which results in greater motivation of these learners to continue with their post-compulsory education (Fenge, 2011).

The whole area of HE in FECs is poorly understood as a result of it being a provision that is small but distributed and quite diverse (Parry et al, 2012). In some quarters it is also not viewed as 'genuine' HE (Leahy, 2012) with some concern in relation to the quality of the learning experience (Fenge, 2011 and Creasy, 2013). Added to this there is limited literature on the subject of HE in FECs in England and what is available, in terms of published research or evaluation studies, is small so little is known about HE in dual sector institutions (Bathmaker et al, 2008) resulting in difficulty in making meaningful generalisations or comparison (Parry et al, 2012). As a result there has been a need to draw on more general literature about participation in HE and historical policy utilising official sources.

To distinguish between HE and FE The National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which aligns with the QAA's framework for Higher Education Qualifications (2008), uses level as the distinguishing feature with HE being levels four and above and FE being up to level three (A-Levels and BTEC nationals). Creasy (2013) argues this is too simplistic a definition not accounting for HE as a community for the advancement of research and scholarship or the quality of the provision. With many students more interested in the qualification and not engaging in scholarship as HE students might previously have done, the delivery of HE in FECs, where the main objective will be the final qualification becomes possible (Creasy, 2013). He also suggests therefore that HE is better viewed as a 'continuum' (p41) with research intensive HEIs at one end and FECs at the other with a range of providers in between. He then suggests that FE could be defined as the mastery of existing knowledge while HE could be

considered the pursuit of new knowledge. According to Lumby (2001) the beauty of the FE sector is as a place of inclusion, where no one is excluded based on age as in schools, or ability as in universities. This diversity and inclusiveness enables the colleges to offer a supportive and welcoming learning environment.

Reform of HE policy in England has significantly increased participation in HE, enabling access by a wider range of the population. The funding of HE in FECs has been instrumental in this, however critics question the legitimacy of this as HE (Leahy, 2012). She suggests there are differences, in regard to the level of independent learning developed, the physical space and environment within FECs, the presence or absence of symbols traditionally associated with HE and how the student engages with, and what their experience of learning is. This is a historical but recognisable picture of traditional HE. This comparison she suggests misses the distinctive nature of the FEC provision instead making a negative comparison with the traditional university as a provider of HE. Leahy (2012) believes it does not have to be so; and proposes a different model could co-exist where FECs deliver HE with the traditional model as its base but develop an alternative experience of HE. She concludes that FECs have a place in providing a good quality, distinctive HE experience to local students. She suggests that the implication that it is not real HE is based on a nervousness that new competition builds and an outdated view of HE in a previous era when students had the time and finances to enjoy the cultural aspects of university life. The reality now is that students are no longer so fortunate and often have to undertake work to support their studies (Crozier et al, 2008).

Concerns remain however around how policy to increase participation through a diverse offer in a stratified system impacts on social inequalities. As much of the

growth has been in the lower status institutions, which work on the basis of recruiting rather than selecting, there are concerns that this results in attracting non-traditional students to HE (democratisation) or directs them away from the elite universities and the resultant opportunities that attending such institutions affords (diversion). The student is then faced with a more complex sector which will impact on their perceptions, how they judge the options available and ultimately the choices they make (Bathmaker et al, 2008).

2.2.2   Widening Participation in HE

The literature, including policy documents and official reports from agencies such as HEFCE refers to WP students, non-traditional students and specific under-represented groups so without clear definitions it is difficult to look comparatively at the literature. The terms, WP and non-traditional, are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Jary (2006) describes WP as the approach taken to encourage an HE system that is more inclusive. He suggests that in terms of both policy and practice the aim is to ensure the opportunity to pursue HE is open to all who may benefit including those who, as a result of social and or cultural barriers, could be discouraged.

From a historical perspective we can begin in 1963 with the Robbins Report, which identified a need to better use the ability of those from lower socio-economic classes. This report, it could be argued, led the way for a more equitable HE sector (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002). There was a commitment made by the last UK Government in the 2003 White Paper 'The Future of HE' (DfES, 2003) to increase the number of 18-

30 year olds entering HE to 50% by 2010 and key to achieving this was partnerships with FE colleges (DfES, 2003; HEFCE, 2009).

There followed an emphasis on strategic planning and collaboration although the strategic planning element some would argue did not occur leading to lack of clarity, frequency of change and barriers to implementation in relation to WP (Greenbank, 2006; 2009 and Scott, 2009). Greenbank (2006), also suggests that despite the activity in relation to WP during this period key groups for inclusion, with a stake in the WP agenda, including individuals from WP backgrounds were not consulted, in other words the student voice was missing. This lack of involvement of potential students he suggests illustrates how in an education system geared to the needs of the economy it is the views of employers and not students that have been influencing leaders and sector change.

The focus on WP increased in 1997 when the Kennedy and Dearing (Kennedy, 1997; NCIHE, 1997) reports were published. It was envisaged participation would widen however this remains debateable as although participation in HE has increased it is not clear that it has widened (Winter and Dismore, 2010; Archer, 2006). Archer (2003) points out that there is a disparity between the increase in participation in HE and the increase in participation of working-class students in HE since the move to mass participation in HE, despite the many schemes aimed specifically to encourage this. While FE continues to be seen as a major player in the delivery of HE, Parry and Thompson (2002) discuss FE as becoming a hybrid offering HE and FE and therefore having characteristics of both.

Collaboration remained prominent with the introduction by the Blair Government of the FD. A sub-bachelor level qualification but with the word degree in its title, which it was envisaged would be largely delivered by FECs in partnership with universities through franchise arrangements (Parry, 2009) offering an alternative route into HE and ensuring FECs gained increasing importance in the role they play in providing HE (Bathmaker et al, 2008). There has previously been a long history of HE in FECs (Scott, 2009) delivering HNCs, HNDs and technical and professional qualifications but this was the first time 'degree' was in the title.

Despite initial reservations and slow uptake of FDs they are now firmly embedded in English HE and should be viewed as a significant development that has introduced a range of successful, new and innovative awards (Ooms et al, 2012).

Following a change of Government in 2010 from 'New Labour', to a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010, there was the publication of the white paper 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS, 2011, p.54-65) which sets out the coalition government approach to HE, dedicating a whole chapter to '*improved social mobility through fairer access*'. This report again emphasised the unique position of FECs to reach students from different educational and social backgrounds through their focus on vocational education, flexibility and accessibility (Parry et al, 2012).

This White Paper drew heavily on the Browne Review, which was set up by the previous Government, looking at policy from the perspective of funding HE and student financing, including fees (Parry et al, 2012). Following publication of the final Browne report higher fees of up to £9,000 were introduced alongside the

commitment to increase social mobility through 'fair access' and the need to attract more students from disadvantaged backgrounds (HM Government, 2010). When published the Browne report (2010) did say that all those with the potential to benefit from HE should have access and that not being able to afford fees and cost of living should not be a deterrent to studying HE.

The result was a new fees system introduced by the Government for students commencing study from 2012-13. Despite the intention for a differential system of fees most HEIs were granted permission by OFFA to increase fees to nearly £9,000, which was the new cap. The fees would now be covered by a loan system where repayment was based on annual salary after graduation (Parry et al, 2012).

FECs who were already charging different and lower fees were not considered in the review despite the acknowledgement by ministers at the time of the distinctive role of FECs in offering choice for students, and efficiency to the HE sector (Parry et al, 2012).

2.2.3 Leadership in FE

At a local level within colleges there has been considerable change, including greater external focus with considerable leadership and management input required to build partnerships in order to secure the future of the college resulting in a dispersal of leadership which required a reconsideration of values but kept students at the centre (Lumby, 2001). Briggs (2010) suggests this new focus on partnerships between institutions requires an approach to leadership she describes as collaborative where there is a need for leadership accountability and responsibility across shared

educational outcomes. As change in the sector continued, Lumby (2001) noted that the student population and the curriculum were increasing in diversity but this was accompanied by a determination to treat all areas of the curriculum equally in terms of how they were valued. This determination to ensure all students were given the best learning experience shows a continuing desire by college leaders to put students first. Lumby (2010) suggests that leaders are all those within the sector, including students, who create and use organisational values to inform their practice and that where diversity and inclusion are considerations values must lie at the heart of leadership.

Rhodes and Brundrett (2010) describe 'leadership for learning' and its position in the college sector and the importance of the student voice within that. They suggest that enabling leaders to impact on learning is not without its problems but has to be a core role in their duty of care to students, for whose learning outcomes they are ultimately responsible. They propose that college principals are increasingly being encouraged to understand their role in the students' learning experience and become accountable for that as leaders. The student voice can be sought at various levels of participation, one of which is as participants in research which is the framing used here to ensure that within the subject of HE in FE leaders not only hear how it is perceived by students but then apply this in leading for the future learning of HE in FE students.

2.2.4 Implications

The final research question outlined in the introduction was: *what are the implications of the widening participation students' perspective for managers, leaders and policy makers in the higher and further education sector?* This short review of the political and historic context of widening participation and the position of HE within FECs has attempted to give sufficient background to orientate this within the research design and study results. The key elements of this have been the impact of changing governments on policy regarding WP, fees and the increasing role that FECs have had in delivering this through their HE provision in recent years (DfES, 2003; BIS, 2011) and the collaborative nature of this provision.

Using the student voice as identified by Lumby (2001, 2012) and Rhodes and Brundett (2010) to inform recommendations in relation to leadership of future provision, positions the values of students in the leadership of collaborative partnerships between universities and colleges.

2.3   Choice and Decision-Making

The literature considering a comparison between those undertaking HE in an FEC and those opting for university is limited, however there is considerable literature which explores student choice and participation in HE more generally. This includes literature exploring the choices made by school pupils and their intentions post-16 (Ball et al, 2000) or choice linked to social class, race and gender considering a traditional HE route (Reay et al, 2001a, 2002, 2005; Archer et al, 2003) or general factors that affect participation in HE from the whole population such as age, gender,

social class, ethnicity (Gilchrist et al, 2003) and disability (Freewood, 2006) and identification of under-represented groups.

2.3.1 Choice

Much of the research undertaken on student choice has been channelled towards discovering who enters HE and how students have chosen which university to attend (Ball et al 2000, Reay et al 2005) as early labour government policy concentrated on increasing access to HE delivered in the traditional university. Gilchrist et al (2003) and Hutchings and Archer (2010), suggest it is also important to understand the characteristics of the non-participant and the reasons they might not be represented in HE.

The studies around choice in general suggest a range of factors that students consider when making decisions about post-compulsory education. Gilchrist et al (2003) looked at characteristics and attitudes across a range of demographic data and concluded that in terms of the working-class student a number of factors may be contributing to their lack of participation.

Reay et al (2005), suggest that students from a WP background are being driven to their local institution because, in the case of the younger students they needed to be able to travel to their institution from the family home in order to be able to afford their studies; or as mature students they needed to remain near to home to carry out their child care commitments. By contrast those WP students in Hutchings and Archer (2010) study who were planning on applying to HE declared an interest in living away

from home and many had already made enquiries or applications corroborating this.
Similarly Reay et al (2009) in their ERSC funded study found that the nine students in
their case study (looking at high achieving working-class students in elite universities)
maintained their connections from home which gave them the comfort of familiarity
but they also became comfortable in a more traditional academic environment more
normally associated with the middle class. These were however quite specific cases
of high achievers who had always intended to enter HE.

The work of Reay et al (2001a, 2002) focused on how those from WP groups
considered their choice of university but did not consider choice of subject or the
choices available to students undertaking their HE in FECs. The 2005 work
undertaken by Reay et al compares the experiences and choices made by
prospective WP students with the more traditional white middle-class students
intending to enter a university, but it does not extend to those undertaking HE in
FECs. They suggest that choice of university is more a decision about life-style and
individual preferences that are influenced by social class. Framing it in the
comparative, as Reay et al (2005) have done clearly identifies the stark reality of the
choice, or perhaps lack of choice WP students face.

Working-class students who do participate have been shown to view gaining a
degree as a way to a better future and as a result they were often pragmatic about
the decisions they made when selecting courses and institutions. Some felt they had
no choice. The degree was not the core of their three years of study but was juggled

around existing work and family commitments, with finance being a concern and resulting in the majority of students taking part-time jobs (Crozier et al, 2008).

Moogan and Baron's (2003) study identified that subject choice was influenced by a variety of factors; favourite subjects, jobs they wished to pursue, risk they perceived around trying a completely new subject, earning potential, sound of a course title or influence of television. Qualifications were identified as a factor indicating likely participation in HE, by Gilchrist et al (2003), along with belief in ability to succeed. They suggest not having A-Levels was perceived as a barrier to HE access. Purcell et al (2008) identified that interest in the course and employment/career ambitions were generally the reasons for prospective students choosing to study a particular subject. While they found younger applicants or those from the higher socio-economic backgrounds opted for subjects they enjoyed or excelled in, mature applicants or those from working-class backgrounds tended to prioritise employability.

2.3.2 Risk

Moogan et al (1999) and Moogan and Baron (2003) touched on risk briefly, as indicated above, and this is a theme that has run throughout the literature in relation to choice in respect of the non-traditional student entering HE. Archer and Hutchings (2001) and Gilchrist et al (2003) identified concerns about the value of a degree which links to concerns around the financial commitment and therefore the risk involved for non-traditional students alongside other competing responsibilities.

The cost of HE continues to rise with the burden moving from the taxpayer to the individual since the introduction of fees in 2006 (Gorard et al, 2007) and the recent introduction of higher fees in 2012 (Parry et al, 2012). As Gorard et al (2007) point out this has been about more than just fees but also cost of living, with changes in the benefit system, removal of grants and means tested fee contributions each having an impact. This has to be a barrier to participation in post-compulsory education for those who are both averse to debt and risk, especially those whose earnings after graduation are likely to be in the lower range of graduate earnings and will possibly be amongst the increasing number of graduates in debt (Gorard et al, 2007).

Students from non-traditional backgrounds also perceived the risk of participation to include other considerations including their ability to manage the academic pressure and workload, achieving the required entry requirements, the application process and personal considerations such as childcare. They also seemed to have less confidence in their ability to be successful in HE and making decisions about their future career (Connor and Dewson, 2001).

Shaw (2012); Archer (2006); Reay et al (2005) and Gilchrist et al (2003) discuss risk as a broader subject where risks are not simply associated with finance, debt and failure. Suggesting risk is also perceived in relation to unfamiliarity of student lifestyles and more emotive subjects such as impact on their social identity, as a result of a degree education, putting up barriers between themselves and the communities they come from. Living with 'people like themselves', Crozier et al (2008) suggest reduces the social and cultural demands even if the demands of the course work remain challenging. A number of authors have identified that feeling

comfortable and a desire to fit in are factors in choice for the WP student. Students it is suggested look for somewhere they perceive as friendly, diverse and informal which feels like a better fit for them (Ball et al, 2000; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Reay et al, 2005 and Shaw, 2012).

2.3.3 Choice and the HE in FE Student

Research in the area of HE in FE and choice, particularly through a leadership lens using the student voice, is limited. Research has however been conducted investigating the impact of undertaking HE in FE (Harwood and Harwood, 2004; Griffiths and Lloyd, 2009; Baird et al, 2012 and Creasy, 2013) but as Leahy (2012) identifies this is often describing a negative comparison between HEIs and FECs and missing the possibility that HE in FE could be offering a distinctly different experience which may have much to recommend it to the WP student.

The small case study undertaken by Shaw (2012) is based around the experiences of the HE in FE student. She refers to the prospective HE students in her study as having a '*tentative learner identity*' (p.115) which she suggests is an additional limiting factor for these students when it comes to making decisions about progressing into and through HE.

Hoelscher et al (2008) looked at transition of students undertaking vocational awards to HE. They describe quality as an important factor in choosing an institution for university students but not those progressing to FECs, although students' indicators for quality were very varied. These included reputation, facilities, quality of teaching

and staff, however official sources such as university ranking were only mentioned in single figures.

They also noted differences between institutions of how students made their choice. For example, for those continuing their HE in an FEC location was more important than for those moving onto university. In their study Bird and Crawley (1994) also found that for the majority of students undertaking HE in FECs, location was a deciding factor making access easier. Hoelscher et al (2008) identified reasons for this to include, as a result of previous study there, students familiarity with the FEC and staff, and a desire to be with friends.

Stanton (2009) suggests that the choices of the HE in FE students looking at employment or continuing to HE in HE are limited as a result of prejudice and preconception. Parry et al (2012) questions the extent to which college HE students are making an informed choice based on their lack of knowledge of differences between FECs and HEIs, even those that are claimed to be the unique offer of an FEC.

Parry et al (2008) made the observation that for students moving from level three to level four within an FEC and then level five in an FEC to level six in a partner university the choice to be made was not about subject or institution rather whether or not to continue with their academic career. Similarly, it has been suggested that working-class youngsters view their choice as one of continuing in education or not rather than choosing which institution (Baker and Brown 2007 and Reay et al 2001b). Although small, the study undertaken by Shaw (2012) would appear to support this

finding. The question she then poses is 'if HE was not available in FE would these students just not progress to HE?'

Parry et als' (2012) study showed that students' in FECs reasons for undertaking HE were in the main instrumental and pragmatic and these factors were predominant in their choice of institution. Those they identified as most important were long-term plans, better life-chances and improved employment opportunities. They expressed a desire for improving their prospects (71%), getting a good job (62%) fulfilling career plans which included HE (62%) wanting an HE qualification to 'get ahead' (54%) a desire to study a certain subject/course (52%). This study however looked at a range of HE level awards, studied both full and part-time and did not look specifically at those opting for full-time FDs.

The main reason for selecting a particular course was the subject and often this was because it was a requirement to enter a particular profession. Purcell et al (2008) also showed a desire to study a particular subject as being a priority for students. The reason for selecting the college was proximity to home and course followed by reputation and having previously studied at the college. The influence of teachers and tutors is low in the Parry study at 13% with none listing it as the most important reason.

Students' reasons for selecting an FEC rather than a university were multi-faceted. These included course availability and perception of a safer more familiar learning environment:

- Course only available at the college (34%)
- Having already studied at college (33%)

- Amount of tutor contact (29%)

- Lower tuition fees (28%)

- Comfort factor (27%)

It is not surprising therefore that concerns have been raised about a stratified system of HE with working-class students and those undertaking vocational qualifications being more likely to attend post-92 universities (Hoelscher et al, 2008). Hutchings and Archer (2010) found that the perception of working-class youngsters was that the choices available to them were second rate, believing the system to be tiered and therefore some were opting out of participating in HE altogether.

2.3.4 Implications

Overall the research in this area identifies the complexity of choice for students from WP backgrounds, because of the many variables which might include tangible considerations relating to their individual circumstances, as well as a range of cultural and social factors (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Ball et al, 2002a, 2002b; Reay et al 2001, 2005; Gilchrist et al, 2003; Archer, 2006). It also points to risk as a key factor for the WP student and how this covers many areas that influence choice of HE. Reay et al (2005) suggest that the whole area of student choice in HE is both '*under-researched and under-theorised*' (p.viii). There is, they suggest, a gap in the literature in relation to studies looking less at who gains a place at university and more at where these students choose to go for their HE experience and what they choose to study. Archer et al (2003) suggest that the differing values and cultures held by the different social goups within our society influence the decisions of potential students

from different social classes in terms of the different routes they may or may not take to HE.

The literature has been used as a basis for developing questions to survey students in relation to choices they made, in order to answer the first research question: *what are the factors that influence a widening participation student to choose to undertake their higher education in a further education college as compared to those undertaking it in a university?*

Consideration of existing literature has identified that research looking at choices made by WP students undertaking their HE in FECs and indeed any comparison with those WP students selecting more traditional university settings is lacking, so it is clear there is a justification for further investigation of this (Reay et al, 2005). Without this knowledge it is difficult for educational leaders in both FE and HE to give clear direction about admissions policy, adding to the justification for further research in this area.

2.4   Information, Advice and Guidance

A lack of IAG about HE has also been identified as a factor in student choice, particularly for those from non-traditional backgrounds, that impacts on their decision-making (Thomas, 2001; Archer et al, 2003; Gilchrist et al, 2003; Reay et al, 2005; Archer, 2006). As this is a large topic in its own right it has been considered separately and the review of the literature indicates a separate research question:

Do widening participation students' perceptions of the information, advice and guidance available to them differ between those undertaking higher education in a university and those undertaking it in a further education college?

2.4.1 IAG the Policy Context

There has been a focus on IAG by policy makers for some time. The Kennedy Report (1997) identifies the provision of better information as a key element in WP. Good quality information, it suggests, helps students make an informed choice. The report identifies that in order to widen participation IAG needs to be accessible to potential students throughout their learning journey. This also needs to be tailored to give learners the best fit in terms of opportunities to ensure they succeed so that time and money are not wasted and motivation is not undermined.

The Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) also raised concerns about the right information being available to potential learners to enable them to make informed decisions based on programme content, structure and outcomes. Students themselves, as many as 50%, from all backgrounds have been found in studies to be dissatisfied with the quality of IAG they had accessed (Connor and Dewson, 2001).

The previous Labour government outlined its strategy for improving the IAG available to young people (HM Government, 2009). This strategy acknowledged the importance of IAG in advising young people about learning and career, its role in social mobility and raising aspirations and the need to listen to young people regarding not only where they get information from, but when and whether it is perceived as informative or inspiring.

The Coalition Government continued to support the view that good quality IAG should be available to prospective students to ensure they choose the correct course and select the best path of HE (BIS, 2011). There is also the hint of the consumerist approach with HE becoming subject to marketization, as policy makers suggest good information will drive informed choices about value for money and put teaching quality at the heart of this (BIS, 2011). This is the driver behind the KIS launched in the 2012 academic year for use by students aiming to enter HE from 2013 onwards (BIS, 2011). KIS requires all institutions to publish specific information about all their undergraduate courses. Whether this is the correct information for students to make the basis of an informed choice is yet to be shown, Brown (2012) suggests that HE is a 'post experience good' suggesting that the difficulty for students is knowing in advance what is needed from their HE experience.

2.4.2 The Student Experience of IAG

The evidence base supporting the belief that better IAG is needed is unclear and there is evidence to suggest that students are not accessing the IAG that is available to them, this makes it difficult to ensure informed decision-making (Hutchings and Archer, 2010). While the focus on IAG gives an impression of empowering students, Slack et al (2012) suggest that information sources are not equal, with students from different backgrounds having access to different information sources which may be problematic. Research undertaken by Renfrew et al (2010) also indicated that applicants are not looking at IAG even when they have identified it as potentially being very useful. Pike and Harrison (2011) suggest that the lack of IAG is also an

issue for HE in FE students who then want to progress to a university to undertake level six study and gain a degree level rather than sub-degree level HE award.

As others previously have pointed out therefore it is not as straight forward as good qualty information leading to good decision-making (Reay et al, 2001a and Slack et al, 2012). When discussing IAG it is important to remember that different students have different types of IAG available to them and also actively choose different sources for their information gathering (Gorard et al, 2007).

Looking at wider social networks, mature students and those students undertaking vocational qualifications it is suggested are more likely to be influenced by friends and family (UCAS, 2002). Reay et al (2005) also found that unlike the more traditional students in their research the WP students were more likely to rely on the advice of friends of friends than undertake extensive research to find the best choice for them. As first generation HE attenders they were not only unable to draw on experiences of parents and close family networks but were often unclear as to what they should be researching. They described these students as suffering from '*time poverty*' (p146) not having the time to undertake the research either online or by visiting open days as a result of family and work commitments.

Hutchings and Archer (2010) found that even the students in their study embarking on level three qualifications with a view to entering HE were not interested in IAG at this stage perceiving they had a couple of years before it was relevant. Similarly, despite acknowledging their awareness of the availability of a wide range of sources of IAG the FD participants in Shaw's (2012) study indicated that this might be something they reviewed in the future, but not now. This brings into question the

continued emphasis on IAG to widen participation and ensure students make informed choices.

In her study, Shaw (2012) used a sample progressing directly from level three programmes in the same FEC that they then undertook a FD in. All of these students had been identified as high achievers but had selected the HE in FE route. Shaw found that all students had identified their tutors at the college as both their primary source of IAG and the reason they had elected to undertake HE, describing the reluctance of the students in her study to use formal sources of IAG, demonstrating a preference for the informal. There is however no indication in Shaw's work as to what type of IAG had been offered and if direct entry to HE had been presented as a realistic option to any of these students.

Similarly Reay et al (2009) found that the students in their study despite being high achievers had not considered making an application to an 'elite' university until it was proposed by a college tutor or school teacher. Hutchings and Archer (2010) were struck by the lack of appreciation of students from working-class backgrounds of the importance of IAG about HE throughout their level three study. These students were too focused on the current challenge of the course they had just commenced to be concerned about something they perceived as a future consideration.

Students from different backgrounds have been found not only to use different sources of IAG but also to rate its usefulness differently. Connor et al (1999) found that in terms of importance to the decision-making process prospective students found prospectuses and open days most influential in their choice. With respect to open days other research suggests that students do not always access open days as

their initial information source as intended by HE providers instead using them to confirm decisions after application, having received an invitation from the university to attend (Ball et al, 2001).

Slack et al (2012) found that although students felt it would be helpful to know how satisfied current HE students were with things such as standard of teaching, the course and support and guidance, and despite the greater emphasis on information sources such as the NSS, KIS and league tables, students were still not accessing the sources that could give them this information. Unlike previous studies, despite the prospectus being the most commonly accessed, they found students perceived formal visits to HEIs as the most useful followed by university prospectuses which have more traditionally been identified as most useful. Regarding usefulness, of those that did access the NSS result via Unistats only 40% were reporting it to have been very useful.

This study found that prospective students perceived one-to-one contact with students, family and friends as a way to get unbiased information and they were particularly keen on information during university visits from student ambassadors. Ball et al (2000) also noted students in their study were aware of possible bias from institutions in relation to their post-16 choices.

The need for unbiased information about HE identified by Slack et al (2012) is in keeping with the findings of Austin and Hatt (2005) who identified student ambassadors as a credible and unbiased information source. In contrast there was also a perception amongst some participants in this study that presentation of

student views on university websites and in prospectuses could be biased which is why actually speaking to the students was better.

Participants in the study were aware of the complexities of interpreting data from sources such as the NSS. Rather than viewing it as a representative average of students views they raised concerns about its subjectivity, with an awareness that a dislike of a particular tutor could affect results and did not mean everyone would agree.

The study also identified that where students had placed importance on university ranking in their decision-making they were less likely to consider student opinion. This was consistent with the view that ranking was a greater issue for those from a more traditional background seeking a place at one of the elite universities.

For students from less traditional backgrounds who were first generation HE attenders they tended to perceive students' opinions highly and link this with how comfortable they themselves might feel at the institution and had acknowledged the importance of attending open days. Vocational learners at FE colleges also perceived information about employability to be important in the decision-making process. These learners perceived the ability to achieve their degree aspiration as influenced by their enjoyment of the university experience.

Parents as a source of IAG for students from a WP background where they are first generation HE attenders is a difficult area, partly as a result of their lack of appropriate social capital. Social capital is a relative concept that, as described by Thomas (2001), can have a number of meanings.   Within this thesis it is understood as described by Reay et al (2005) as a concept where there is a value in who you

know as a result of your social networks and the information that is shared and the opportunities that arise as a result. While children would naturally want to discuss such an important decision, as entering HE, with their parents, students often recognise they lack social capital and have no personal experience to share unlike parents of traditional HE students. The result is often a discussion for the sake of inclusion but without the expectation of useable advice (Reay et al, 2005). There also seems to be a difference between the attitudes of mothers who were generally encouraging and fathers who were more reticent. (Brooks, 2004; Reay et al, 2005). So although parents are often cited in the research as the most commonly accessed IAG source they are not necessarily the most useful (Thomas, 2001; Brooks, 2002; Reay et al, 2005).

2.4.3 Validating the Information and Identifying the Gaps

It is difficult for students who are first generation HE attenders to obtain full information and to validate its accuracy so they often lack the same level of guidance as students from families who traditionally attend university (Davies et al, 2008). Unfortunately this means students can make mistakes in their pursuit of HE as a result of poor IAG or because they do not question the validity of the information they are given and its relevance to their decisions (Gorard and Rees, 2002; Moogan, 2011 and Slack et al, 2012).

Moogan (2011), suggests mistakes are a result of information that is limited, inaccurate or irrelevant and often contradictory. In addition she suggests the absence

of information relating to the wider benefits of the university experience further disadvantages the decision-making process.

One of the biggest gaps in information, identified by those from non-traditional backgrounds, was financial information and the benefits HE study offered in relation to employment opportunities, income and the wider experience of HE study (Connor and Dewson, 2001). They suggest that as a result institutions were chosen mainly for reasons of cost particularly in relation to cost of living and ability to live at home.

Amongst those who had not considered attending university, there has been reported considerable confusion about the costs of HE. This has included what fees and cost of living expenses include, so that outgoings such as books were not widely considered. Some were unaware even that fees needed to be paid and many seriously underestimated the cost. Although unclear of what the costs were these potential students still had an aversion to entering HE because they perceived it would result in debt (Hutchings and Archer, 2010). Most participants in their study, looking at non-participants in HE, felt that in order to make ends meet they would need to work throughout their time in HE and they would still struggle and finish with debts.

WP school children aged 11-16 in Moogan's (2011) case study identified the school careers service as lacking but also viewed it as a potential source of good information had they had access to it. They also suggested teachers with their first-hand experience could tell them more about their own experiences. Careers guidance is a broad topic and not just within the realm of the careers guidance

advisor. There has been much change in the delivery of careers guidance but students still perceive it to be poor.

One of the challenges is everyone's experience is different based on their background and as such careers guidance needs to be individualised and assumptions can not be made. Added to this is the scenario that even after pupils appear to have made a decision about the career path they would like to follow this is rarely set in stone and so one session of guidance and rigid planning is not an effective approach (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002). They go on to suggest that without a family history of HE students from a WP background need a philosophy of post-compulsory education embedding throughout their compulsory schooling.

The students in Moogan's study (2011) were critical of school events aimed at WP suggesting these were geared to the high achievers and the rest were dragged around open days. The author's own experience of hosting events in university for schools and colleges has been one of school pupils who already intended to attend university and were often clear about their subject choice being invited by their school to attend. The result was disengagement from any of the activities presented to them that were not related to the subject area they had already identified. One potential student at such an event said she did not know why she was there as she wanted to do dentistry, which was not on offer at WP University. Another pupil commented that the teachers treated it as a 'jolly' so why shouldn't they. The teachers had, as in previous years, all disappeared off to one of the coffee shops on campus as soon as their charges were in the lecture theatre, missing an opportunity to engage and encourage their pupils as well as to learn more about what the university had to offer to share with future pupils.

Hayton and Paczuska (2002) are very positive about such events but are clear that they should be to the benefit of students, facilitating their entry to HE and built on a strong relationship between schools, colleges and the university sector targeting those who may not otherwise have considered university.

2.4.4 'Hot', 'Warm' or 'Cold' IAG

The different sources of IAG have been categorised as 'Hot' or 'Cold' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and building on this students have been described as 'Contingent' or 'Embedded' in the way they choose their HE (Ball et al, 2002b). 'Embedded' choosers they suggest have the luxury of a wide range of their family and friends network having first-hand experience of university to share. They are therefore able to base their choice on 'hot' knowledge from these sources along with 'cold' knowledge, which Hutchings (2003) argues, that as a result of their middle-class identity, they are more able to effectively assimilate. 'Contingent' choosers, conversely, they suggest rely on a small number of exposures to 'hot' knowledge but are more reliant on 'cold' knowledge from prospectuses, websites and other literature because they have fewer direct links to those with first-hand HE experience. Smith (2011) also suggests those from lower socio-economic groups are less able to assimilate the 'cold' information and require assistance from those with HE experience to make sense of it.

Slack et al (2012), build on the work of (Ball and Vincent, 1998) around 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge in relation to parents selecting secondary schools and also Hutchings, (2003) to examine the way prospective HE students from different

backgrounds use IAG. 'Hot' knowledge was initially described as the use of social networks to give first or second hand recommendations based on direct experience. Slack et al (2012), expanded this to be knowledge gained from the grapevine but perhaps where the links to that person were more tenuous than the clear family and social groups Ball and Vincent (1998) and Hutchings (2003) referred to, and they labelled this 'warm' knowledge. 'Cold' knowledge was that gleaned by researching the literature from prospectuses to web sites. Both Ball and Vincent and Hutchings identified that students perceived the 'hot' knowledge to be more trustworthy. The value of 'cold' knowledge to supplement 'hot' knowledge and therefore assist young people in informed decision-making has been recognised, the challenge is to help students understand this and critically evaluate that information (Smith, 2011; Slack et al, 2012).

2.4.5 Implications

The literature suggests that although IAG has a high profile in WP policy the evidence base to support this is limited. If, as the literature suggests, WP students are at the best ambivalent to IAG, a considerable amount of time and money has been wasted in recent years. What the research appears to be suggesting is a need to support WP students to understand the available choices and their implications.

The literature also indicates students need to be given the skills to assimilate the IAG already available to them. Perhaps then IAG could have a more meaningful impact on students making the most appropriate choice. Understanding how IAG is perceived by students, what they want from it, when they want it and supporting them

to decode it will, as other authors (Smith, 2011; Slack et al 2012; Moogan, 2011) have identified, help students make the right decisions at the right time.

Classification of the different types of IAG as 'hot', 'warm' or 'cold' is a useful starting point as a framework to help explain the findings of the study in relation to IAG and to better understand its use by prospective students. Understanding how it is used now is important for those in leadership positions to determine what is needed for the future.

2.5   Aspirations

Much of the literature on aspiration both in England and globally (Knowles, 1997; Strand and Winston, 2008; Kenway and Hickey-Moody, 2011 and Archer et al, 2014) is based in schools and a consideration of young pupils' aspirations for their future education and future careers. This thesis is interested in both career and educational aspirations although the subject of aspiration is considerably broader.

There was only a limited amount of literature identified, such as that of Baird et al (2012) that considered the views of those in post-compulsory education. Their research, looking at survey responses from students in post-compulsory education (excluding HE) using open questions to investigate aspirations, found that careers or future jobs were the most commonly cited aspirations, followed by aspirations to continue in education. Together these accounted for over 50% of responses, with a further 14% of responses related to personal growth. They then considered how these aspirations differed by educational setting. Those attending FECs were more likely to respond with career ambitions, while those attending sixth form in school or

college were more likely to respond with educational ambitions. Although those attending sixth forms were quoting career ambitions nearly as frequently as FEC responders the FEC responders were much less likely than the sixth-form responders to include aspirations related to education.

Aspiration raising has been a focus of discussions and WP policy in education since New Labour expressed their commitment to supporting students to aim higher and invested in a range of programmes to encourage young people from all socio-economic groups to fulfil their potential (HM Government, 2009). This has also been a strand of Coalition Government policy with Michael Gove declaring a need to create an 'aspiration nation' (DfE, 2010) and a commitment in the White Paper to social mobility and raising the aspirations of young people so that no one is prevented from achieving their potential (BIS, 2011). HEFCE has been concerned with promoting skills development and the contribution this can make to society and the economy and the encouragement of universities to consider aspiration-raising approaches (HEFCE, 2001, 2009, and 2011).

This rhetoric continues both inside government and is also perpetuated by others outside government despite the increasing volume of educational research that suggests young people who fall in the WP category frequently have high aspirations (Archer et al, 2014). The playing field however is not even in terms of achieving these aspirations and there should instead be policy and guidance, with investment, to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are supported in achieving their aspirations (Slack, 2003; Archer et al, 2014). It is also important to understand the evidence base and effectiveness of this guidance including the views of those that aspiration raising is aimed at, focusing on what they want (Slack, 2003).

As a number of authors on the subject of aspiration and career decision-making suggest that these early aspirations are not cast in stone but subject to the influence of life experiences (Hodkinson, 1998 and Kenway and Hickey-Moody, 2011) it would seem that in order to help understand differences in aspiration there is a need to research this in post-compulsory education and particularly HE.

2.5.1 Educational Aspiratiions

Much has been written about educational aspirations, generally described either in terms of intent to continue with education past compulsory education or on in to HE. Some authors suggest that post-16 education is stratified not only by participation but also the route taken by students from different socio-economic backgrounds (Hoelscher et al, 2008; Hutchings and Archer, 2010). The result it has been proposed is that those who did not enjoy school prefer to continue their education in FE where the culture gives them more freedom but as a result they become segregated further reinforcing class, race and gender differences in education. The suggestion is that many of the courses are designed specifically to engage less able students therefore separating them from peers on less vocational courses who are the higher achievers with higher aspirations (Gorard et al, 2007).

Baird et al (2012) found that out of the 30% who did not list any educational aspiration a larger proportion were from FECs. They go on to suggest that while FEC responders were career orientated with aspirations linked to long-term employability, sixth-form students were more academically orientated, prioritising success in academia. Despite posing a number of possible reasons for this they were unable to

make a link with causality. Previous work by Reay et al (2001a) suggests these differences could be linked to the different social environments and culture experienced between vocational and academic learners.

The research suggests that there are differences in perceptions of going to university, which will ultimately impact on the likelihood of achieving aspirations between students from different backgrounds (Reay et al, 2005). While aspirations remain an important element of WP, the literature would suggest that rather than concentrating on how to raise aspirations, the focus should be on helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to fulfil their aspirations (Archer et al, 2014).

Research suggests that in year seven aspirations are similar with 75% of pupils in the study declaring a wish to continue to university (Atherton et al, 2009) and pupils from WP backgrounds being as likely as their peers at this point to aspire to HE and professional careers. A number of studies identify that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not necessarily have aspirations that differ from their fellow pupils (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). Although Metcalf (1997), looking at young people later in their compulsory schooling, suggests that even those from lower socio-economic groupings who have the relevant educational qualifications are less likely to decide to pursue HE than those from middle-class backgrounds.

Although there has been no previous work comparing students who choose the FE route and those who enter directly into an HEI Gorard et al (2007) do suggest that at the stage of entry to HE there is no difference in representation based on social class where students possess level three qualifications. They propose that, while as a

whole, there may be under-representation between the social groups in terms of those who gain level three qualifications the groups are fairly represented and therefore aspiration raising needs to be undertaken at an earlier stage in compulsory education.

One of the strong influencing factors besides socio-economic background is parental experience of HE or contact with someone from HE (Thomas, 2001). Indeed Knowles (2000) suggests that while coming from a lower socio-economic background reduces the chances of students opting to continue with HE, previous contact with HE through parents or other sources makes it more likely they will participate. Archer and Yamashita (2003), in their small study of year 11 lower ability pupils found that over 50% of them were still expressing a desire to progress to post-compulsory education despite their teachers having identified them as unlikely to do so. In a later study Archer et al (2014) found that young people were more realistic about their chances of achieving their aspirations than previous studies and unlike previous studies the main obstacles they perceived stemmed from their own ability to achieve rather than external constraints associated with those from WP backgrounds.

Others discuss the reluctance of students from working-class backgrounds to acknowledge the delayed benefits of HE demonstrating an inclination to live in the present which can lead to an inability to conceive what the future could hold, describing a lack of 'future orientation' and a tendency to live for today which may give an impression of 'poverty of aspiration' rather than being the reality (Robertson and Hillman, 1997). This is in contrast to the strong work ethic of the middle classes and appreciation of the benefits of making sacrifices for the longer-term benefits it affords (Greenbank, 2009).

One of the effects of increased participation in HE seems to be an increase in graduate participation in postgraduate study, particularly at masters Level (Gillon and Hoad, 2001 and HEFCE, 2005). The reasons are unclear but perhaps this should be expected as there are now more people in a position to entertain the idea of postgraduate study as a result of an increase in the graduate population. Research from HEFCE (2005) suggests that there is no difference in participation between graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds, however research by Smith et al (2000) suggests there to be less participation in postgraduate education from those from non-traditional backgrounds.

2.5.2 Career Aspirations

Aspiration has been shown to be an indicator of future career for young people, research in England showed that around half of those who do have clear aspirations (four-fifths of whom were able to express an occupation they aspired to) as 15 year olds do tend to achieve broadly similar aspirations 10-15 years later (Croll, 2008). This research further goes on to note that of those stating careers which required a university education or skilled non-manual careers, the majority were planning to stay in education at the end of their compulsory schooling, although not all ultimately did.

A report from Universities UK (2007, in Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009) identifies that while 56% of children whose parents have a professional career aspire to the same, only 13% of those with parents in semi-skilled occupations have such aspirations.

Having examined the aspirations of young teenagers 12-13 and explored how they came to such ambitions Archer et al (2014) illustrate that the young people in their sample were from an 'ambitious generation' (p76) however despite their high aspirations their confidence in achieving these ambitions appeared less self-assured. Most popular career aspirations for year six to eight in their study were in the arts, sports, medicine and teaching. These aspirations were generally influenced by, family members or family friends already in that occupation, hobbies and out of school activities, school and television.

Archer et al (2014) also found that there were associations between source of influence and aspirations so that those aspiring to careers in sport and the arts were in the main linked to hobbies and other activities children were undertaking outside of school. Middle-class children were more likely to discuss family influence when interested in professional careers such as teaching and medicine. By contrast working-class children were unlikely to discuss influence of family or hobbies but would focus on TV (especially in relation to aspirations to teach), the influence of other adults they may have contact with and also money.

They suggest that there is an uneven distribution of aspiration resulting from the different influences children from different backgrounds experience, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds having less opportunity to have positive influences. This is important for careers education, which can be targeted at these children to attempt to even out the balance of influence to support career aspirations. This would appear not to be happening at present as their study also found that those sampled between the ages of 10 and 13 rarely mentioned careers advice as a factor.

Baird et al (2012) noted a difference in the type of career aspirations cited, with FEC responders more likely to cite the skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs as their aspiration than responders from sixth-form settings. While both groups cited professional careers more often than other employment , those from sixth-form settings cited this aspiration more often than those from FECs. They also found students, despite having high career aspirations, were often vague about their career aspirations. Instead of citing a specific career or employment setting they discussed 'getting a good job' or 'doing well in a career'. They link this to the work of Macrae et al (1997), suggesting these students appreciate the importance of education but are unable to articulate its role in their future employment. Shaw (2012) also found the students in her study, although able to articulate future career ambitions then, had no clear ambitions at the time of enrolling on the programme.

While Connor and Dewson (2001) were encouraged that participants in their study perceived an HE qualification would present better job and career opportunities as well as a better income and employment security; they also noted that upon considering entry to HE only a few had aspired to a specific job or career pathway. In contrast to other studies, the students in the ESRC study conducted by Reay et al (2009) all had aspirations for professional careers and an understanding that this required academic achievement from early in their compulsory education. Although they appear no different to that of students in other studies, they are described as ideal learners having *'developed almost superhuman levels of motivation, resilience and determination'* (p1115).

2.5.3 Implications

While high aspirations would seem a positive thing some researchers raise concerns that, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are unable to fulfil their aspirations as a result of poor academic results there could be negative outcomes (Croll, 2008; Yates et al, 2011). Goodlad and Thompson (2007) go as far as to suggest that the marketing to WP students of some of the opportunities, rather than offering a freedom of choice in fact restricts those choices leading to improbable rather than the imagined futures described by Ball et al (2000).

This disparity is reported in the literature in terms of a more pragmatic approach linked to ability and a realisation, as young people mature, of the barriers that they may face and the need to compromise their earlier aspirations (Gottfredson, 2002; Strand and Winston, 2008). Boxer et al (2011) suggest that the discrepancy between aspiration and expectation needs addressing and that it is important to focus on supporting students in raising expectations to meet aspiration rather than suggesting a lowering of aspiration.

Ball et al (1999, 2000) discuss 'imagined futures' and what is illuminating about the narratives they include is the difference between the working-class and middle-class students in terms of their imagined futures. Not suprisingly the middle-class students with their social networks and lifestyle opportunities have no difficulty in having positive aspirations about their future. The working-class narratives however tell a different story of struggle with day-to-day issues, of finance and family responsibilities not giving them the space to imagine a future beyond taking care of these needs first. As a result they describe three groups, the first have a clear journey mapped out towards their imagined future by their own interests and family expectation. The

second have a focus on the future but with some uncerainty and lack the family experience to guide them. The final group do not have an imagined future beyond the short-term or even the present and lack a learner identity.

While there is extensive literature in the area of aspirations and expectations looking at the different social and cultural capital young people have there is an absence of literature examining any differences there may be between students from WP backgrounds who undertake their HE in FECs and HEIs. Identifying if there are any differences may be helpful in ensuring all WP students have the opportunity to fulfil their true potential. This supports the needs to further investigate aspirations from the student perspective and this has been identified in the research question: t*o what extent do widening participation students' aspirations differ between those undertaking their higher education in a university and those undertaking their higher education in a further education college?*

Aspiration will be explored using the concept of imagined futures, using students' own descriptions of their career and educational aspirations and aligning these with the groupings described by Ball et al (1999, 2000).

2.6   Students' Perceptions of Higher Education

As a result of the limited nature of directly applicable publications uncovered in the literature search about the perceptions of HE in FE students on HE this review is focused on a limited number of papers that offer insight into perceptions of students of HE more generally.

To put this section in context it should be recognised that social class will impact on perceptions. It is recognised that the impact of social class, although present in comparable industrialised Western societies, is none the less stronger in British society (Jovchelovitch 2007 in Shaw 2013). Shaw (2013) is clear that:

> '…socio-economic status and family background are, therefore, important factors in any research that is examining attitudes and perceptions affecting entry to higher education'. (p199)

2.6.1 Perceptions of HE

Although there are no studies looking at the different perceptions of HE in HE and HE in FE it is worth noting that when exploring the perceptions of those not currently undertaking HE about university there is documented confusion about levels of qualifications and the post-compulsory education sectors (Roberts and Allen, 1997; Hutchings and Archer, 2010).

Although much has been written about staff perceptions of the HE sector there is less literature exploring students' and potential students' perceptions of any aspect of the HE experience, let alone HE in FE. As a result the views of those who have experienced HE, or are prospective students of the future, have not been solicited. The student voice therefore is not being reflected in change in the sector and policy initiatives proclaiming to make HE more accessible (Gorard et al, 2007).

There are a small number of studies exploring the perceptions of students' or potential students' from different groups in relation to the HE sector in general (McKendrick et al, 2007; Moogan, 2011 and Shaw, 2013). There are only a few detailed studies looking at the unique features of HE in FECs so it is difficult to make

comparisons between HE courses taught in FECs and those in universities (Parry et al, 2012). Some of these studies include part-time students, which may well impact on results as their experiences will be different again especially as many part-time students are over 23 and working.

The literature considering students' perceptions of the differences between HE delivered in an HEI and FEC setting is virtually non-existent although a study by Parry et al (2012) is a notable exception. By these authors' own admission however it is still small in scale. Parry et al (2012) consider the views of students undertaking HE in the FE sector and do attempt to draw comparison with full-time students using data from the *Futuretrack project* by Purcell et al (2008, 2009) suggesting that for full-time provision there are apparent differences. They do however acknowledge the limitations of this comparison as a result of the different methodological approaches.

To gain some background, Moogan's (2011) research, based in schools with 11-16 year olds from a WP background, is a good place to start. She found that there was an overwhelming perception of university being associated with debt and not being for people 'like us'. For those that thought about themselves as potentially attending university they generally expressed a preference to stay near home, family and friends because they perceived a comfort factor of knowing the place and having people they knew and cared about nearby. They also felt that it would be cheaper. Both of these are risk factors identified by Gilchrist et al (2003) and Archer (2006) as barriers to HE entry.

Rather than staying at home being a deliberate strategy employed to avoid the social aspect of university and the risk of being uncomfortable in unfamiliar social situations

Crozier et al (2008) suggest that it is time that is the concern of students and with the workload and part-time jobs they simply can not participate.

Similarly, Metcalf (1997) found that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds held the view that university was for the middle classes which was accompanied by a perception of alienation for those not familiar with that culture. There is also documented a perception of disadvantage based on qualifications that are vocational in nature along with resentment that students were directed to undertake vocational qualifications when more academic qualifications would have better prepared them for university (Hutchings and Archer, 2010).

As might be expected in a study specifically about perceptions of HE in young applicants it was found that the knowledge base of the HE sector from those from lower socio-economic groups was considerably lower than the knowledge base of those from higher socio-economic groups (Roberts and Allen, 1997). This is particularly true in relation to cost, despite the cost of a university education being documented as one of the major barriers to participation (Gorard et al, 2007; Hutchings and Archer, 2010).

The perception of the students in Moogan's (2011) study, that a course consolidated into two or three days, so they could undertake part-time work to support their studies was preferable, showed a lack of understanding of the actual hours involved in HE study including those of independent learning and that an HE qualification is not simply based on attendance. There was also a perception of universities as businesses and not centres of learning and a lack of comprehension about the cost of university living not just fees (Hutchings and Archer, 2010).

Another misconception was associated with the risk of failure and the perception that failing a module would result in immediate removal from the course with no opportunities for resits or re-submissions. A number of authors have identified confusion amongst potential students from non-traditional backgrounds about qualification levels and the difference between HE and FE, the options available through colleges and university and the final qualifications (Knowles, 1997; Hutchings and Archer, 2010 and Moogan, 2011).

Knowles (1997) found that exposure to HE through the Access to HE project he was involved in significantly changed school pupils perceptions of HE. These went from being something for 'posh' and 'clever' people and something that would be boring and like school to an understanding of it not being like school, a perception that it was not just for clever people and a perception of independence. This construct of HE as boring and for posh or clever people is not uncommon amongst those from lower socio-economic backgrouds and is identified by a number of authors. Even those who intend to enter university are doing so not for the love of the subject but as a means to an end (Hutchings and Archer, 2010; Moogan, 2011). Invariably WP students did not aspire to a transformational experience but were taking the rather instrumental view, described as being a tenet of the WP students characteristic, that participating in HE would lead to better career prospects (Robinson, 2012).

One study that briefly addresses the differences between HE across four institutions is the ESRC study by Crozier et al (2008) who acknowledge the different student experience across the four different institution types included in their study. Differences included living on campus or at home, being forbidden to work by the institution to some students working practically full-time to make ends meet, the need

to build up a CV and participate in relevant activities to facilitate this and the different perceptions of university life beyond the academic and the social and cultural capital traditionally associated with university attendance. Specifically for those attending the FEC they comment:

> "….an economically disadvantaged area, lacking the cultural attributes of 'old' university towns. There are no bookshops or theatres and students tend not to go to the partner university for their learning resources; nor do they identify as university students." (p.172)

In her case study looking at the expectations and perceptions of HE in female students the starting point for Shaw (2013) is their perception of the purpose of HE and those from a WP background were more likely to have associated HE with economic gain, citing this as their reason for entering HE. Interestingly on reflection Shaw identifies that many of them talk about a feeling of fulfilment and having grown as a person. This research implies that economic gain is no longer a major factor however the students reflecting in this study are postgraduates so if they are full-time and moved directly from undergraduate to postgraduate education they may not yet have experienced economic gain but the personal gain on the other hand is real to them, hence the change in focus to something tangible.

Regarding environment, Hutchings and Archer (2010) found that some were perceiving university as a threatening place, large and isolated from family or as full of white middle-class people and were therefore unable to imagine themselves there. When we think of Ball et als' (2000) construct of imagined futures it is easy to then see why this becomes a barrier to participation.

In terms of the study undertaken by Parry et al (2012), which led to the BIS report *'Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges'*, the participation rates for women and men were equivalent in both settings with both teaching more women than men (57% HEI and 56% FEC). The representation of ethnic minorities was different with their being less representation in FECs than HEIs. White or White British represented 85% of the total participants in their study. For the subjects with the largest number of full-time college taught students, using DLHE data it was found that there was a difference in graduate salary which favoured those from an HEI although they do caution the interpretation of these results.

Parry et al (2012), acknowledge that FECs are offering HE to local students who are reluctant to travel for a number of reasons even to nearby HEIs. They also comment that this can be linked with disadvantaged student groups, although not always.

With respect to the students in the Parry study they identified two common characteristics, one was the 'local' nature of students, in terms of geography and also culture and aspiration with students expressing a desire to remain within their 'comfort zone'. The second was the desire for vocational subjects and less interest in the wider university experience. One member of staff participating in the study described the typical student as seeking a qualification relevant to their work, making the point that many were already undertaking some form of paid work.

Creasy (2013), comments on evidence suggesting a need to change teaching styles within HE in FE and the poor range of resources available in FECs for HE resulting in a different experience for HE in FE students. Parry et al (2012) also describe a model of HE in FECs that is differentiated by quality; where the students have a different

experience, are unable to engage in the same extra-curricular activities and do not have all the learning resources available to them, including contact with research active staff. By contrast these students do benefit from smaller group teaching in an environment they are often already familiar with and is perceived as less threatening and tutors that are more accessible. Those interviewed described the environment of FEC HE as 'nurturing' compared to the 'sink or swim' they perceive to be the learning culture of HE in HEI's.

Students did not have strong views about the advantages studying at a college might give them. As FECs promote an advantage of their HE provision being the links with employers and responsiveness to the skill needs of local employers it was interesting that the students in the Parry study did not perceive they would have an employability advantage.

Students, 46%, agreed there is more help and support when studying at an FEC than university, but 45% believed a better campus experience was available at universities, 35% also agreed that library and IT facilities were better at a university but more either disagreed or did not know. HEFCE 2011 showed that in the NSS college students rated learning resources lower than university students (Parry et al, 2012).

Parry et al found that college students felt unable to comment on experiences at university having not experienced it, and suggested it an empirical question as to whether university students would feel able to comment, but suggest as some were coming from level three qualifications at an FEC they would be better placed to do so.

Status was perceived to be different and students felt it important to emphasise their degree was awarded by X university but not mention it was undertaken at Y college. Similarly, Robinson (2012) identified that students experienced a stigma in relation to undertaking a degree at a college and often described themselves as attending university to avoid this.

Kandiko and Mawer (2013) published their report from the project commissioned by the QAA which is the first published qualitative work to consider the importance of a quality education experience to students, following the increase in fees in 2012, and students focus on value for money. Areas that students focused on included contact hours, resources, investment in facilities along with size of class and appropriately qualified lecturers.

The report makes 38 recommendations from a relatively small sample of a large population, so although the findings are interesting and should spark useful discussion and debate it is difficult to be confident in the evidence base and therefore the generalisability of the study. The report is light on methodology so although it suggests 150 students participated it is not clear how many participated in which way and from where. This would be interesting considering the variety of institutions types and geographical spread indicated.

Nevertheless it raises some interesting findings and is the only study of its kind identified in the literature search and a good starting point for the future. The report is admirable in the range of perspectives it considers, including some of the wider aspects of the student experience such as work experience.

Kandiko and Mawer (2013) consider their findings under four sections. The first covering 'ideology, practices and purposes' is particularly relevant. The first finding considers perception related to value and suggests students have a more consumerist approach to their education, in keeping with much of the literature (Ritzer, 2002; Fox, 2002), interestingly this is found across both first and second year participants with no evidence that this is more pronounced in the first year students who were paying the new higher fee. Third year students were included in the study but no reference is made in the findings as to their specific views. The discussion goes on to suggest there is no 'fees market' and no student was basing their decision solely on cost, however the institutions chosen appear to have similar fees as they do not appear to have included any FECs offering HE programmes where fees are more likely to be significantly different. What of course this study cannot tell us is how many students based their decision not to enter HE on cost.

Measures of value for money for students included amount of class contact time, the quantity and quality of the resources available to them and slightly more subjective were perceptions of institutional investment in students. One finding suggested students were questioning the worth of their education and wondering if the financial and personal investment was ultimately worth while, often based on class contact time, or lack of, which in the absence of better information about what fees actually support appeared to be the most tangiable measure for many students. The qualitative nature of the research enables the authors to question the nature of contact and unlike in earlier studies (Bekhradnia, 2013) it is not as simple as more lecture hours but rather a desire for more individual support and smaller group

contact opportunities but balanced in terms of avoidance of 'spoon feeding' with opportunities for work experience and other concerns related to value.

Kandiko and Mawer, (2013) also found that students felt they lacked details such as who would be teaching them and what their qualifications were, the proportion of the time in class and the size of classes/departments/faculties. Students also identified clear expectations in relation to four aspects of their learning environment which broadly covered learning spaces and availability of IT resources, course organisation, relationships with staff and qualifications and attitude of lecturing staff. Their third finding under this section identified an ambition to improve career opportunities as students' reason for undertaking HE. Despite this some students were still unclear as to their final career choice although they were cognisant of the need to take their HE experience beyond the academic to achieve the best job opportunities in the future. Students also expressed a desire to access work placement opportunities and course specific career guidance.

In their second section Kandiko and Mawer, (2013) explore quality assurance findings. They identify both feedback on student work and the ability of students themselves to feedback on the course and how that feedback is responded to as a student concern along with staff engagement and the perceived ability or lack of ability of some staff. Finally there is the expectation of a personalised experience within small teaching groups. The importance of staff approaches is highlighted here in terms of students making course content choices based on the lecturers as opposed to the topic area.

Because this is qualitative research it is difficult to get a feel for the extent to which these perceptions were prevalent and the consistency of these findings so this research could have been strengthened by having a quantitative element included. It pays a lot of attention to the new fee regime in England but then only makes a glancing reference to the impact of this on students' perceptions despite the study including students on both the old and the new regime. Based on the introduction it might be reasonable to expect some comparing and contrasting between the expectations of students paying different fees.

The use of concept mapping, a facilitative method to encourage ideas is very creative as a method of data collection. It is not clear how many students completed concept mapping, in one section it indicates it was all but in another the impression is that it was only those interviewed. The authors also discuss the selection of the concept maps used being based on representativeness but it is not clear of what they are representative.

It would seem reasonable that potential students might have different expectations of the HE evironment and their construct will vary based on their background. There is however little research looking at expectations of HE of potential students. In a comparison of expectations on entry and the reality of the student experience it was found that most undergraduates had been surprised by the number of hours attending class, volume of academic work and class size, all of which they had underestimated (Cook and Lecky, 1999).

Their experience will also vary, with the more traditional HE student more likely to participate in the full range of life as a university student. As research has shown

however, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are often not at liberty to have the same experience as financial concerns, part-time work, family commitments and time constraints will limit or prevent their participation in non-academic activities. This includes joining and participating in sports clubs or other societies and socialising in general (Cooke et al, 2004).

2.6.2 Perceptions of FDs

Regarding students' perceptions of FDs specifically, Ooms et al (2012) found that, overall, students' experiences of accessibility, flexibility, progression opportunities, work-based learning and assessments linking to work experiences were positive. Students did however perceive that the FD made a large demand on their time and finances. Although on the whole students perceived the FD to have had an impact on their confidence, only a small proportion felt it had made no difference. Students also perceived support as key to their success in undertaking a FD. Similarly students in a small study undertaken by (Fenge, 2011), also focusing on FD students, perceived that the opportunity to undertake HE through FE made it more accessible to students from WP backgrounds in terms of geographical location and the culture of the institution. At the same time, the students in this study perceived a FD to be not quite HE but a good way to get a taste of what HE would be about. Fenge suggests that by viewing it in this way the students are able to view it as an option whereas considering a degree in a university would not be an option so they are excluding themselves at this stage but acknowledge an aspiration to attend university in the future. This again is an indicator of the tentative learner identities, lack of confidence and concerns with risk of failure already described about these students. The

perception of a FD giving a taster of HE rather than being HE also suggests a lack of understanding of the award they were undertaking. FD students also expressed concerns about other distractions at a university having a detrimental effect on their studies (Parry et al, 2012).

Regarding how the FD is valued the message is mixed. Robinson, 2012 found students generally perceived a FD as a poorer alternative to a degree in a hierarchical system of HE in which they were at the bottom end. Their determination to gain a degree did however reflect an appreciation of the market and the value of a degree in increasing employability.   Ooms et al (2012) however, found students were pretty clear that they felt employers did not particularly value FDs, despite often supporting them to undertake one, as they seemed to lack understanding about what was involved. Robinson (2012) suggests that students' perceptions have shifted to consider the risk of not having a degree, even via a vocational route as greater than the risk of not entering the job market and securing a career through an apprenticeship. She also identified a difference in younger students who viewed a FD simply as a qualification and mature students who had an awareness of the broader value of the HE experience in terms of their self-development, often seeing it as a second chance at education. Ooms et al (2012) found that the closer the course was delivered to the partner university the more students felt a part of the university culture.

Students understood the importance of continuing in education and preferred the convenience and familiarity of their local institutions even if they perceived this could result in a lower status qualification. Their decision had been one to continue in education and not about where or what to study (Baird et al, 2012; Robinson, 2012).

These perceptions, Robinson (2012) suggests reinforce their position in society and exclusion from certain types of HE, and therefore job opportunities, as a result of others perceptions of FDs despite their experience of it being a transforming rather than instrumental experience.

2.6.3   Implications

This review has shown a lack of literature on students' perceptions of HE in FE and even in relation to students' perceptions on HE the literature and inclusion of the student voice is limited. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) and Parry et al (2012) have started to raise awareness but it is an area where finding out more would be helpful in understanding the decisions students considering HE in FE make based on their perceptions of the sector. It suggests that a better understanding of the potential students construct of HE could help drive policy and widen participation. This understanding needs to consider all those from under-represented groups not just those undertaking level three qualifications and look at the full range of institutions delivering HE.

This thesis will therefore investigate this further aiming to answer the research question, *what are widening participation students' perceptions of the differences between universities and further education colleges as providers of higher education?*

2.7   Conclusion

Much of the literature presented in this review is pre-September 2012 both in terms of publication date and when studies were undertaken. This is important as this is when the landscape of HE changed considerably as a result of the introduction of higher fees which inevitably introduces a gap in the literature. This gap relates to the impact not only of the coalition government and their policies but in particular to the policy which introduced higher fees. It is essential therefore that new research is undertaken to assess how these changes may be impacting on the choices being made by prospective HE students and particularly those from WP backgrounds and those accessing HE in FE who the literature suggests are most likely to be affected.

Achieving a more complete picture, reflective of recent change and using the student voice it is hoped can influence a more inclusive and evidence based approach to policy and practice on HE in FE, student choice and widening participation by leaders in the sector.

As Moogan (2011) points out it is important that those leading organisations in the HE sector consider the perspectives of the WP students in terms of their wants and needs not just as she suggests to be able to match the institutional offering with these but also to raise awareness of the wider university experience. Therefore getting leaders to engage with research in this field should be an essential part of the ongoing strategy.

This review of existing literature has been helpful in identifying some of the factors influencing student choice and decision-making in relation to progression to HE in general. It would indicate that the real lack of empirical data is in the area of the

choices made by students undertaking HE in FE and students' perceptions of HE in FE. This will require further research utilising the student voice. The literature has therefore enabled the identification of a number of issues in relation to the research questions that form the justification and basis of this study.

The research reported in this thesis will use the following frameworks to explore the differences between the two groups of students as illustrated in Figure 2.1. It will draw on the Slack et al (2012) model of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' information in relation to their perceptions of IAG and decision-making, Ball et als' (1999, 2000) work on imagined futures in terms of their aspirations for the future, the concept of risk and how students assimilate it and its impact on their choice and decision-making strategy and finally their perceptions will be considered in relation to an instrumental or transformational view as discussed by Robinson (2012).

Figure 2.1 Conceptual frameworks driving research

The framework outlined above is used as a conceptual model by which it is possible to explore and understand students' perceptions and why they differ or remain similar despite their different experiences of HE. This is framed in terms of the student voice as the consumer and therefore at the centre providing a lens for leaders to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the HE in FE sector and influence its future.

3   RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter describes the research strategy and design and how it enabled the research questions to be explored and answered using the literature review as a framework for the interpretation of data and justification for the research. It considers the methods used and then presents variations from the intended ideal design with the reasoning. Finally it reflects on the relative strengths and limitations of the design used.

3.1   Research Strategy and Design

The aim of the study was to consider and analyse differences in perception and behaviour between WP students choosing a university or an FEC to undertake their HE and their use of IAG in the decision-making process. Establishing any differences there may be between the two student groups will support those in recruitment leadership roles in the development of policy and practice. It therefore follows that students have both a valid contribution to make and a unique interest in terms of leadership in this area.

In considering the research strategy, in this instance the research questions identified mean the intention is to facilitate educational leaders in the development of practice and policy in relation to recruitment to HE of non-traditional students by providing empirical data utilising the student voice. Lumby (2012) suggests that because leadership is seen as having only an indirect effect on students, historically they have been absent in leadership research but included in learning research where the link with learning is more explicit. She comments that despite the demands of some that

students are given a voice in policy development both at local and national level, and that this is a part of their preperation for their future in a democratic society, others challenge this as lacking critique and depth. She concludes that it is not realistic to think leadership and learning can be seperated and gives the example that research around recruitment can not be disentangled from learning outcomes.

From an epistemological position my stance is interpretive, reflecting the distinctiveness of people and how their experiences and interpretations of these may impact on their perceptions (Bryman, 2012). This research employs a mixed methods strategy using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The mixing of methods is used both for the purpose of development, which Briggs et al (2012) describe as the process of utilising the results obtained from one method to inform the other, and triangulation of data. In this instance the main approach of the research is qualitative but this is combined with a quantitative element which is then used to inform the primary qualitative approach. The sequence is therefore very important with the quantitative coming first but the emphasis being given to the qualitative element.

The research used a postal questionnaire as the starting point to collect data from a larger group of students than could be achieved through face-to-face surveys or focus groups. The results from the data analysis from the questionnaires enabled the identification of the most important areas of interest for further in-depth study in the qualitative phase of the data collection. It supported the selection and development of themes to be explored during the focus group. The quantitative data was only able to show how many students held certain views. The qualitative phase

enabled further in-depth discussion of these views and a better understanding of students' perceptions. The data from both methods was then integrated enabling triangulation of the results.

In terms of ontological considerations this research will be undertaken from a position of constructivism, where the belief is that social phenomena are dependent on the experiences of individuals (Bryman, 2012).

Having considered the research strategy the next step is to consider the design, which as Bryman (2012) describes will provide the framework reflecting the priorities that have been considered in relation to various stages of the research process and the indications therefore for methods of data collection and analysis to answer the research questions.

Identifying the correct research question(s) is an important element of design as this gives the researcher the problem to be investigated (Blaikie, 2007) therefore driving the whole study. These considerations will therefore impact and inform decisions relating to research design.

This study used a cross-sectional design to answer the research questions. Bryman (2012) describes this as an approach involving data collection at a particular point in time, which explores a number of variables for recurring themes and associations. The fact that this is about observations made on data at one point in time is a key consideration because of the ongoing change in the sector, making it important to ensure data is collected over a limited time period when all participants are experiencing the same influences, from for example government policy, and were enrolled after the introduction of higher fees. Cross-sectional research design

ensures standardization of the data collection process so that it is easier to identify links between variables and make comparisons between cases, effectively giving the researcher, as suggested by Bryman (2012, p59) a '*consistent benchmark*'. The questions being asked aim to identify differences and similarities between cases and therefore inform policy and practice based on perceptions and experiences of the population under study as well as possible links between the different variables identified. This is what Wallace and Poulson (2003) refer to as '*knowledge-for-action*'.

The study was interested in a comparison of two groups of WP students undertaking full-time HE study, one group where the students were undertaking their HE in universities in England and the other group where students were undertaking their HE in FECs in England.

The potential population for this study was therefore all full-time WP students who commenced an HE degree, at level four, in England in the September of the 2012/13 academic year. This is a large population so there was a need to consider exceptions and select a sample of this population in order to make this a manageable project within the resource and time constraints available. Understanding the population then enables selection of the sample. When deciding on the sample Mason (2002) indicates the strategy employed should ensure there is a meaningful link between the sample chosen and the wider context and that this takes account of practical considerations such as access to subjects.

Exclusions are those who:

- were HEFCE funded but were receiving bursaries, eg social work students
- had their fees paid, eg health professions students such as nurses

- were overseas students.

This was because they would not be considering financial matters in the same way as students who were facing the new higher fees with no cost of living bursaries. Students who were not undertaking either a bachelors degree or a foundation degree were also excluded to ensure students were all undertaking degree programmes.

The population was specific to England because there was different educational policy and fees across the UK. Level four is specified because occasionally potential students get exemption for previous study and may be starting HE at level five or six, so they may have enrolled with the institution for the first time in 2012/13 but not be first year (level four) students.

WP students were specified to ensure students were from similar backgrounds and to reduce the number of variables that could impact on decision-making such as family background, finances and previous exposure to HE.

As the research specifically looked at students from a WP background there were some difficulties as to how the initial population was defined as despite it being a term often used there was no clear defininition of WP and in terms of policy the groups that are classified as WP change over time. It was therefore necessary to define WP within the context of this study.

The sample was taken from one university (referred to throughout as WP University) and its partner colleges, which used a flagging system to identify students it classed as WP and therefore this defined WP for the sample. So the students who participated in this study either:

- had a postcode that fell within the 13,000 most deprived Super Output Area (SOA) through Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) in England,

- declared a disability,

- were classified as having been Looked after Children (have been resident in the care system),

- or were first generation HE attenders.

The sample frame for this study was all WP students entering HE as full-time undergraduate degree students at level four on HEFCE funded programmes accredited by WP University, including all students entering partner institutions of WP University who deliver FDs accredited by WP University.

The research was intended to be explorative rather than comprehensive given the complexity and size of what has been described as an under-researched area and the potential population. This was a convenience sample, as I was accessing students at an institution I had contact with.

Having applied the above filters there were 381 HE students from partner FECs who were eligible to be included and a further 1279 who were undertaking HE at WP University making a total population of 1660 subjects. It was initially decided to select 100 students who were attending partner organisations and 100 who were attending WP University as the sample. It was anticipated this would give sufficient data, based on a minimum response rate of 30%, to inform the research but still be manageable by one researcher within the planned time frame. The sample was randomly selected using student number to order the sample frame from which the sample was taken. For the students from FECs every fourth student was selected, giving 95

students, for the students from WP University every 13th student was selected giving 98 students, resulting in a total of 193 students in the original random sample.

3.2   Method

The method for this research was a survey. The primary quantitative data collection method was a self-completion questionnaire with focus groups and unstructured interviews as the primary qualitative data collection methods. The students in the sample identified above were sent, by post, the questionnaire with a covering letter, explaining the purpose of the research and anonymity and asking them to return their completed questionnaire in the envelope provided.

Denscombe (2010) suggests that generally most questionnaires will include elements collecting both opinion and fact. This was mainly quantitative, collecting factual biographical and demographic data and using mainly Likert scales in relation to attitudes and opinions, but did also include some free text to allow the collection of qualitative data to inform the next stage of the research.

Denscombe (2010) states that research questionnaires should meet three criteria: be able to collect data for later analysis, have written questions for the sake of consistency and are collecting information direct from the individuals rather than others' perceptions of them. Further, he suggests it as an appropriate method of data collection when: information required is not complex, there needs to be standardisation of the information collected and the researcher is confident those participating would understand what is being asked of them.

A questionnaire was therefore felt to be suitable here as the questions were framed in a straightforward manner, some being simple demographic and biographical data. The data needed to be in a standard format to enter into SPSS for analysis and because the population was HE students it was reasonable to expect they would be able to understand the questions.

A strength of using self-completion questionnaires as the data collection method was that it potentially enabled a larger sample to be used than methods such as face-to-face questionnaire completion. An online survey was considered however there was no guarantee students would access their university email account.

In developing the questions consideration was given to factors such as length of question, not asking two questions in one and the use of appropriate language (Bryman, 2012). Sequencing was important, so the questionnaire had the factual, demographic data first and then explored biographical elements that may be considered more sensitive before moving onto opinion.

Question development was based on the literature and how best to answer the research questions which should increase the face validity of the research. The majority were closed questions which are easier to code, input and analyse with only a handful of open questions being included. Some of the closed questions were represented as a Likert scale, which are most often used to measure the attitudes of respondents (Bryman, 2012) and to save space and increase the number of questions asked. Care was taken in deciding which questions were suitable to be represented as a Likert scale as ordinal data such as this does have limitations. As Denscombe (2010) points out they simply look at rank order but do not allow

inference of cause around that choice of ranking. This study therefore also included

open questions in the questionnaire and the methods also included focus groups and

interviews to elicit the more interpretive qualitative data.

The questionnaire was piloted on a small group of existing students who commenced

before the introduction of higher fees. It was therefore clear their data was simply

being used to inform the research but would not be eligible for inclusion in the study.

Pilot participants were specifically asked to consider the questionnaire in relation to

understanding and ordering and feedback comments in relation to this. Minor

modifications were made as a result which included, where the question 'which was

most/least useful' was used, clarifying this was of the ones selected and not of all

options and to give an option for those who had not come directly from school or

college.

The questionnaire was then revised in response to the feedback to produce the final

version (appendix one) for data collection. This was clearly presented and not too

long in order to prevent fatigue of respondents, which can result in non-completion

(Bryman, 2012). This was accompanied by a covering letter (appendix two) and sent

to all 193 students in the selected sample along with a stamped addressed return

envelope.

The strategy of this mixed methods research was to use a sequential approach,

which Creswell (2003) proposes allows the researcher to follow up the quantitative

method in which theories are tested with a more in-depth look at a smaller number of

cases through a qualitative method. The focus groups and interviews aimed to gain

further qualitative data to strengthen the contextual element of the research and

specifically to be able to explore perceptions, which is particularly suited to the epistemological stance of interpretive research. Themes for the focus groups and interviews were therefore identified through analysis of the questionnaire data and this was used to stimulate discussion. Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest this approach of using themes rather than a list of specific questions.

Focus groups allow researchers to try to understand the views being expressed and perhaps some of the underlying factors that may be key to explaining individual's views. This is done through discussion that is facilitated by the researcher, it is therefore important to consider carefully the number of people in each group, the length of the session and the number of groups. This is often led by practical considerations but ideally the group should be small enough to encourage contributions but not so small there is no meaningful discussion. In terms of length, there needs to be sufficient time for all involved to have their say. Finally from an ethical perspective the main consideration was confidentiality, which required the development of mutual trust amongst the group (Denscombe, 2010). While focus groups have limitations, their strengths generally outweigh these and a well prepared and facilitated focus group will reduce the risks associated with the limiting factors (Litosseliti, 2003). Limitations include the potential to lead participants, introducing bias, a belief that a consensus has been gained when in fact it is the result of participants who do not agree not speaking out, and finally the complexity of transcribing and analysing data because of the multiple participants and fluid nature of a focus group (Krueger and Casey, 2009).

The intention was to host four focus groups aiming to recruit eight participants with a mix of students from FECs and WP University in each who had self-selected to

participate following completion of the questionnaire. Unfortunately organising these was problematic and interviews were also used. Unstructured interviews were selected as these were closest to focus groups in that they use themes rather than set questions, are informal and allow the interviewer to ask different questions of each participant within the same theme and pursue different threads, probing the participant further to expand upon their answers (Bryman, 2012).

The format of each focus group was identical with an introduction outlining the reasons for conducting it, the topic area of interest and confirming consent had been gained and that all participants were clear in relation to confidentiality. The time allowed and the way the group was going to run was explained including ensuring there was respect within the group for all participants, allowing everyone the opportunity to participate and the fact it was being audio recorded. All participants completed a consent form prior to the focus group commencing.

The interviews used the same themes as the focus groups, students' consent was gained before proceeding and they were given the same information about the study, confidentiality and recording of the interview as focus group participants. They were told the interview would last up to an hour.

3.3 Modifying the Design

Planning the research design means starting with the optimum design in terms of validity and reliability. In this instance however a low response rate to the questionnaire and a lack of volunteers for the focus groups meant that the data

collection methods and sample had to be reviewed and revised. This meant moving away from the ideal to the art of the possible.

The target for the sample was a minimum response rate of 30% but the original postal questionnaire did not achieve this. All members of the sample had been sent a questionnaire, with a covering letter and a stamped addressed envelope to return the questionnaire. From the university group ten and from the college group 12 completed questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 11%. A follow up email reminder which included an electronic version of the questionnaire and a link to be able to complete the identical survey online elicited four online responses, all from university respondents and a further five returned paper copies. This gave a final response rate of 16%, which was well balanced across both groups but still well below the target 30%. A further email reminder was sent out at the beginning of the next term but this brought no further responses. Information from the focus groups indicated college students particularly did not use their university email account, which would explain why no college student participated online and justified the original decision to use a postal rather than online questionnaire.

Having failed to get sufficient participants through random sampling I then focused on those students I had relatively easy access to, enlisting the support of colleagues to ask for volunteers to complete the survey, where they fitted the criteria. Asking for students that were first generation HE attenders ensured students fell within the WP criteria but without having to identify them in terms of some of the more sensitive criteria used in the original sample. As a result a further 24 completed questionnaires from college students and 26 from university students were returned. In addition to the randomly selected sample of 31 there was an additional convenience sample of

50 giving a total of 81 participants who were all from the original sample frame but no longer randomly selected.

The sample was now less well balanced as the convenience sample was drawn from one faculty rather than across the whole university, although these were from a range of subjects across that faculty. The disadvantage of this was a reduction in validity.

Part of the reason for the low response rate was timing as it was near the end of term so there was the pressure of end of term exams/assignments. The timing problem was more apparent when in the next semester 22 questionnaires were returned as undelivered, all of which had gone to university students in halls of residence. Prior to this only one questionnaire, intended for an FEC student was returned undelivered. The random sample was therefore reduced from 193 to 170 although all those in the sample were also sent the invitation to participate via email but it is impossible to know if they received it.

The next challenge was that only one member from the original sample volunteered to participate in a focus group, which meant reviewing the sampling method for the qualitative data collection. All students from the original randomly selected sample were emailed asking them to consider participating but there were no further volunteers and as identified above no guarantee they saw this request.

By working directly with student groups from WP University asking for volunteers to participate in focus groups the number of volunteers increased to nine. A similar process was undertaken with students from the partner colleges, concentrating on three colleges and through college tutors identifying individuals who met the criteria and asking for volunteers to complete the questionnaire and participate in focus

groups. College tutors were very supportive and helpful in facilitating this however arranging mixed focus groups in a central location proved impossible, as students were unwilling to travel and had limited flexibility. Instead I aimed to run one focus group in each of the four locations, even though this reduced the diversity of the group potentially limiting the range of views and discussion.

It was impossible to get enough of the nine university students together for a viable focus group so I asked if they would be willing to participate in individual face-to-face interviews instead. Ultimately eight volunteers were interviewed, the ninth student never finalised a date and time despite several reminders. There was little variation in the views expressed during the interviews so data saturation appeared to be achieved although with such small numbers this is difficult to guarantee. The intention was that interviews would be up to an hour in length but in reality most lasted around 45 minutes.

Colleagues in the three colleges helped arrange focus groups within time-tabled tutorial time or linked to time-tabled sessions on research methods. Two were larger than ideal but after the tutors had done such a good job in pulling together volunteers it felt ungrateful to turn participants away to achieve ideal numbers. Students were still given the option not to participate as tutors made themselves available for tutorial for those who did not fit the criteria or wish to participate.

One group was the original planned size with eight students, however all eight students were from the same course. The second group was a larger group of 13 students from different courses. The third and final group also had 13 students all from the same course and although an attempt was made to split them into two

groups students who were asked to participate in a second group at a later time were reluctant to do so but equally reluctant not to participate in the session planned and so we proceeded with one large group.

An opportunity arose during the course of the study to attend a workshop where six students who were all first generation HE attenders and had commenced study in 2012/13 were discussing their experiences of HE. Although not part of the original design this seemed too good an opportunity to miss and added some diversity in terms of institutions and subjects. The narratives from these students also therefore form part of the data in this study.

The difficulties encountered highlight that even with considerable planning it is difficult to implement the optimum research design and method so it then becomes an iterative process. Holding a senior position within the organisation I was researching I was concerned students would feel under pressure to participate in my research and on reflection perhaps I over compensated making it too impersonal as I was essentially a stranger undertaking the research to the random sample and the response rate was poor. By working with colleagues and asking them to make questionnaires available to students, fitting the criteria, at the commencement of classes so students could return them at the end of the session and asking for volunteers for focus groups participation rates were considerably higher, demonstrating the impact of personal contact.

3.4   Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through the questionnaire constituted one source of data. Questionnaires had no numbering system so as to preserve confidentiality and anonymity ensuring it was impossible to identify who had completed which one. The envelopes for the two samples were different colours but students were asked in the questionnaire which institution they were attending for lectures so the colour only assisted in sorting them into the different groups.

Questionnaires were numbered on receipt to prevent duplication of data entry. Numbering on receipt rather than prior to completion helps reinforce the anonymity of the research removing suspicion that numbers are a coded method of identifying participants. SPSS was the analysis tool selected for the quantitative data, so the data from the 81 questionnaires was coded and entered into an SPSS file and analysed using descriptive statistics for frequencies, percentages and cross-tab comparison between the two student groups. An example of one of the crosstab data analysis is presented in appendix three. In relation to the open questions this information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and the data was uploaded into an NVivo file to be analysed with the qualitative data. The data from the questionnaires was reviewed initially to give the themes for further exploration during focus groups and interviews.

Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded using a digital voice-recorder and the data was transcribed as soon as possible afterwards and anonymised so that data that may subsequently identify an individual was removed. A portion of one transcript is included as appendix four. A method described by Blaxter et al (2001) which involves underlining key words, highlighting possible quotations, re-reading the

transcript and inserting margin notes as prompts for use in the analysis was applied within NVivo. A quick content analysis looking at the frequency of different words allowed the initial nodes (coding) to be created through the identified themes and then as each transcript was analysed additional nodes were added.

The highlighting of key words and themes allowed the creation of nodes that contained sub-nodes so that themes were kept together but could be queried. A map of the nodes is included as appendix five. Transcripts were re-read and memos within NVivo were used to keep notes in a similar way to margin notes if undertaking on paper. The advantage of using NVivo is the ability to then easily drill down into any coded aspect for further interrogation, an example is included in appendix six. To avoid bias it was essential to consider the whole meaning of paragraphs and not just key words and phrases as the context is important in analysing data and so this was kept in mind when deciding exactly what to highlight for each node. This approach to coding was intuitive and allowed the themes to emerge from the data. The whole approach was iterative with the questionnaire as the starting point, which then informed the interviews and focus groups.

Interviews and focus groups were coded as the data was reviewed rather than being developed beforehand. The first four transcripts (three interviews and one focus group) generated a large number of codes which were then reviewed to identify codes with the same meaning despite different phraseology, these were then split into themes and transcripts reviewed again at which point further codes were added but no new themes identified.

The first level codes gave the main themes coded at each node with some having second level codes that were linked into the main theme and a few having third level codes but this was the exception.

The remainder of the transcripts were coded using the codes already generated. After all transcripts had been coded some sub-nodes were added. Some nodes were changed to sub-nodes of other themes and finally some existing codes were renamed. Following this process some text queries were run to ensure the re-coding/naming had not missed any data.

The majority of the data was codeable with only a few exceptions of data that was judged not to fit with the remit of the study and could therefore not be coherently conceptualised into a code. Some pieces of data were coded at more than one node where appropriate.

As Bazeley and Jackson (2013) emphasise it was important throughout the process of working with the qualitative data to ensure that the research questions lead the process and the software was not a distraction leading the process. With this in mind the codes informed the themes presented in the findings.

Data security was another consideration when designing and undertaking this research. With only one researcher security was more straightforward than where there are multiple sites and researchers. To ensure confidentiality of the data it was maintained on a personal computer and an external hard drive, both password protected and maintained in a private study.

3.5   Considerations

When considering the design and methods proposed for a study it is important to be aware of the strengths and limitations.

In terms of strengths this should be an easily replicated study as sufficient information is detailed in respect of sample selection, research instruments and methods of data analysis in the write up so that other researchers are able to use this to reproduce the study.

The mixed methods strategy enables triangulation, which is the corroboration of data in a study of social phenomena using data collected via different methods (Bryman, 2012). This maximises the validity, reliability and usefulness of the data particularly as a result of the iterative approach ensuring data integration and consequently utilising the strengths of each method to give breadth and depth to the study (Gorard and Taylor, 2004).

The ability to collect questionnaire data in a consistent format is a strength of this method and useful at the data entry and analysis stages, a weakness however is it can lack depth and context around responses (Denscombe, 2010). The use of the focus groups and interviews as well as open questions on the questionnaires enabled some context to be gained.

There being only one researcher removed the risk of lack of consistency between researchers, or inter-observer reliability in interpreting the data increasing the reliability of the study.

In terms of limitations of the design it is not possible to establish cause, even if there appears to be a relationship between variables. It may be possible to infer causality but the certainty with which this can be concluded is reduced compared to an experimental research design, weakening the internal validity of the research (Bryman, 2012).

The sample was a convenience sample and the intention to randomly select participants from that sample did not generate sufficient responses. As a result, to achieve a large enough sample I had to include additional participants based on ease of access so external validity was weakened.

The fact that the qualitative data for the two different groups was, for practical reasons not anticipated during the design, collected in different ways; focus groups for one and face-to-face interviews for others also reduces the validity.

The use of focus groups can also have limitations as transcribing them is more difficult than interviews and as Bryman (2012) points out the danger is there are multiple gaps as a result of participants talking over one another or microphones not picking up voices from all parts of the room. Bearing this in mind the ability of the voice-recorder to pick up from all parts of the room was checked, the importance of not talking over one another and the need to speak up was explained to participants. Where I was unsure something would be clear on playback I either repeated it myself or asked for it to be repeated/clarified and as a result there were only a couple of places where I was unable to transcribe a whole sentence.

From an ethical perspective there is little to consider as there is no harm done to those participating but the Research Ethics Guidelines of this University and

guidance from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were observed. Permission was sought and granted from WP University. Ethical approval was given from both the University where the thesis is being supervised and WP University where the research was based.

All of those participating were made explicitly aware of the reason for the research and how the information will be used. Both the questionnaire and introduction to the interviews and focus groups covered the reason for undertaking the study and an outline of what the research involved.

As the research evolved and changes were made to the methods of data collection and sample, consideration was given as to whether this required a further submission to the ethics panel but it was felt it was still covered within the original proposal.

If repeating this study, two new considerations would be:

1) the introduction of concept maps so that individuals could express their own perceptions before hearing what others thought and also as a guide to support interviews and focus groups in terms of subjects to cover

2) the use of examples of IAG such as prospectuses and websites to better generate discussion about the merits of each.

Both are methods used by others but encountered after data collection had commenced.

This cross-sectional study just considered students who entered HE in 2012/13 at one institution. To strengthen the validity of the study if time and resources were not

limited this could be a multi-site longitudinal study repeated at multiple institutions across a number of intakes.

4   PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter explores, through a presentation of the findings from the research undertaken, WP students' experiences and perceptions of HE in different settings. It aims to provide insights into their aspirations for the future and the decision-making processes they undertook when choosing to study HE, particularly why some decided to study at a college rather than a university. It makes comparisons between those WP students undertaking their HE initially at an FEC with the intention to move onto a university for the final year and those who complete the whole HE award at a university.

The chapter presents the key findings in two sections, firstly from the quantitative work and secondly from the qualitative work. Each section is further sub-divided, presenting the respondent profile and then considering four of the research questions. As it was an iterative process, with information from the quantitative study used to inform the qualitative stage, the quantitative findings are presented first. The findings presented here will be discussed within the context of the existing literature in the next chapter.

4.1   Quantitative Data Findings

Quantitative data was collected via an anonymous questionnaire distributed to a sample of WP students who were in their first year of HE study in 2012/13 where WP University was the awarding university.

This section is based on the findings from the survey to which 81 HE students responded, 42 were attending WP University and 39 were attending one of seven partner FECs.

4.1.1 Respondent Characteristics

Table 4.1 and figures 4.1 – 4.4 provide basic information about the students who participated in the survey, showing that:

- while the majority of students attending FECs where white, there was more diversity of ethnicity amongst the university respondents

- while the mix between males and females overall was fairly equitable, the number of males undertaking their HE in FECs was considerably higher than the university where there were more females

- only a small number of participants were disabled, and most of these were attending the university

- the age profile of those attending university was more mixed than those attending colleges

- more students, where they were the first in their family to attend HE, chose to attend college rather than university

- while respondents were spread across a range of geodemographic groupings college students were most likely to come from postcode areas where the main wage earners were from the C2 (skilled manual), D (semi-skilled) and E (manual) groupings; university students were more likely to come from areas that included people from the higher social groupings A (professional), B (graduate) and C1 (technical)

- nearly all college respondents were undertaking a FD while the majority of university students were undertaking a bachelors degree

- prior to commencing their current programme of study most participants were in education, more were studying at an FEC than at a school or sixth-form college, those from an FEC were only slightly more likely to select an FEC than a university

- respondents who held A-Levels or an Access award were more likely to choose to attend university than college; where students held at least one A-Level in combination with either an Access award or a vocational qualification at level three they were always attending university

Characteristic	College Respondents (%)	University Respondents (%)	All Respondents (%)
White British	92	52	72
Other Ethnicity	8	48	28
Male	72	33	52
Female	28	67	48
Disabled	3	12	7
Age Group			
17-21	87	64	75
22-26	5	5	5
27-31	3	12	7
32-41	3	7	5
42-46	3	5	4
46-51	0	5	3
52+	0	2	1
First in family to attend HE	59	36	47
Course Type Chosen			
BA	3	50	27
BEng	0	5	3
BSc	0	41	21
Foundation Degree	97	2	48
LLB	0	2	1
Prior to Entry			
Attending School/Sixth-Form College	31	38	35
Attending FE College	59	50	54
Other	10	12	11
Qualifications on entry to HE			
GCSEs or Equivalent	97	83	90
A-Levels	28	55	42
Access	8	21	15
Level 3 Vocational Qualification	41	36	38
Foundation Degree	0	2	1
Held at least one A-Level and a level 3 vocational qualification	0	10	5
Held at least one A-Level and an Access award	0	5	2

Table 4.1 Characteristics of respondents attending different institutions

Of the 81 respondents 39 (48%) were female and 42 (52%) were male. Only 11 (28%) females were attending FECs compared to 28 (72%) males, while at the university there were 28 (67%) females and 14 males (33%).

The majority of those responding (58 or 72%) were White British. Figure 4.1 shows the ethnic mix of all respondents.
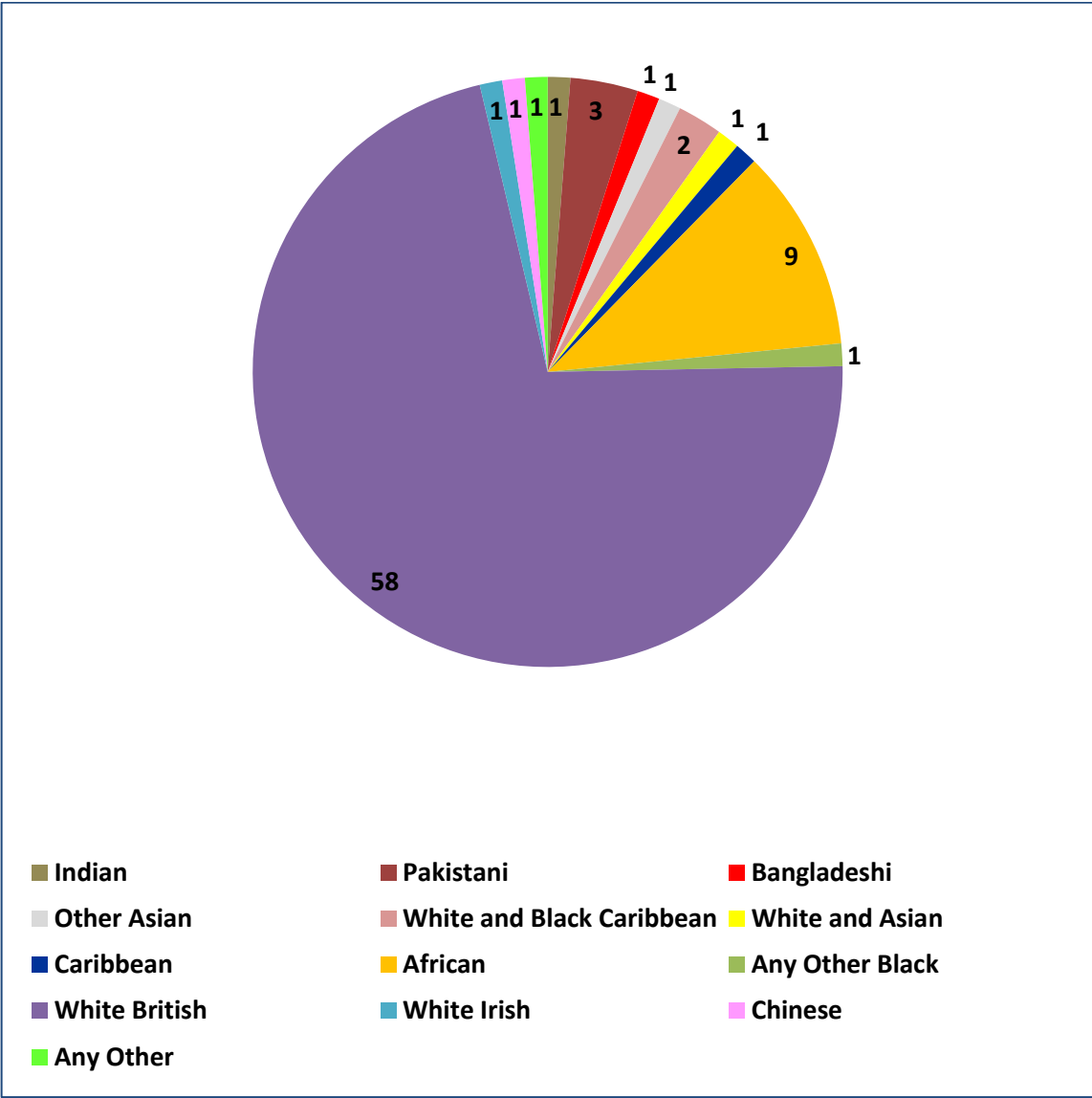
Figure 4.1 Ethnicity of respondents

Those from minority ethnic backgrounds were less likely than those from White British backgrounds to be the first in their family to be attending HE and more likely to be attending university.

The majority (61 or 75%) were in the 17-21 age range, in FECs this accounted for nearly 90% of all students; the age range by institution type is shown in Figure 4.2.
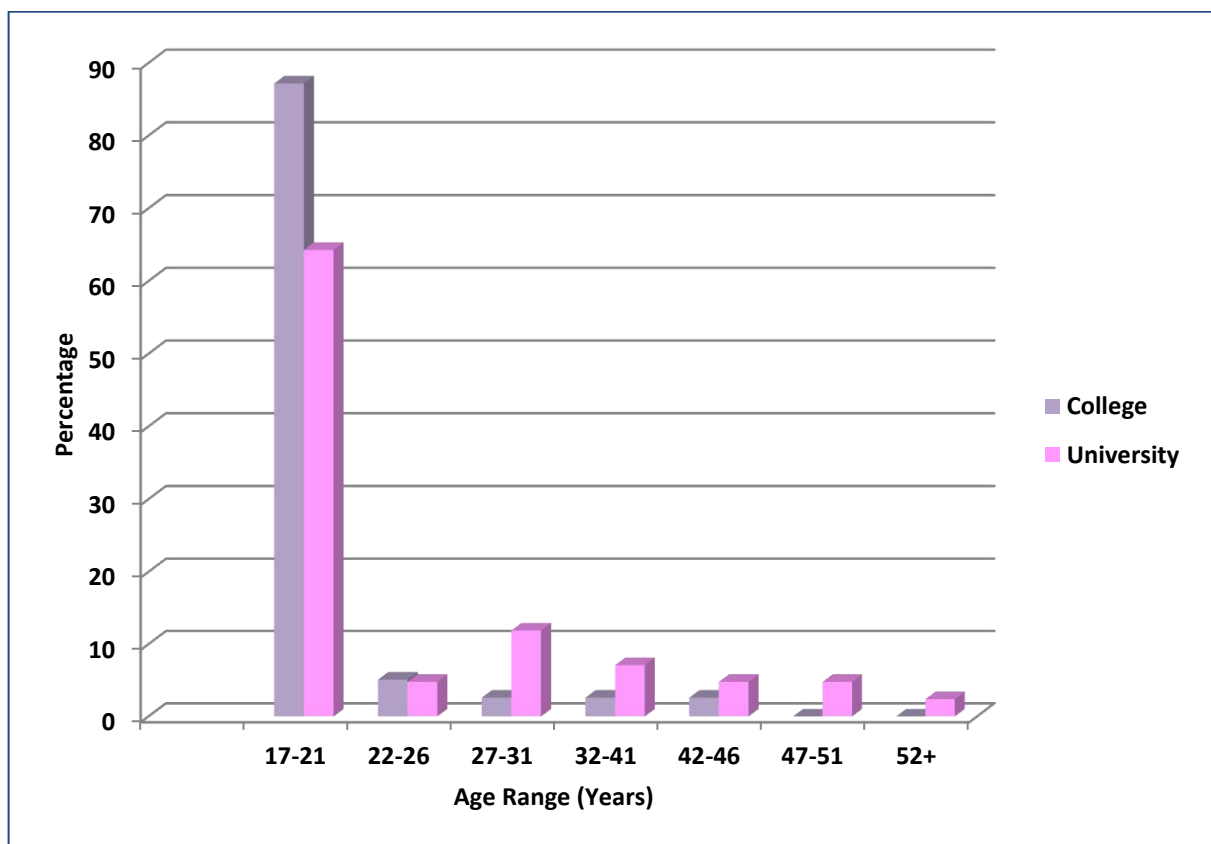
Figure 4.2 Age profile of respondents by institution

Figure 4.3 illustrates the social grouping of respondents based on their postcode using publicly available geodemographic data from a commercial database that profiles people residing in that postcode to give a description of the demographics of

that geographical area. These are rough groupings based on the occupation of the household's main wage earner so are illustrative only. There are six classifications, described in appendix seven. The letters are used in combinations to show the various social groups identified as living in that area.

Of university respondents 40% come from an area that includes people from the two highest social groups compared to only 26% of those attending FECs. While only 29% of university respondents came from C2D or C2DE areas, 46% of FEC responders did.
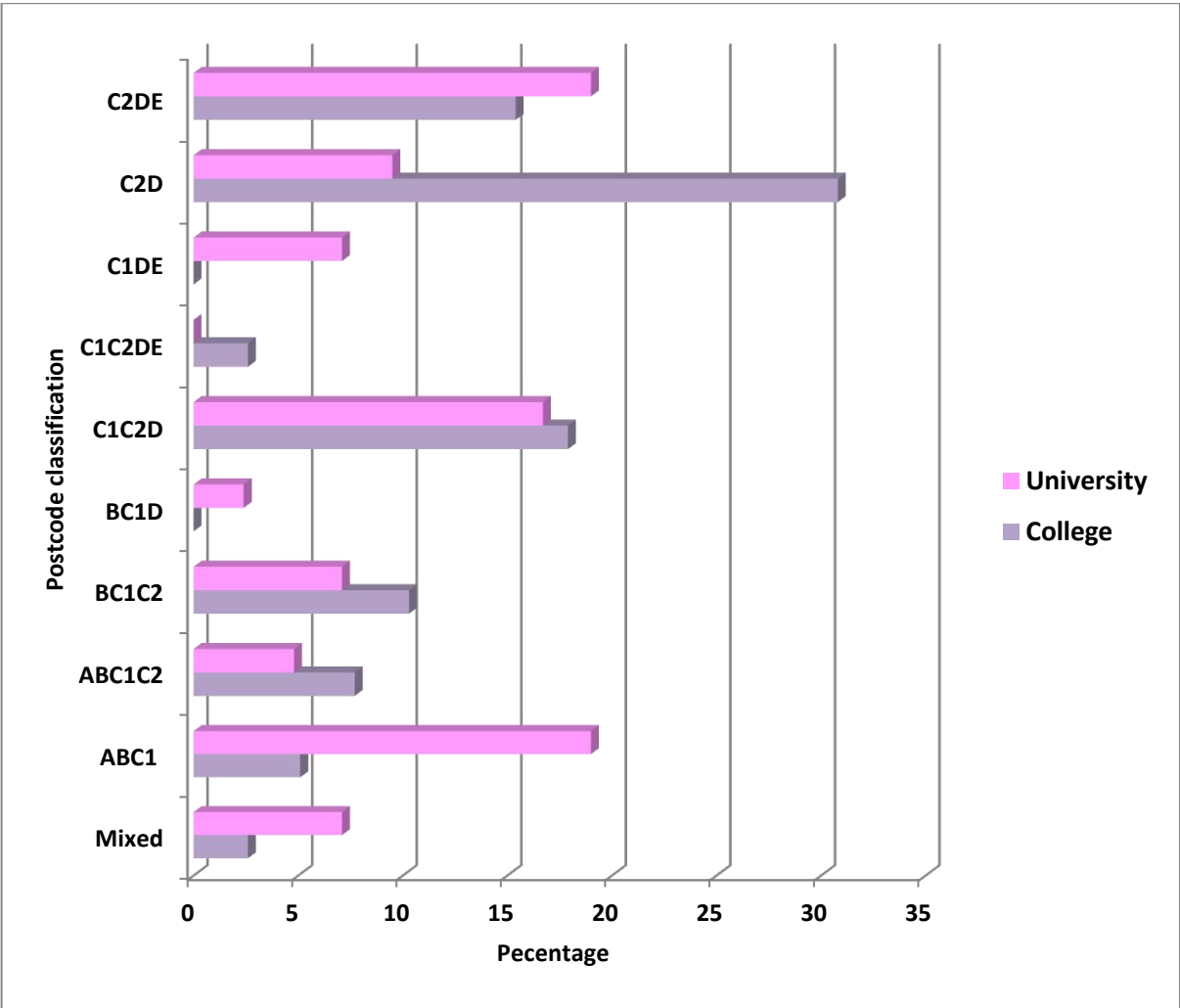
Figure 4.3 Social classification based on postcode by institution

GCSEs or equivalent were held by 73 (90%) respondents, 34 (42%) respondents had A-Levels, 11 (14%) respondents held Access Qualifications, two (2%) held an HNC while 22 (27%) held BTEC diploma qualifications. Other qualifications including FDs and NVQs, were listed by 27 (33%) respondents. The split between college and university is illustrated in Figure 4.4.
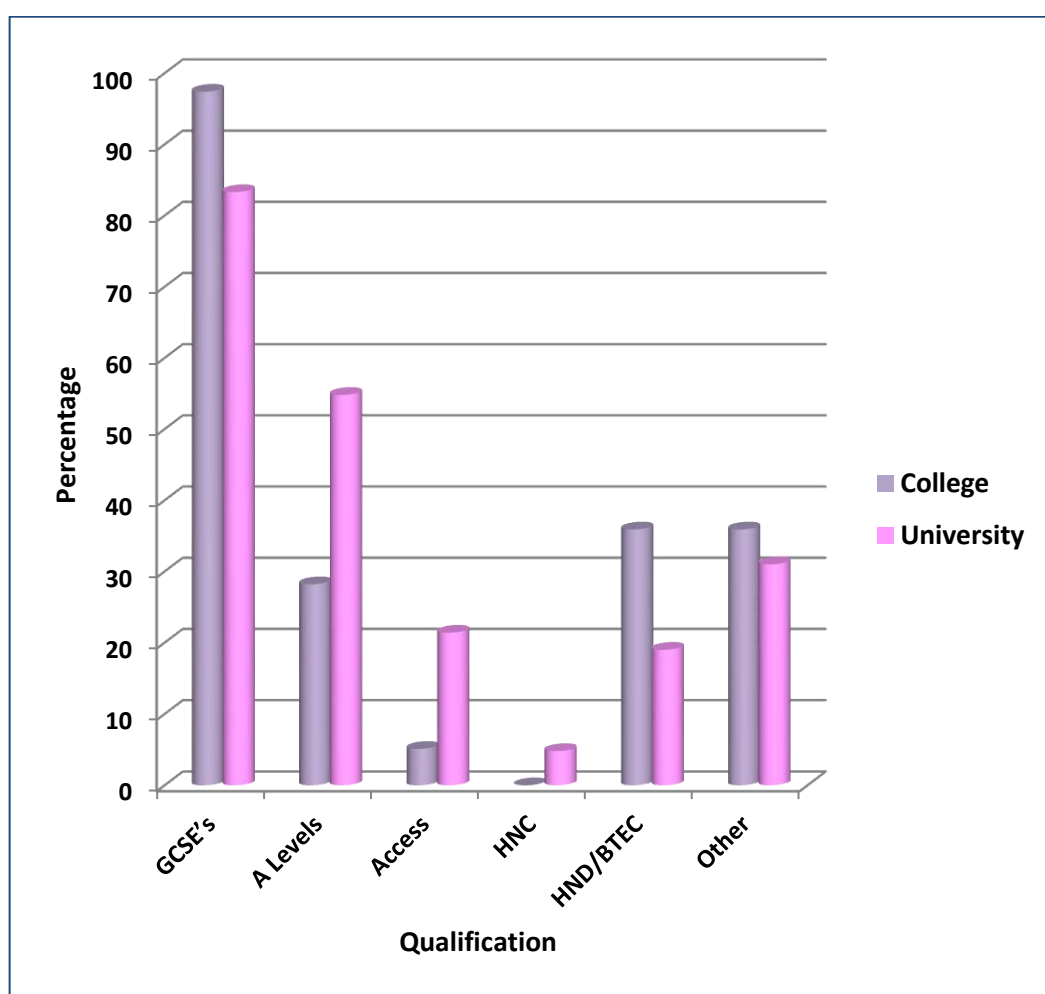
Figure 4.4 Qualifications by institution

4.1.2 Differences between HE Delivered in University and FECs

Respondents were presented with 22 statements and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale of one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). The heat maps for all questions are presented in appendix eight and the main findings summarised below.

- The majority of respondents from both institution types agreed that HE in FECs and HEIs is aimed at different learners, offers different subjects and offers courses at different levels.

- While the majority of respondents agreed that FECs were more affordable than HEIs, college respondents agreed more strongly.

- While slightly more respondents disagreed that there was no crossover between HE and FE university respondents disagreed more strongly.

- While respondents were more likely to agree that degrees were only offered in HEIs university respondents agreed more strongly. On the other hand respondents were fairly evenly split overall about the statement 'undergraduate programmes are only offered in HEIs'.

- While college students agreed more strongly that a FD was equivalent to the first two years of a degree, university students were more likely to disagree with the statement.

- Respondents did not strongly agree or disagree that there was more support from tutors in the HEI setting than FE but college students were more likely to agree that there was. Students from both settings however overwhelmingly agreed that students are expected to be more independent in an HEI than an FEC.

- Respondents from both settings agreed that both library and teaching facilities were better in an HEI.

- While college respondents were mainly in agreement that class size was smaller in an FEC, university students were mixed and as likely to agree as disagree.

- The majority of respondents agreed that assignments were harder in HEIs, university students however agreed more strongly.

- The majority of students strongly agreed that there is a difference in the student experience, the teaching and the level of qualifications held by tutors between a university and college.

- Students agreed that the social life was better at a university but college students agreed more strongly.

- While university students agreed the employment prospects were better for students from a university, college students were more likely to disagree with this.

- Students generally agreed that university was more daunting than an FEC however while college students also were in strong agreement that FECs were more friendly and welcoming than HEIs, university students were split with as many agreeing as disagreeing.

Overall students perceived that there were differences between the delivery of HE in the two settings but the open comments indicated a perception that each had its strengths and met the needs of different students.

'With higher education there is more independent learning and use of critical thinking skills than in further education.' (US)

'Students choose FE for specific reasons - inability to move away or less competitive entry requirements.' (CS)

'FE the building blocks for HE. FE an extension of school - an introduction to independent learning and working.' (CS)

4.1.3 Choice and Decision-Making

In relation to choices students make, Figure 4.5 illustrates comparatively between the two groups which factors had most influence on their choice. Figures presented are calculated as a percentage of the number of participants who responded that it did influence their choice where n=39 for college students and n=42 for university students.

While for all students who participated, the factors that most often influenced students were Distance to Travel, Course Availability, Location, Career Prospectus and then Cost of Fees, looking comparatively the priorities between the two groups differ:

- for those attending university the factors having most influence were Course Availability and Career Prospects

'I believe having a degree unlocks certain jobs and is a gateway to a better career and more knowledge when used correctly. (US)

- for college students it was Distance to Travel and Cost of Fees

'I chose the college I am studying at because I live 2 minutes away, it worked out cheaper and I know the staff and the college.' (CS)
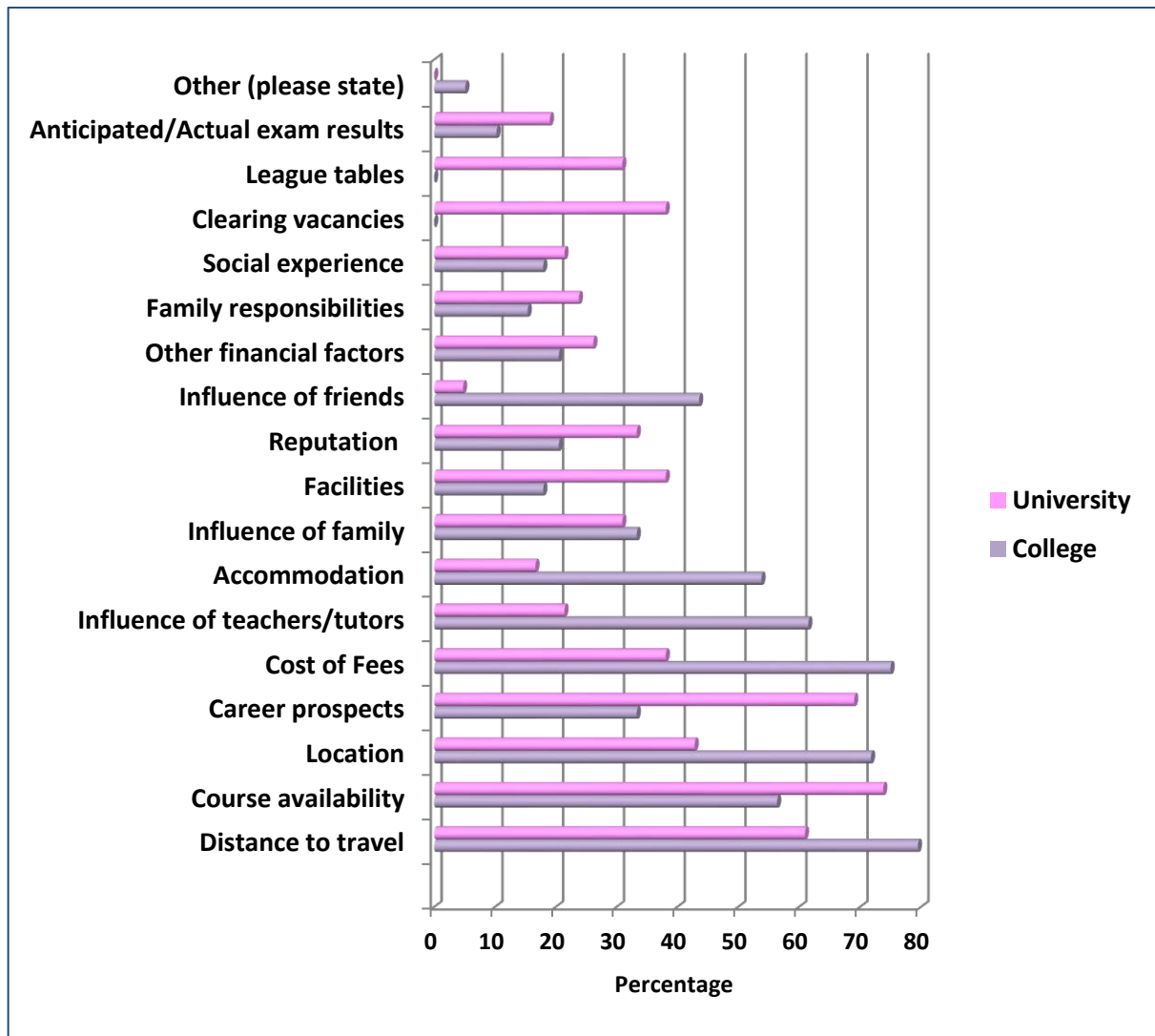
Figure 4.5 Influencing factors by institution

Respondents were asked, out of the factors they felt *did* have an influence on their choice which was *most* and which was *least* important. The top five factors which were most frequently stated as being *most* important (based on the percentage of those who considered this as a factor in their decision-making and then marked it as *most* important) were Career Prospects 33%, Family Responsibility 25%, Results and Clearing Vacancies 25%, Distance to Travel 21% and Fees 20%.

Figure 4.6 and 4.7 show this comparatively between those students who chose to undertake their HE at an FEC and those who chose university.
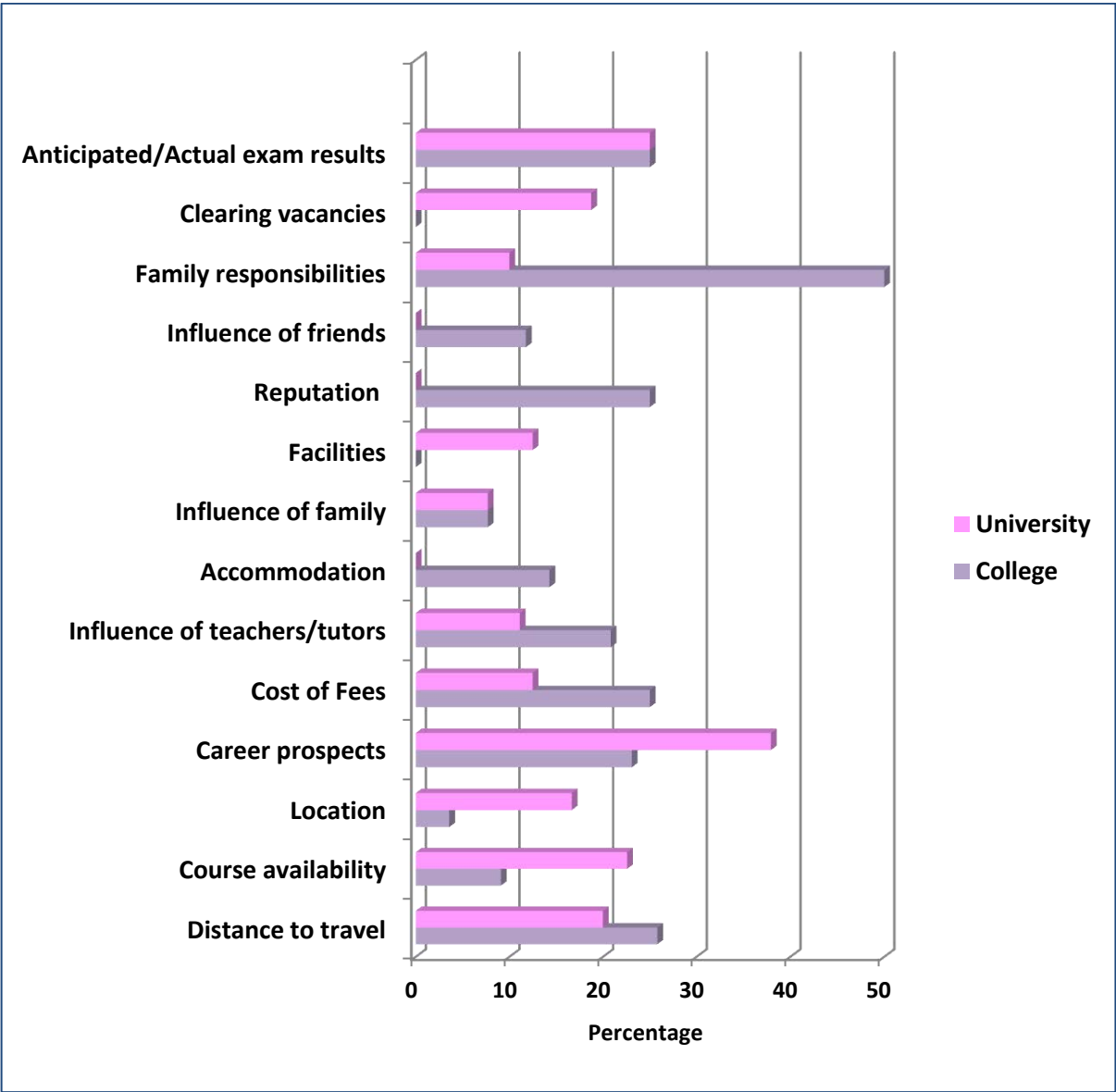
Figure 4.6 Most important factors by institution

For college respondents the *most* important were Family Responsibilities and Distance to Travel, however for university students the *most* important were Career Prospects followed by Exam Results.

'As a mature student with family commitments I had limited choice but I am happy with the options available to me.' (CS)

For me, deciding whether to move away or stay at home played the biggest part in deciding where to study. (CS)

'I originally intended to study Human Biology at Loughborough but my grades weren't up to the required level.' (US)

The top five factors that were most frequently stated as having the *least* influence (based on the percentage of those who considered this as a factor in their decision-making and then marked it as *least* important) were Social Experience 31%, League Tables 31%, Influence of Family 31%, Influence of Teachers/Tutors 24% and Fees 23%.

For college respondents the *least* important were Social Experience followed by Influence of Family, however for university students the *least* important were Influence of Tutors followed by Cost of Fees, League Tables and Influence of Family.
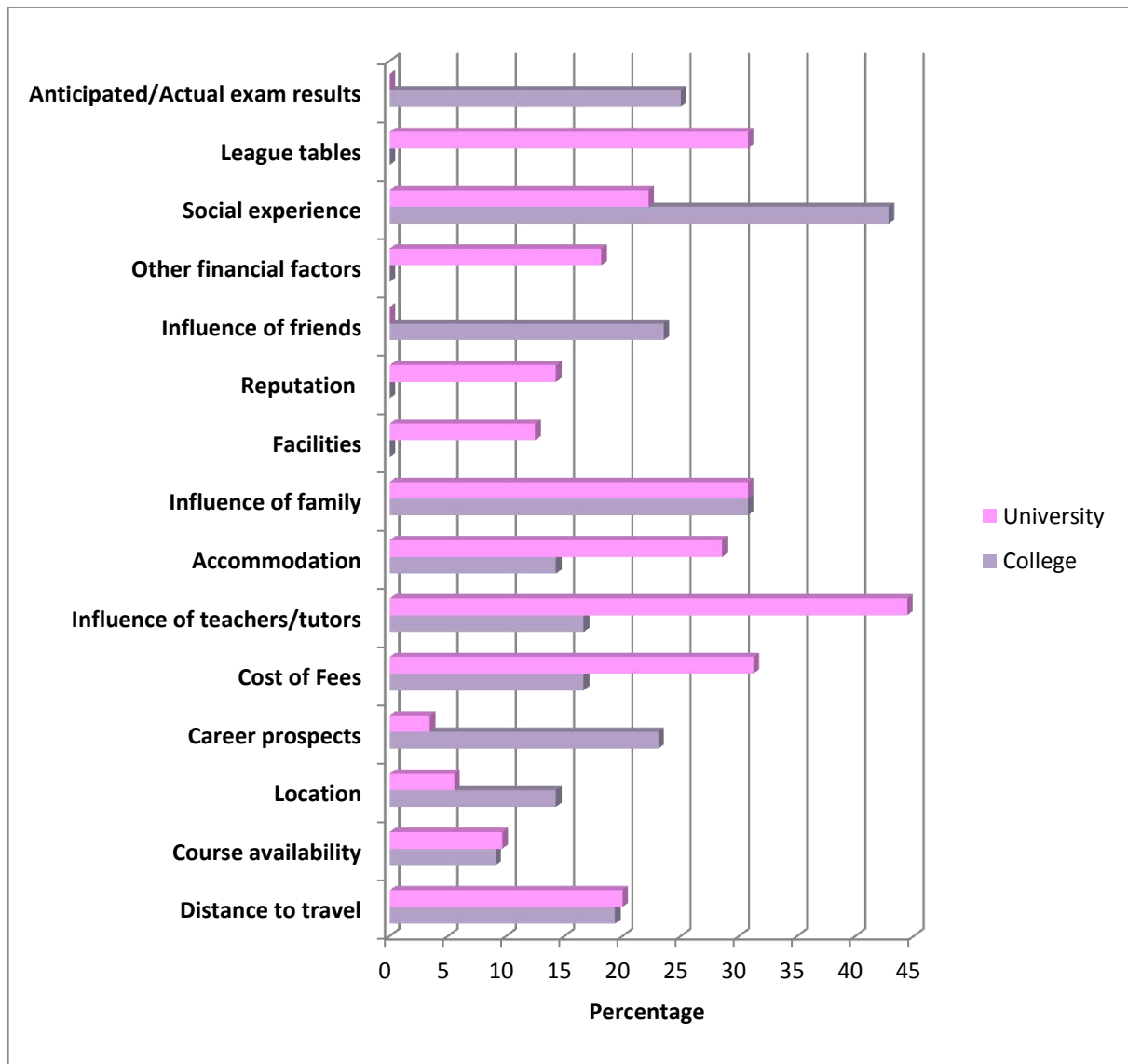
Figure 4.7 Least important factors by institution

Table 4.2 shows consideration students made to alternatives.

- Students attending university were more likely to have considered other courses and institutions

- Students attending college were much less likely to have used clearing

- Female students were twice as likely as males to have gained their place through clearing

Characteristic	College Respondents (%)	University Respondents (%)	All Respondents (%)
Considered other courses	53	69	62
Considered other institutions	54	76	65
Found selecting their course and institution difficult	31	38	36
Place secured through clearing	25	52	38
Females gaining places through clearing			26
Males gaining places through clearing			12

Table 4.2 Consideration of other options

These findings indicate differences between the two groups of students regarding the things that influence them when making choices in relation to their HE and how they prioritise these in their decision-making.

4.1.4 IAG

Respondents were presented with 15 statements about IAG and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale of one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). The heat maps for these questions are presented in appendix nine.

The majority of students tended to agree with most statements to a greater or lesser extent. While there was a level of disagreement with every statement the following statements had the most students disagreeing:

- 'IAG about continuing study was available throughout compulsory education'

- 'My parents gave me lots of help and advice in making my choices'

- 'I only had IAG from my school/college tutors'

- 'The IAG accessed resulted in me making different decisions to those originally planned'

- 'The IAG accessed had no impact on my decision'

The last two statements were the only two that showed a clear difference between university and college students. University students were more likely to perceive the IAG had influenced their decision and had made them change their mind.

Figure 4.8 illustrates the different priorities between those students who chose to undertake their HE at an FEC and those who chose university in relation to the IAG they accessed.

- College students were most likely to access prospectuses, attend open days and consult other relatives

- University students were most likely to use websites and consult their parents
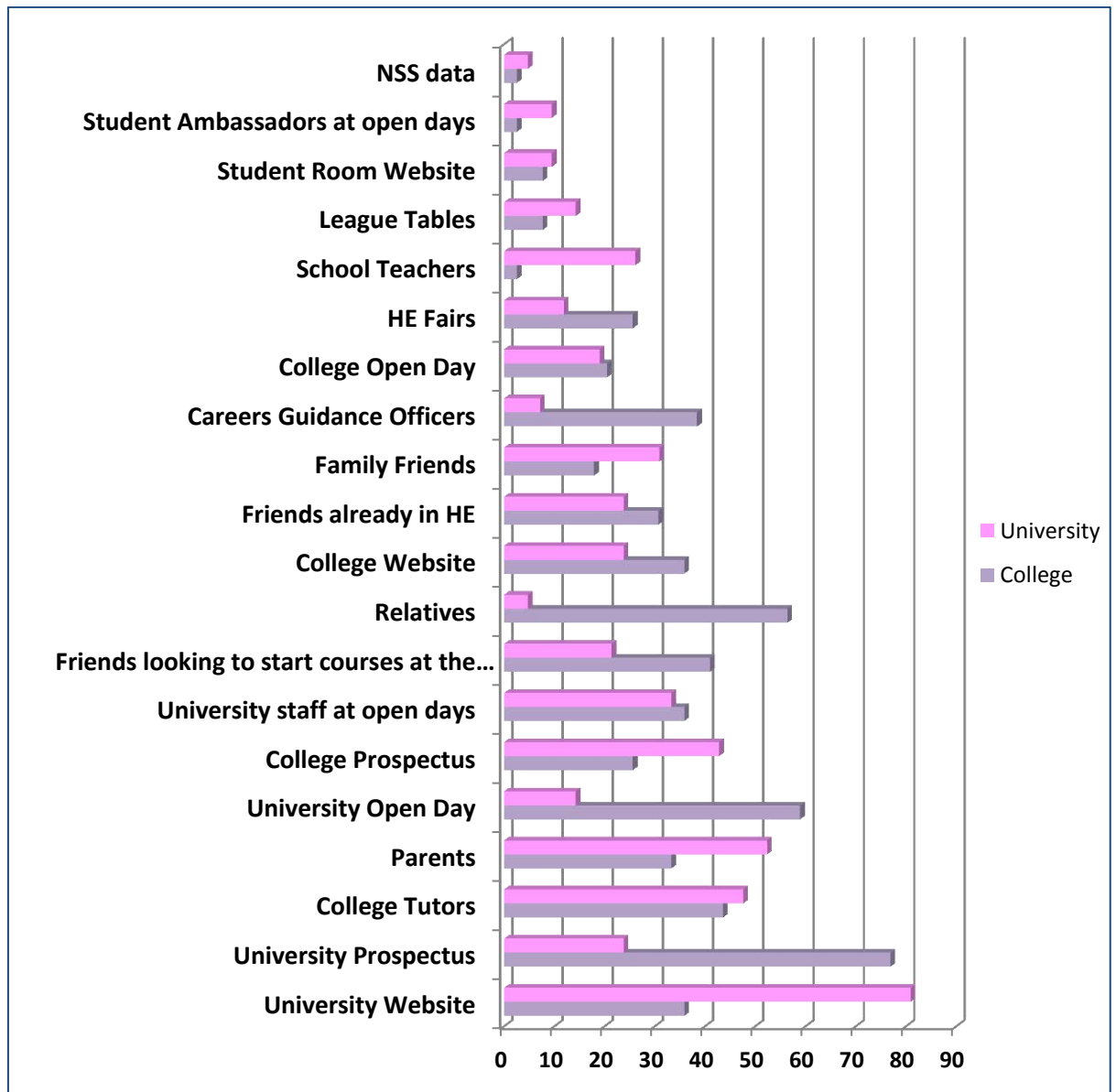
Figure 4.8 Sources of IAG accessed by institution

Respondents were asked out of the sources of IAG they *did* access which one was
the *most* and which was the *least* useful. The five sources of IAG that respondents
felt were *most* useful (based on the percentage of those who accessed that source
and then marked it as *most* useful); were College Tutors 40%, University Website

30%, College Open Day 22%, College Prospectus 21% and University Staff at Open Days 21%.

Figures 4.9 and 4.10 show this comparatively between those students who chose to undertake their HE at an FEC and those who chose university.

For college respondents the most useful were College Tutors and College Open Events.

> *'College tutor helped me decide what to do as I was undecided and left it at the last minute to apply at college.' (CS)*

> *'Struggled initially to find the right course but happy with decision made after talking to college HE staff.' (CS)*

However for university students the most useful were University Website followed by Careers Advisors.

> *'…relied on uni (web)sites…' (US)*
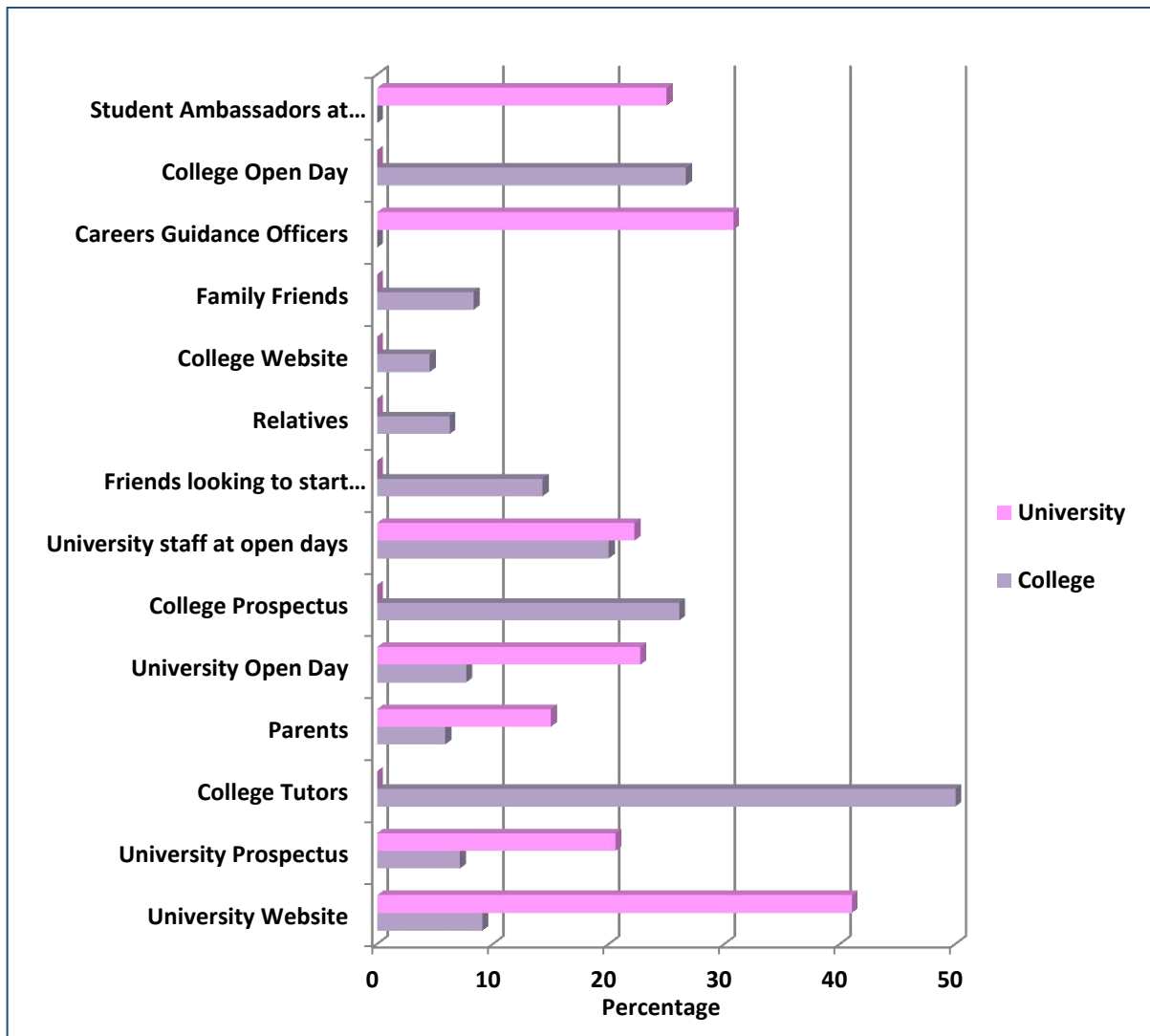
Figure 4.9 Most useful IAG by institution

The five sources of IAG that respondents felt were *least* useful (based on the percentage of those who accessed that source and then marked it as *least* useful); were NSS Data 40%, Friends Looking to Start University at the Same Time 36%, League Tables 33%, Student Room 33% and Family Friends 27%.

For college respondents the *least* useful were NSS Data and League Tables, however for university students the *least* useful were College Prospectus and Tutors.
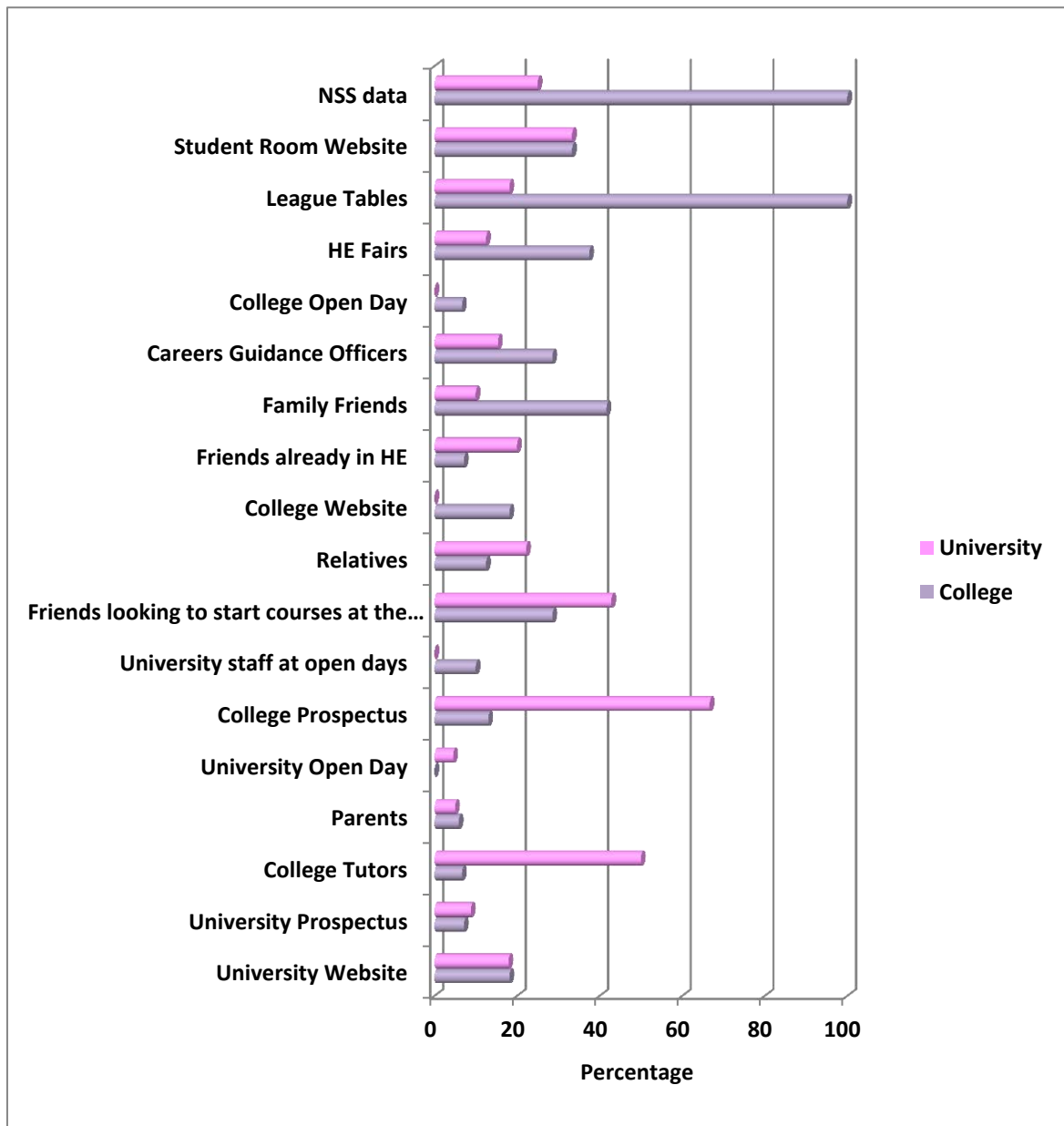
Figure 4.10 Least useful IAG by institution

Students from both colleges and universities had similar perceptions of IAG although they used it differently and prioritised different sources. Overall however they gave the impression of being both satisfied with the availability and usefulness of IAG and accessed a range of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' sources.

4.1.5 Aspirations

Respondents were presented with 12 statements about aspirations and expectations and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale of one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). The heat maps for these questions are presented in appendix ten.

Students were mostly in agreement with the statements. The statements where there was most disagreement were:

- 'I have planned to go on to HE and gain a degree for as long as I can remember'
- 'Gaining a degree was at one point beyond my expectations' (university students disagreed most)
- 'My parents had planned for me to undertake HE' (college students disagreed most)

More college students agreed that entering HE had given them more confidence and their level of agreement with the statement was stronger. Although only a handful of university students disagreed, fewer college students disagreed.

A handful of university students but no college students disagreed with the statements:

- 'Gaining a degree will enhance my job prospects'

- 'Gaining a degree will enable me to earn more money'

- 'It is important to me to have the opportunity to enter HE and gain a degree'

While a handful of students disagreed that they felt comfortable completing a degree and attending university fewer college students disagreed either about their comfort levels of completing a degree or attending college.

When asked about the job they wanted when they graduated some students were quite clear and very specific: '*Engineer at Jaguar Land Rover' (US);* while other students either said they did not know or listed several options: '*coach/physio/gym instructor/medical staff'* (CS).

Table 4.3 lists the career choices of students by institution. These were classified as:

- academic (a job in research),

- managerial (a business or management job),

- professional (a job leading to professional registration or requiring a particular qualification e.g. teaching),

- technical, (a job in the arts or supporting technology),

- vocational (a role not leading to professional registration but directly related to their education)

- undecided (not known or different careers listed)

Job Type	College %	University %
Professional	46	31
Undecided	31	17
Vocational	13	36
Technical	7	9
Managerial	3	5
Academic	0	2

Table 4.3 Career choices by institution

Although a large number of college students listed a profession as the career they would like to enter after graduation, most wanted to become teachers, which accounts for the majority of the 46% of college students opting for a profession. A large proportion of college students, 31%, were still undecided about the occupation they would like to enter on graduation compared to 17% of university students.

Overall the findings indicate that university students are better able to imagine their futures and have more of a sense of family encouragement in pursuing their aspirations than college students.

4.2   Qualitative Data Findings

This section is based on the findings from qualitative data from 48 students, 13 attending university and 35 attending college, collected via a mixture of one-to-one interviews, focus groups and a workshop, plus comments from the questionnaires.

4.2.1   Participants

Information about each student's age, sex and ethnicity is included as a reference for the discussion as these are all factors that have been discussed in relation to access to HE, especially in terms of non-traditional entrants. Appendix eleven shows information in relation to each respondent and their pseudonym used to preserve anonymity.

Eight students from the same faculty, but a range of courses, at WP University participated in unstructured interviews. There were two male and six female participants, three were over 25, six were White British, one White Irish and one Black African. Only one student had come straight from A-Levels at school, the remainder had either been in work prior to commencing their studies or had been undertaking a variety of college courses including some at level four.

Focus groups were held with students from three of WP University's partner colleges. All participants were under 26, the majority were White but three were Asian and one participant was Mixed Race.

Table 4.4 gives information about the participating colleges and participants.

College	Participants	M	F	Range of Awards Represented	Miles to Partner University	Miles to Nearest University
1	8	6	2	2	35	11
2	13	9	4	1	17	2
3	13	10	3	2	62	13

Table 4.4 Focus group participants

A conference was attended that included a workshop with six students from widening participation backgrounds discussing their journeys to HE. Students in the workshop were all under 25, five were female and one was male, three were White British, one Black African and two were Black Caribbean. They were from three different universities and one college. Two were studying the same subject the remainder were on different courses. Three had A-Levels and three had a BTEC.

4.2.2   Choice and Decision-Making

University and college students prioritised different factors in their decision-making which led to their choice of where to go for their HE.

- University students always considered their ultimate career goals and were well informed about the choices they made.

- Some college students, particularly those who had also secured places at universities appeared well informed making quite deliberate decisions while others appeared to have given rather less consideration to their decision to undertake HE focusing on their present concerns.

For those at university the motivating characteristic was, in all cases, a specific career path they wished to follow which required a degree education. Four students described having always known they wanted to go to university and therefore having planned this from the stage of GCSEs, even if their choice of career changed their

desire to attend university did not. Six were at college when they finally decided on their career route and three were working.

"Because I'd always wanted to go to university I started packing when I was in year five! I had a little suitcase above the wardrobe and I used to put all my stuff in it." (Fatuma, US)

"I never thought about going to university at all when I was younger, I didn't really think about it at all until I was doing my GCSEs. By year nine I'd decided I wanted to be a teacher." (Derek, US)

"I'd got 10 years' experience but no actual qualifications ….I was noticing that the job market was changing and there was a lot of people applying for vacancies at my place of work who'd got qualifications and I was thinking well, I'm a little bit behind here because although I have got some qualifications my CV wouldn't look as good as theirs did." (Mary, US)

Only two of the students studying at university were aware that it was possible to study a HE level course at a college so college had not even been a consideration. Ashley had commenced her degree at an FEC but had transferred to WP University because she was unhappy with the course and Katy had previously completed a FD at college.

Those attending colleges were more likely to have made the decision to enter HE while undertaking level three qualifications at college. Often referring to staying on to study a FD in a similar way to school children deciding to stay on to A-Level study, viewing it as the easy option as Rachel, Rory, Jo and Gareth indicate. For Rachel it was the ease of the application process, for Rory, Jo and Gareth it was about familiar faces and places and for Gareth there was the additional incentive of being able to keep his job. For all of these students choosing their local college was reducing the risks they associated with HE.

"I knew in my last year of college I wanted to stay on… Well it was easier to apply, because it was straight forward and we didn't need to go through UCAS and we knew what to do and didn't need to do loads of research on the place and the course." (Rachel, CS)

"…it was an easier option to come here because most of the people on the BTEC course were coming here as well so it would mean I would know everyone." (Jo, CS)

"We were already here doing a similar course but at level three and just stayed on. So knowing the area, knowing the tutors kind of influenced the decision to stay and do the course here rather than looking at university courses." (Rory, CS)

"…. it was an obvious choice, because it was close it meant that I could keep my job and mainly you know the place, you know where you're going so you feel comfortable." (Gareth, CS)

College students like Louis and Deepak also considered the level of support available at college and reflected on this in relation to their learning style and how this influenced their decision.

"I'd say this is my preferred style at the college, it's more one-to-one….you're not just another number in a list. At university where they've got 50 people they can only give you about three minutes to look at something with you but here they could look at yours for nearly a whole lesson if they needed to. It feels like you get more for your money when you come here." (Deepak, CS)

"Yeah that's one of the reasons I decided to come here. I did my two years of BTEC here and when I realised the numbers were going to be as small as this I knew I was going to get a lot more one-to-one help if I needed it." (Louis, CS)

Some students had returned to education after time in the workplace. Duncan and Mike described dissatisfaction with the job, their prospects and for Duncan his treatment by co-workers as the trigger for returning to education, although they had no long-term plan of where this would lead.

"I just genuinely didn't enjoy my job, it was boring, it was like welding and fabricating and because I was quite young I was getting put upon a bit by other people so in the end I just thought I'd leave and do something at college. Why I chose a BTEC I don't know." (Duncan, CS)

I didn't think I was going to progress any further in the job that I was doing without a degree. I was fed up with the lack of options and there was no career so I thought I'd be better to leave and do a degree. (Mike, CS)

One university student and at least six college students had previously attended university but dropped out in the first term. A few college students held unconditional places they rejected preferring to be near home or in a smaller institution. For college students like Lizzie and Louis they had the academic qualifications for university and after considering their options they chose their local college.

"I went to university as well but I didn't like it, it was a big university and I just preferred being near home so I transferred here." (Lizzie, CS)

"I'd been offered a place (at university) and accepted my choice and then it was about two weeks before I was due to go that I changed my mind because I wanted to stay more local." (Louis, CS)

For others the intention had been to go to university but they did not get the required grades and like Mike ended up somewhere not by choice but as the only option on offer.

> *"I did A-levels but I didn't do the best, so it was really about who would take me…" (Mike, CS)*

Students from both settings discussed starting A-Levels at school but being poor at exams and changing to a BTEC after doing badly in the first year exams or getting poor grades after completing A-Levels. This applied to at least ten students, and started to shape their perception of how they learn as Catherine and Louis describe:

> *"I started A-levels but I just didn't do very well because I was so rubbish at exams." (Catherine, US)*

> *"I got two U's and a D and dropped out to do a BTEC, because it was more suited to the way I learn." (Louis, CS)*

Unlike those at university, those attending colleges were often still unclear what they wanted to do when they graduated, so this was not a deciding factor for these students. Even those who had an idea often listed several options and in some instances professions that their current degree would not give them entry to. Nick, who is not undertaking a teacher training programme, for example, wanted to be a primary school teacher.

"I've always wanted to be a primary school teacher." (Nick, CS)

"I've never known what I wanted to do…. I knew I wanted to do this course but I'm not entirely sure what I want to do after this course still so I'm still trying to get some sort of experience and some sort of degree." (Ed, CS)

"I haven't a clue to be honest, still don't have a clue." (Kain, CS)

"I was sort of flitting from idea to idea sort of not really knowing where I wanted to go with things." (Kelly, CS)

Although distance was the most frequent reason students gave for choosing colleges, all of the colleges were within 15 miles of the nearest university campus. Cameron, although having grown up in the area, was unaware of the location of WP University and was surprised to discover it was less than two miles from the college.

"Locality, I've never travelled far from home." (Mark, CS)

"I think it depended on distance as well, how far away the place is." (Sujit, CS)

"I don't even know where the uni is. Facilitator: Are you not from here then? Yeah I am…" (Cameron, CS)

Seven of the university students were in student accommodation, most because they were too far from home to commute. The other six had made a conscious decision to stay within commuting distance, Chloe, Jaz and Mary because of family commitments; some were only travelling a few minutes while others were travelling up to an hour and a half each way. Chloe, for example had applied to three universities all within an hour of home and declared:

> "Yeah, I'm a bit of a home bird, even before the baby I was applying near home." (Chloe, US)

Catherine had gone away to university after college for a term before getting homesick and although she described herself as more mature with greater confidence following a few years in the workplace she still opted for her local university which now offered the course she wanted to do, giving her the incentive to return to HE.

> "I didn't want to go away again, I wanted to stay locally and when the course I wanted to do was running here there didn't seem much point, it was the right option. I didn't even think what I would do if I didn't get a place, probably just apply again next year." (Catherine, US)

Ashley, commuting the furthest to attend university as a result of an early change of institution, having been poorly advised at college, was under the false impression her only option was the local college because she was too late applying to get accommodation. Having then transferred to WP University and a more appropriate

course for her career aspirations she was considering halls for the remainder of her programme.

The next most common reason given by college students was remaining near friends and family, unlike some of the university students this was not because they had families of their own, just a desire to be near friends and family.

> *"For me it were the people who were around you, it's your family, your friends. A few of my friends were on the course I did previously, the one I started on before I changed, and that was a big factor for me." (Joe, CS)*
> *Facilitator - So being around friends and family was that important to all of you? Participants: Lots of nods and Yeses.*

> *"It (fees) never really influenced my decision, I always wanted to stay around here, just because of family to stay near the family, I just wouldn't have fancied being away from home." (Hayley, CS)*

The next reason most commonly discussed by college students was the financial aspect, be this cost of living, fees or general financial factors. While for a large proportion this had no impact as Hayley described above for some, like Duncan and Naveen it was a deciding factor. Duncan was concerned about his financial contribution to his parents and being able to maintain a part-time job so he could continue this.

"The finances and ability to live at home was a factor for me, I've got a part-time job and I help pay some of the bills and rent towards the house so my family needed me to stay at home to help with that."
(Duncan, CS)

"I considered three or four different universities…. I judged it on what would be better for me like on the finance side of it, like with the nine grand a year fees for the courses at university whereas here we are only paying £4,900 a year for the foundation degree."(Naveen, CS)

While university students discussed finances, like Catherine, they did not see them as instrumental in their decisions to attend university, did not consider fees a barrier and all understood how the new fees system worked.

"No, not at all, because the way I see it is that once I graduated and I have a job in this field I'm going to be earning a lot more than I'm earning now so what does go out of my wage I'm not going to miss. You only payback the fees when you're earning over a certain amount anyway, so I just don't think it really affects anybody that much." (Catherine, US)

This was not the case with all college students, where for a small number like Naveen implied above, fees had made a difference even though some clearly did not understand how the system worked.

"This course is like £2-3,000 a year cheaper than any university course, so it might not affect us now but when we come to pay it back it will be significantly less so that's better." (David, CS)

"Do they take it out of your wages, like when you are earning, say £5 or £10 up to £30 a month?" (Cameron, CS)

"I think if the fees had been the same, I would actually have gone away to university but thinking of the fees and that sort of thing no." (Emily, CS)

Prior achievement had an impact for some students from colleges and university, for college students it had involved a change from university to college while for university students they had already been considering their likely grades and had fall back plans that might mean a change of course.

"Well the course I wanted to do at XX they wanted higher points for and I didn't get good enough grades in my A-levels so that's why I come here. This was the closest I could come." (Sujit, CS)

"I applied to do physiotherapy and I got a conditional offer but one of the grades I just didn't meet so I wasn't able to do it so then I reconsidered my options." (Ben, CS)

"It was between two subjects at different unis… and it was depending upon the grades as to which one I went into." (Pippa, US)

Students from the colleges did not mention any aspect of course content as being important in their decision but for Mary, Chloe and Elisha it was very important

"XX had got something similar but when I'd looked at the modules the course was better here because it got the modules I wanted to do." (Mary, US)

"At first I was going to do a different course but then because I'd had a year to look at the courses properly I decided not to …I wanted to keep my options open a bit longer which is why I decided to do the course I'm doing." (Chloe, US)

For me I chose XX because of the placement year, I really wanted to do a placement and not many courses had that option. (Elisha)

There were contrasting approaches from two students who discussed their disabilities. The college student felt the smaller group would enable more one-to-one support and therefore college was a better option. The university student had taken a wider view and selected the institution based on the reputation of its support for students with a disability having researched the wider support services the university offered rather than just the tutorial support available.

4.2.3   IAG

Students came across as less satisfied with IAG in general through the qualitative findings than in the quantitative findings. While some of their experiences were similar there were also differences.

- Both groups were positive about the impact of previous/current students.

- Both groups, but particularly college students felt it would have been helpful to have information about careers their degree led to.

- University students were more likely to discuss their use of IAG in terms of research.

- College students were more likely to discuss options with a variety of people and less likely to have mentioned their use of other sources.

- College students were less positive about open days.

Students had very different experiences in relation to IAG directly from individuals. Generally they felt that 'people' could have done more. Some felt they had no family or friends to speak to who understood university, others spoke to them anyway and got negative responses, others got mixed responses with the mother being more positive than the father in all cases where there was a difference while others were

positively encouraged by family members. Students from both settings had similar

experiences as shown in Table 4.5.

College Students	University Students
"It was difficult for me to speak to anyone about it because no one else in the family has been to university so it was really difficult to get them to understand why I wanted to go and what it was all about." (Duncan)	*"I discussed it with my parents and they said what do you want to do that for?" (Mary)*
"My one granddad was against me even going to college, he said like you should go to work and start earning. My Dad didn't agree with it to start off with but then he conceded yeah you do actually need a degree to get a decent job…and my Mum was all for it." (Jo)	*"My Mum was thrilled that I got onto the degree course because she knew I really wanted it….but my Dad was like no you're not gonna do it." (Jonathon)*
My parents were happy for me to go. My Dad's only concern was the finance aspect of it. (Toby)	*"My Mum … she was just finishing her nurse training…., I sort of spoke to her about it, about what would be the best, what she thought would be the best thing." (Chloe)*
"My friend studies at Liverpool….and I've …visited her …. and she said if there was a chance of her doing it closer to home she said she would have done it." (Hayley)	

Table 4.5 Students' experiences of 'people' as a source of IAG

Students from both settings perceived their interaction with previous students as

positive:

"I think the open day was one of the biggest things that influenced my decision it was talking to the student ambassadors as opposed to the lecturers." (Fatuma, US)

"I also looked for quotes from students about what their experience had been. They appear on some websites." (Pippa, US)

"It was good being able to speak to some of the students who had done the BTEC here as well and then gone on to do this course. They all said they'd enjoyed it and thought it was a wise decision to stay here." (Jo, CS)

Students described the influence of tutors at different stages in their education. While some described positive experiences which had influenced their decision to pursue HE:

"I never really thought about it until I went to college, then one of my lecturers, who I'd known for two years also taught on the degree course and said I should think about it and that's when I started to consider maybe." (Carla, CS)

"There was a (college) tutor … she played a major role in developing me to have the confidence to come through to where I am now." (Jaz, US)

Others felt that tutors were pushing them to take courses without regard for what was in their best interest:

 "I do think that the risk is that the tutors are biased towards

recommending their courses instead of someone else's which might be

better for you." (Naveen, CS)

Jonathon and Ashley vividly described receiving incorrect information from college tutors. Both were lucky enough to find acceptable alternatives but others may not have been so fortunate.

"When I first went for the interview to college for the BTEC I said I

wanted to do physiotherapy and was this the course for me and they

said this was the course for me…. it wasn't until I started getting

rejected from all the physio courses at university that I contacted the

university and said look why do I keep getting rejected and they said

that it was my course as it didn't have enough science in it. I went

back to the head and said look you lied to me, it was two years of

hard work to get the BTEC… and he'd just lied to me… so I was quite

annoyed with that." (Jonathon, US)

"One of the ladies (at the college) helped me with my application and

she sort of showed me all the local colleges because I said I wanted

to stay local because of the accommodation and I'd left it late. She

didn't tell me anything about clearing places or that there might still

have been accommodation, I know that now but nobody told me at the time…

So I did email saying I want to do gymnastics coaching in the course is this going to be available and they said yes that would be fine…. But then when I got there it was clear after the first week that wasn't the case. When I asked he said that they didn't have any facilities for it. I spoke to my tutor there at the college and he said to just leave it, give it a chance … so I phoned the university that validates the course and asked to speak to the course leader. He said because I already had a BTEC...I could transfer onto one of the degrees at the Uni….I was then given a choice whether to just transfer on the same course but come to the university instead or to transfer to one of the PE type programs so I decided to change…." (Ashley, US)

Students from both settings also described positive experiences where tutors had encouraged and supported them in their application to HE.

"I spoke to (tutor name) quite a few times and she was really good. She said I sounded ideal for the course and she sent me some information through the post and everything. I hadn't actually registered with UCAS either because I haven't got any family who have been to university so I didn't know what UCAS was or what I was supposed to do so she helped there with that as well." (Mary, US)

'College tutor helped me decide what to do as I was undecided and left it at the last minute to apply at college.' (CS - questionnaire comment)

In respect of marketing materials those attending university were more likely to have used online options, including UCAS as a source of IAG as described by Mary, Jazz and Fatuma.

"I found the website information was really good it was really helpful especially the stuff on the course…I found that I could actually get more off the Internet and I did find it really helpful being able to do the research in my own time…" (Mary, US)

"I just… researched it online, I remember very well when I did my application through UCAS I looked at websites to find out about courses and the uni." (Jazz, US)

"….researching favourite websites about university. All those nights scouring the student room website have definitely come in handy." (Fatuma, US)

When discussing how they considered all the information most university students talked about how they researched their options. By contrast college students rarely did, instead they talked about what they had looked at.

So I researched it through the university website and prospectus and then

came to the open day…. I got everything I need to get from all that."

(Catherine, US)

On the whole students found that prospectuses were helpful but students from both settings did comment that they had already got the information online or felt that the prospectus was a marketing tool showing the university at its best (and not the reality), that the information was confusing and there was a danger of overload.

Table 4.6 shows this using the students' own words.

College Students	University Students
"I went to a fair where you could see lots of universities at the same time, so I got loads of prospectuses from the different Uni's and that was really helpful." (Mark)	*"The prospectus had everything in I needed to decide that it was for me." (Jonathon)*
	"…ohh these are our pretty pictures…in the prospectus you look at and then the reality" (Katy)
'I was confused about what was the right course to take, found it hard to balance research with other work…" (questionnaire comment)	*"It can be information overload and then nothing gets through." (Derek)*

Table 4.6 Perceptions of prospectuses

Students had very different perceptions of open days, university students were more likely to be positive about them and some reflected that they should have gone to

more while two perceived them not to give a realistic impression of university life.

College students were more likely to discuss university open days negatively and

compare them to a much more friendly approach from the colleges own IAG

evenings.

Table 4.7 gives examples of students' experiences of open days.

College Students	University Students
Facilitator: were they (open days) useful? *"I went to some and like (Kain) already said they just didn't seem bothered and at the end of the day I felt like I was just going to be another person in the room. It didn't seem like there was anyone that you could actually sit down with who would help. It didn't seem like they would be bothered about individuals like they are here and (name of tutor) was on our back to get us to come here when we finished our BTEC course." (Jo)*	*"I came to XX and loved it. I actually didn't go anywhere else I just made my mind up that day I wanted to get out of London…."* *(Elisha)*
"Me and my friend went … but when we got there it wasn't very good." (Ed)	*'Only went to two Open Days, not realistic of what it is to study, didn't bother with anymore.' (questionnaire comment)*
	"I dragged my mum around loads of Open Days…. I think that I just knew I wanted to come to this university….but I'm glad I looked around." (Beth)

Table 4.7 Students' experiences of open days

Ashley, who decided to apply too late to go to any open days said:

> *"I think it would have been good to have gone to open days. I think I would have thought more about the course. I really didn't know what the course was about so the open days would've helped me understand it was the wrong course and what other courses were available to me and also broadened by options about where in the country I might have thought about going."* *(Ashley, US)*

Pippa, who was unable to attend an open day at the institution she chose but arranged to visit at another time said:

> *"I saw it as it's going to be when I'm a student not with hundreds and hundreds of people here just visiting for the day and all the stalls. So that way you get to see what uni life is really like, which you don't normally get to see at open days, you get to see it on a real working day instead of stalls set up everywhere with banners here and people saying come and have a look at this. So it is actually really nice."* *(Pippa, US)*

Considering information that students felt they would have liked to receive, students from both settings felt they would have liked to have received better careers guidance at school. Some students were not given the opportunity or in some instances did not take the opportunity because they did not know what they wanted to do.

"I didn't have anything planned towards the end so I sat down with the careers person and looked at everything and she said well you could do a sports course.

Facilitator: And was that helpful?

No, because I still had no idea what I wanted to do." (Harry, CS)

'I always wish I could have had career guidance, students/young people who move a lot like me are always missed. If I had not been personally motivated because the career I want demands a degree then I would have never come close to being at university.' (US, Questionnaire comment)

"…careers advice is optional but it should be made compulsory so you get an idea instead of thinking I should have done that and having to go back and start again and pay another £400 to do another A-level you need." (Andy, CS)

Only one student expressed satisfaction with the careers guidance they were given during their compulsory schooling.

"My careers advisor, we had one at school. You went to her about uni applications, about anything to do with uni or going, so we'd go to her and she was the best person to sit and speak to about what you wanted to do…" (Pippa, US)

Students from both settings expressed a desire to know what sort of jobs the degree they were undertaking could lead to before they commenced their HE, this was stated more often by college students.

"Where the courses led to, even though I'm happy studying this I'm still not exactly sure about the options open to me." (Andy, CS)

"I think more with careers guidance, if it was more information before choosing the course about the career options (it) can lead to after doing a degree." (Jaz, US)

Students also expressed a desire to have known more about the course structure at a modular level before commencing on the programme.

"I think I would've liked to have known more information and of seen a course structure." (Ashley, US)

"Some of the girls didn't look at modules on my course and then when they realised what was involved a number of them transferred." (Carla, CS)

"Because I was so wanting the placement I didn't really look into the course content and I didn't realise they are really into the cognitive side and so I wish I'd done more research into the modules because I'm not so keen on that." (Elisha, US)

College students expressed a desire to have had the opportunity to speak to graduates from their course. They also felt it would have been useful to have been given the opportunity to go on a visit to their local university while studying level three programmes.

"… it would be good to hear what previous students had got out of this course, so to see where they are now and what jobs they are doing and what they've accomplished." (Louis, CS)

"I think it would have been good if we'd been on a trip to the uni to see the library and stuff…." (Jo, CS)

Students from both settings felt that teachers/tutors and other professionals who had attended university could have done more during their compulsory education to encourage them to undertake higher education.

"It is good to have somebody different coming in than just a regular teacher, like we said about the professionals coming in and doing life talks. Also they could get university students in but it would be good to get BTEC students in as well…. Also professionals who have been through it and what their journey was like to get to the job they are in now." (Derek, US)

"I think getting people like us to go into schools and see students and encouraging students to be more proactive and get involved in practical events at the universities and HE fairs. The key is them being able to relate to you." (Elisha, US)

4.2.4 Aspirations

In terms of aspiration and ability to imagine their futures there was a difference between university and college students.

- University students were undertaking HE as part of a plan to achieve their career aspirations and were undertaking additional activities to give themselves the best chance of getting the job they aspired to.

- University students were not restricting themselves to jobs available locally and appreciated that they may need to undertake a masters to achieve their goals.

- A large number of college students even after commencing HE were aspiring simply to get a better job than they would have done without a degree but were unclear what that might be.

- With the exception of students in one college, who were clearly being encouraged to consider the competitive graduate job market they would be entering and what else they would need to succeed, college students were focused on the qualification and not what else they could do to ensure their success.

The majority of students participating in interviews and focus groups were first generation HE attenders so the decision had primarily been influenced by teachers/tutors, self-motivation, or even popular culture as Austin, Fatuma and Beth describe.

"My tutor on the level three course suggested it would be a good path to go on to get my career." (Austin, CS)

"I always knew I wanted to go to university, I came to this country when I was 12 from Zimbabwe. My parents didn't but most of my extended family had…. I didn't know much about it and what was coming but I wanted to do it" (Fatuma, US).

"I've always known I wanted to go to university, you know when you're a kid and you picture yourself. I think it was probably Harry Potter's fault, I always wanted to be in an environment like this, an education environment." (Beth, US)

When asked about their reasons for entering HE both groups of students had similar motivations. These were generally to have better career prospects and to earn more money. Students also recognised the importance of education in this as described by Ed and Jaz.

"I went to uni….I left thinking I'd still be able to get a decent job, but I ended up with a load of crap jobs in bars and things like that so I realised it was better to come back and do this because it's going to benefit me in the long run." (Ed, CS)

"I've always been a person who believes that education is the key to a fruitful life." (Jaz, US)

Students attending university had realistic aspirations they were able to articulate with a clear idea before applying what their end goal was. So although as identified previously Ashley started off on the wrong course because she had a clear career goal she quickly realised this and made a change. Derek had been planning a career in teaching from 16 and just had to decide on his subject.

"Yes, I was looking for something that would be specific to supporting a career in coaching gymnastics." (Ashley, US)

"By 16 I was fairly sure I wanted to teach but I didn't know what I wanted

to teach, I knew the general path I wanted to take but not the detail."

(Derek, US)

Although some college students were able to clearly articulate their aspirations at the commencement of the programme it was clear that some had not considered their final career goal at the time of commencing HE and some were still unclear at the end of their first year.

Table 4.8 shows the range of focus in college students' aspirations.

Theme	References	Quote
Vague ideas	12	*"I want to be a PE teacher, or a personal trainer or something." (Gemma)*
Clear Focus	10	*"I want to be a Sports Coach" (Louis)* *'I'd like to found a business eventually, offering careers advice.' (CS, Questionnaire Comment)*
No Idea	9	*"Not a clue." (Gareth)*
Leaving to chance	4	*"I just want to see where it all ends up really." (Charlie)*

Table 4.8 College students' aspirations

Some college students were still unclear as to what jobs they could pursue after completion of their degree or felt it was too far in the future to need consideration.

"I ended up on this course but I don't know what I can do with it" (Mark, CS)

"That's ages away yet."(Martin, CS)

All university students indicated they had given consideration to further, higher level study. Ben (CS) specifically mentioned his desire to complete a masters degree as part of his aspirations and a large proportion, like Finn, at the same college indicated they were also considering masters study. Students at the other two colleges were less positive about masters study, Mark for example talked about going on to undertake further study because he did not want to get a job but enjoyed learning and a few mentioned continuing on to undertake teaching qualifications.

"I want to do a masters after I graduate and obviously to access that I need a minimum of 2:1…" (Ben, CS)

Facilitator: "A couple of you mentioned masters study do you want to go on to do that? ... Wow, quite a few of you, is that because you've been encouraged to do it during the course?"

" Yeah, it sets you apart from everyone else so you can get a better job because obviously lots of people have degrees, leaving school and going to university is the norm so if you've got your masters it sets you apart from everyone else and makes you more employable." (Finn, CS)

Thinking forward to where they might work after completing their degree university students were more likely to have higher expectations and a broader view of the options available to them.

"…. or else going to Australia and working for an athletic club" (Jonathon, US)

"I'm not stuck here now I can go anywhere." (Ashley. US)

"…I would then be able to run a private practice." (Pippa, US)

College students were more likely to have lower expectations and not have thought outside of their locality.

"I'm not expecting to get a job straight away." (Jo, CS)

"I want to work here at the college" (Charlie, CS)

"I think if it was the job I wanted even if it was somewhere like Middlesbrough I'd have to take it." (Cameron, CS)

"I think I'll look for experience working in a school as an assistant before I do anymore education." (Toby, CS)

College students, except those at one particular college were focused on their studies and not considering their future beyond graduation. University students were considering their future after graduation, how their CV would look and how to get their dream job so Jaz and Chloe were both student reps and others were student mentors or like Beth, aware of opportunities with the student union.

> *"I'm totally focused. I'm the only person on my course to do a placement….my CV's starting to look well now. Basically what I'm aiming for is to graduate all being well, please God with a first-class honours degree." (Jonathon, US)*

> *"If you are in a society in first year you can run to be on the committee in the second year and that's a lot of responsibility that looks good on your CV." (Beth, US)*

> *"…lots of people will get a 2:1 and above so that's not enough, you need to have something different to set you apart and make your CV stand out from the rest. I think therefore there is some pressure to step up and take these (mentor) opportunities." (Elisha, US)*

> *I've done peer mentoring, and many other activities…so many opportunities have been afforded to me. (Fatuma, US)*

College students despite having access to similar opportunities, with the exception of Carla who was an ambassador for Aim Higher, were unaware they existed and did not engage with the wider university.

> *"Anything probably gets sent to our uni email but we don't look at it."*
>
> *(Louis, CS)*

College students did not feel the placement element of FDs counted as experience in terms of giving them a competitive advantage in employability.

> *"I think it's going to be hard for all of us to just graduate and then go out and get a job unless you've got the experience behind you. I think working in a school and getting the experience would be best."*
>
> *Facilitator: But don't you do work experience as part of your course?*
>
> *"Yes but it's only a minimum. You only have to do 50 hours." (Jo, CS)*
>
> *Facilitator: Do any of you do more?*
>
> *"Yes but the others do a full placement year."*
>
> *Facilitator: Not everywhere so you have a head start in terms of experience over a lot of people.*
>
> *"I guess." (Louis, CS)*

4.2.5 Differences between HE Delivered in University and FECs

Although students from both groups perceived there to be differences in the delivery of HE in university and colleges none of them expressed dissatisfaction about their choice having considered this.

University students, as Jonathon articulates, perceived that staff in a university would have relevant experience as well as subject knowledge and good teaching skills and that college tutors were less experienced.

> *"Our lecturers all have relevant years' experience … I don't think the*
> *college lecturers would have the same skills….universities are going to*
> *have a higher pay packet for their lecturers, so you're not going to get that*
> *same level….." (Jonathon, US)*

For college students' their perception was that the learning environment at university would not be as supportive because classes were so big and tutors could not possibly have time for everyone as described by Ben and Diane. Mark suggested he would not have survived the course at university because of the lack of support he perceived there would be.

> *"I think if you are quite introverted it's quite easy to become isolated and*
> *you'd just get lost in the abundance of students because maybe there's*
> *not that consistent and regular support with your lecturers and stuff."*
> *(Ben, CS)*

"I think it's a support factor as well here, because obviously I knew, me I've like got dyslexia so it would be a lot harder for me to learn at uni in a bigger class like 30 or something unlike over here the class of 12." *(Diane, CS)*

"If I hadn't come here to do my course, if I'd done the three years at uni I wouldn't have lasted….I just think I like to be nurtured, to have someone available to help it's really reassuring and I wouldn't have had that at uni, there are too many of you." (Mark, CS)

Both groups agreed that university probably made one more independent, both as a learner and in terms of life skills.

"I think it's more of an advantage to me…being here at college because when I talk to my uni mates, they just don't get on with their work, it's up to them whether they do it or not and even though they are really smart they just don't do it." (Colin, CS)

"By coming to university you've got that responsibility…. if you fall behind it's only up to you to catch up, it's your responsibility you get out of it what you put into it basically." (Jonathon, US)

"I think sometimes that (living away) can be an advantage though, because it helps you become more independent if you are like fending for yourself rather than living at home." (Ed, CS)

"With the uni route you can live away from home you become independent and you become able to control your own life so it's not just a degree." (Pippa, US)

An interesting concern for college students was that university would have been full of temptation and distractions so they felt more comfortable with the structure offered at college.

"I'd probably say temptation, because my brother was one of them students that used to go out every night and then sat at the back of the lecture hall and fell asleep in lectures the next day." (Jason, CS)

"I went up to one of my mates at university in half term and they had this amazing flat and were playing cards to early hours of the morning and chilling and I was thinking yeah this could be me but then I thought I'd get no work done…." (Toby, CS)

College students also felt college timetables, concentrated into a couple of days and consistent throughout the year, enabled them to accommodate part-time work were advantageous.

> *"Balancing the other commitments as well such as a work placement on the course it's much easier when you are in a couple of full days rather than a few hours here and a few hours there spread over the entire week. So it allows you to keep part-time jobs like (Nick) said and other commitments can be more flexible." (Jason, CS)*

Mature students particularly, like Mary, felt that the larger proportion of young students in colleges would not have suited them and college students, like Rory expressed dissatisfaction with sharing facilities with younger students.

> *"When I go to pick my son up from college you're like a fish out of water, there aren't many mature student….a lot of them start at 16, and I don't know I feel as if at university they do cater more for the mature student….I just feel more comfortable, there seems to be a bigger age range." (Mary, US)*

> *"I think at uni the students are more mature as well, because here when you go in the library sometimes some of them are quite immature and they make a lot of noise." (Rory, CS)*

Both groups perceived facilities and resources would be better at university. Those attending colleges with experience of a university setting, however brief, were particularly struck by the difference.

> *"The library is much better at uni, when I lived in… I used the library there and it's much better. I found it a lot easier to find specialised books and online material and references. I think you accessed more because the books were right there in front of you and you didn't need to search websites for electronic resources." (Mike, CS)*

> *"I think we probably have access to less resources here, when I went and looked at the university the library was much much bigger, and it looked like it had a bigger selection of our books to be honest." (Gareth, CS)*

> *"…for a recent assignment we had to do a lab test but when we came to do it we realised we'd not got the right equipment at the college, so we had to just like improvise and then halfway through the test that equipment broke so we couldn't really finish the test we just had to like make it up." (Kelly, CS)*

Ashley, who was in a unique position to comment having started at college but was dissatisfied so transferred to the partner university, found the opportunity to mix with

students from other courses in lectures and seminars was preferable to her college experience which centred on computers in the classroom, but with limited access outside of time-tabled sessions.

> *"At the college it was just lots of sitting around in a room being talked at or on the computer whereas here there's loads of variety. I quite like going to the lectures and then to the seminars but in the college it was all focused on the computers. It's good being with the others on the different courses because you get a different perspective.*
> *The IT facilities are better here as well even although we were sat in front of their (College) computers all the time in lessons actually getting access to a computer outside of that was quite difficult." (Ashley, US)*

Social life was perceived as a big difference for both groups. Some regret was expressed by college students at not having the opportunity to participate in 'freshers', or join clubs and societies however many said they would not be able to participate because of part-time jobs. Similarly university students were positive about the opportunities for a social life university offered although none were particularly active participants citing course pressure, family commitments and employment as barriers to participating.

> *"I think the experience for the students socially is different because if you go away to university then you stay in halls so then you've got the whole going out and fresher's experience." (Jonathon, US)*

"Because I've got a child and a job I don't have time for the social life, so I've never been on a night out with them….I would have liked to have been able to join a society, the students union or something and you can't do that at college but I just haven't got time." (Chloe, US)

The university experience was also referred to by both groups as a difference, some college students perceived that by staying near home, not meeting new people and not mixing with people from other courses they were not having the opportunity to broaden their views. University students felt college students missed out by not having the opportunity to experience the wider benefits of university:

"I think it's nice to come to a university because of the whole package you get, you've got the student union you can be involved in different things, you can talk about postgraduate courses. I just feel as if it's nice to have a university environment, so you get the whole experience of university. It's dedicated to your degree level learning experience and if you want to go on to do postgraduate study you're here and you can talk about it so you can do it all here in one place." (Mary, US)

"Yes, I do think you miss out on some of the wider university experience and the opportunity to broaden your view…" (Martin, CS)

"I think it does like narrow your view a little bit. It's interesting to talk to people doing other degrees and discuss what they do and how things are going with their degrees. Here you only talk to people doing the same as you so it's really narrow you just get the one view." (Deepak, CS)

The final area was status, with many students from both settings either perceiving themselves or perceiving that others perceived a status difference.

"I don't know how employers would look at that, would they favour someone with a university degree over someone who'd done one at college?"
Facilitator: "So you think a university has a higher status?"
"Well yes...I think the university is going to be better…" (Catherine, US)

When college students were asked where they told others they studied a large number admitted to saying they were at university and linked this to others' perceptions of HE in FE.

"If I said I was at college people would think I was doing my A-Levels again or bricklaying or something like that (laughter from group) they would! If you say you are at university they know I'm not doing an NVQ or something like that." (Martin, CS)

When university students were asked if they would have preferred to stay at college given the option the answer was a unanimous no. Chloe for example framed this in terms of feeling like she had made an upward transition in her learning by choosing to study at a university.

> *'I actually know a girl who is at xxx college who is doing a degree level course there and I know she still gets spoon fed, they get a lot more help than we do. So I think coming to an actual university just helps you make that step.' (Chloe, US)*

When students who were attending college were asked if they would have preferred to have gone away the majority were happy with their choice with just a few indicating they would have preferred to go to university.

> *'I feel that college is a little disappointing which is why I am going to take a year out and apply to university in a year's time.' (CS, questionnaire comment)*

4.3   Findings Summary

The quantitative data highlighted some differences in the characteristics of students attending the different institutional settings for their HE. These included differences in the diversity of the students from age, sex and ethnicity, to prior family experience of HE to their geodemographic classification and prior education.

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative data identified different approaches to the decision-making process between university and college students who prioritised different factors and assimilated risk in different ways. University students were more mindful of their career goals while some college students had given less consideration to their decision in the context of their future focusing instead on their present situation. While the quantitative data indicated similar perceptions of IAG the quantitative data highlighted differences in approach and use of IAG sources. Differences in aspiration and future focus were clear between the two student groups in both the quantitative and qualitative data with university students having more clarity about their career goals and aspirations for the future than college students.

While the quantitative and qualitative findings both indicated similar perceptions in terms of the differences in perceptions of HE delivered in different settings, the impact of this was different between the two groups of students.

Having established through an analysis of the data that there are differences in decision-making, perceptions and aspirations between those WP students who choose to undertake their HE at university and those who choose their local college the next chapter will put this in the context of the conceptual models from the literature and draw conclusions based on these findings.

5   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the study findings in the context of the existing literature and frameworks presented earlier. It will highlight any supporting or contrasting information to further develop these and answer the research questions outlined at the beginning. Following this discussion it should be possible to draw some conclusions from the study, which will be presented in the next chapter, along with recommendations.

The findings of this research, as presented in chapter four highlighted differences in the perceptions and experiences of those students who chose to attend a university and those who chose to attend a college for their HE.

These differences began with the way students made decisions about their HE and how they chose their course and institution, including their use of the various sources of IAG and the level of risk they were prepared to expose themselves to. The differences continued in terms of the clarity students had about their aspirations for the future both during the decision-making process and while undertaking their HE. Finally there were also differences relating to how these students perceived the different HE environments and what was important to them with regards to these different perceptions.

This chapter discusses these differences, builds on the theoretical work of authors discussed in chapter two and links the findings back to the research questions identified in chapter one, aiming to draw conclusions that will inform the answers to these questions.

5.1   Choice and Decision-Making

The factors, and their relative importance, that students considered when making their decisions about HE, as described in chapter four, are not surprising based on the existing literature (Ball et al, 2000, 2001; Connor et al. 1999; Connor and Dewson, 2001; Reay et al, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2005). The differences between the factors considered by these two groups of students, opting to undertake their HE in different types of institution however, are of interest.

The research question asked: *what are the factors that influence a widening participation student to choose to undertake their higher education in a further education college as compared to those undertaking it in a university?*

Choice has been divided into three themes, demographic, risk and course-related for the purpose of this discussion. For university students the course-related factors were much more important to them, indicating a focus on the future and long-term decision-making.

For college students, factors around familiarity and finances were most important. Both of these themes can be linked to a perception of risk, financial risk and the risk of not fitting in and having to make changes as described by Gilchrist et al (2003) and Archer (2006) and Reay et al (2009) in relation to working-class students fitting in to the elite university system.

5.1.1 Choice based on Gender, Ethnicity, Age, Social Class and Qualifications

As 72% of the respondents to the questionnaire from colleges were male and 67% of respondents to the questionnaire from university were female it appears that male students are more likely to choose an FEC and female students a university but this could be a result of gender bias to certain subjects as observed by Archer et al (2003), Gilchrist et al (2003) and Reay et al (2005). There was a strong focus at some partner colleges on sports related courses that are more likely to be the significant factor attracting more males. Conversely at the university there were a higher proportion of respondents from the Faculty of Health, which attracts a greater percentage of female students.

Although the majority of respondents were White British the ethnic mix of the respondents from a university setting was much greater, 52% were White British, compared to FECs, where 92% were White British. This mirrors the findings of Parry et al (2012), who explained this by the large number of international students at universities however this study specifically excluded international students but still came up with similar findings. Research has shown that one of the factors influencing choice of the WP student is diversity and they are therefore more likely to choose a new university (Reay et al, 2005). That research did not look at students studying in FECs and their choices, so it may be that white students are more likely to consider an FEC as an option for their HE while students of other ethnicity still prefer the diversity of a new university. There is evidence that ethnicity also has subject bias, which could also be the reason for the difference (Thomas, 2001 and Archer et al, 2003).

While 64% of university students were in the 17-21 age range, 87% of college students were in this age range. The qualitative comments suggest mature students prefer a university where the age range is broader and there are no students under the age of 18 who may have a less mature approach to their learning. Current literature such as Gilchrist et al (2003) looks at age in terms of participation rates but not in relation to choice. Parry et al (2012) did consider age and unlike the findings in this research identified that those undertaking HE in FECs were generally older than those completing their HE in the university sector. Their study included a large number of part-time students, who have been excluded from this study, which explains the difference.

University students were more likely to come from a postcode area that included people from the A, B and C1 social classifications (appendix seven), than college students. This may be as a result of those living in these areas having had the opportunity to mix with others in their community whose habitus and social capital is one where attending university is the norm and therefore their exposure to HE was increased. Archer et al (2003, p9) suggests the existence of a 'cultural accessibility' within those from a higher socio-economic status so those who are immersed in this culture because of the community they are based in, rather than their own habitus, may be more inclined to aspire to university, while those with a similar habitus and social capital but who are surrounded by others of lower socio-economic status face a culture that perpetuates the belief that university is not for them.

Those students with A-Levels, HNC or Access qualifications were more likely to have chosen a university for their HE and those undertaking BTEC awards at a college were more likely to continue at the college than those undertaking A-Levels or

'Access' qualifications at a college. Gorard et al (2007) suggest a stratification of post-16 education resulting in segregation of low achievers on vocational programmes from higher achievers on more traditional academic routes. This could explain the higher level of uptake of university HE places by A-Level students. This also reinforces Shaw's (2012) concept of the tentative learner identity as students of similar ability are segregated into different learning routes, not encouraging students to establish a more confident learner identity. The result is a lack of confidence in their ability as learners and therefore a reluctance to apply to HE outside their established comfort zone, limiting their choice of HE, thus as Crozier et al (2008) suggest, failing to reach their potential.

Additionally the direct link between the BTEC subject and the HE subject they choose, the vocational nature of the FD and previous contact with the same tutors, who may have taught them during level three may increase their security. This in turn reduces the level of risk these students associate with HE, identified by Gilchrist et al (2003) and Archer (2006) as barriers to participation for WP students. This is in keeping with the findings of Hoelscher et al (2008) who found students undertaking vocational qualifications and staying on at an FEC for their HE were more likely to cite familiarity as a factor in their choice of institution. The result is participation in HE, but a limitation in choice, as FECs offer a limited range of HE level subjects, and a different HE experience.

University students were more likely than college students to have gained their place through clearing. This suggests college students had intended to undertake their HE at a college from the point of application to HE. This is supported by the qualitative comments which indicate some college students just 'stay on' at the college without

putting much thought or effort into their HE options unless guided by a tutor. This could be because of their lack of confidence in their abilities, something noted by Crozier et al (2008) in their study, making students reluctant to plan ahead and reach their potential. This is not unlike the findings from other studies that suggest students on vocational programmes are reluctant to engage with planning their next steps to HE until the last minute (Reay et al, 2009; Hutchings and Archer, 2010 and Shaw, 2012).

5.1.2 Risk in Decision-Making

A difference between the two student groups appears to be their approach to risk, particularly debt. For college students, factors that were most important to them were current concerns, including cost of fees and distance to travel, which have been described as risk factors (Gilchrist et al, 2003).

Fees are of particular interest as these students were the first year of HE students to encounter higher fees. College students rated this as one of the most important factors they considered in their decision-making. Over 70% of those who opted to stay on at college considered fees a factor in their decision-making, whereas less than 40% of university students did. Nearly 25% of college students who considered fees identified them the single *most* important factor in their decision-making, compared to just over 10% of university students who considered fees. Only 15% of college students considered fees as the single *least* important factor compared to over 30% of university students who considered fees. This concern with financial commitment has been identified as an issue for WP students participating in HE by

previous authors, describing it as a risk factor (Archer and Hutchings, 2001 and Gilchrist et al, 2003).

The qualitative data further informs this, it becomes apparent that those students who chose university understand the new fee mechanism and discuss considering the implications but deciding the benefits outweigh any risk. College students by contrast did not always understand the new system, tended to overestimate the debt and were sometimes confused about how the loan is repaid. They focused on the whole debt now and seemed unable to consider it in the long-term relative to their graduate earnings.

While concern for distance is in keeping with the literature, Reay et al (2005) speaking about university choice suggest that WP students feel compulsion to attend their local institution; Bird and Crawley (1994) looking specifically at students undertaking HE in an FEC identfied location as a major deciding factor as did Hoelscher et al (2008) whose study included students progressing to HE in an FEC.

Although distance and desire to remain at home near friends and family were influencing the decision-making of college students, all colleges participating in the qualitative phase were within 15 miles of their nearest post-92 university campus. We do not however know how far students were travelling to these colleges, which were all in the city centre and easily accessed by public transport compared with university campuses often out of the city centre and possibly requiring more than one bus or train ride. Understanding how far students were travelling to college and what they perceived an acceptable journey to be would be something for further consideration. Students also discussed the need to continue with part-time work in order to cover

cost of living expenses and so wanted to stay locally to continue in their current employment.

5.1.3 Course-Related

University students identified factors as most important that were linked to their future aspirations; career prospects, entry requirements and course availability which are similar to the areas of consideration of the traditional university student such as those participating in the research conducted in schools by Ball et al (2000). They were particularly concerned about career prospects and how their choice of subject and institution would enable them to achieve their career goals. University students also demonstrated awareness and consideration of the impact of their exam results on their decision-making about HE.

College students perceived exam results and career prospects to be least important factors in their decision-making. Possibly because even if they had not decided at this stage to undertake their HE in an FEC they knew it was an option and although they were deciding to enter HE they were not thinking beyond this to life after graduation. While over 60% of respondents overall had considered other courses or institutions, 46% of college students had not even considered alternatives.

From the qualitative data we know that although many did consider other options, because they went to open days and made university applications, we do not know how seriously they considered them. Many of the references are quite negative which could indicate college students had already decided to continue at the college therefore did not have an open mind to other options. The qualitative data indicated

that college students often did not consider their future beyond deciding to stay on to HE having no career in mind or in some cases any awareness of what the degree they were pursuing would enable them to do. This is in keeping with the assertion of Parry et al (2008) that the choice to be made by college students moving from level three to four study within their college was not subject or institution driven but based on whether they should or should not continue in academia. This is in stark contrast to the qualitative data from university students for whom career had been a major influencing factor in their choice of course and institution.

College students identified social experience as the *least* important influencing factor, again signalling their focus on more tangible issues. Connor et al (1999) identified that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were generally less likely to participate in the social life traditionally associated with university life. Although in this study it was only college students who specifically identified social experience as the *least i*mportant factor in their decision-making, in their interviews university students indicated no or limited participation, even though they had the opportunity to do so, citing similar reasons to the college students.

5.1.4 Summary
Figure 5.1 illustrates the areas considered by students when deciding on their route into HE. For students attending FECs they weighted more heavily the areas of familiarity and finance, both of which have been classed as risk factors. HEI students by comparison weighted more heavily the areas of course-related characteristics.
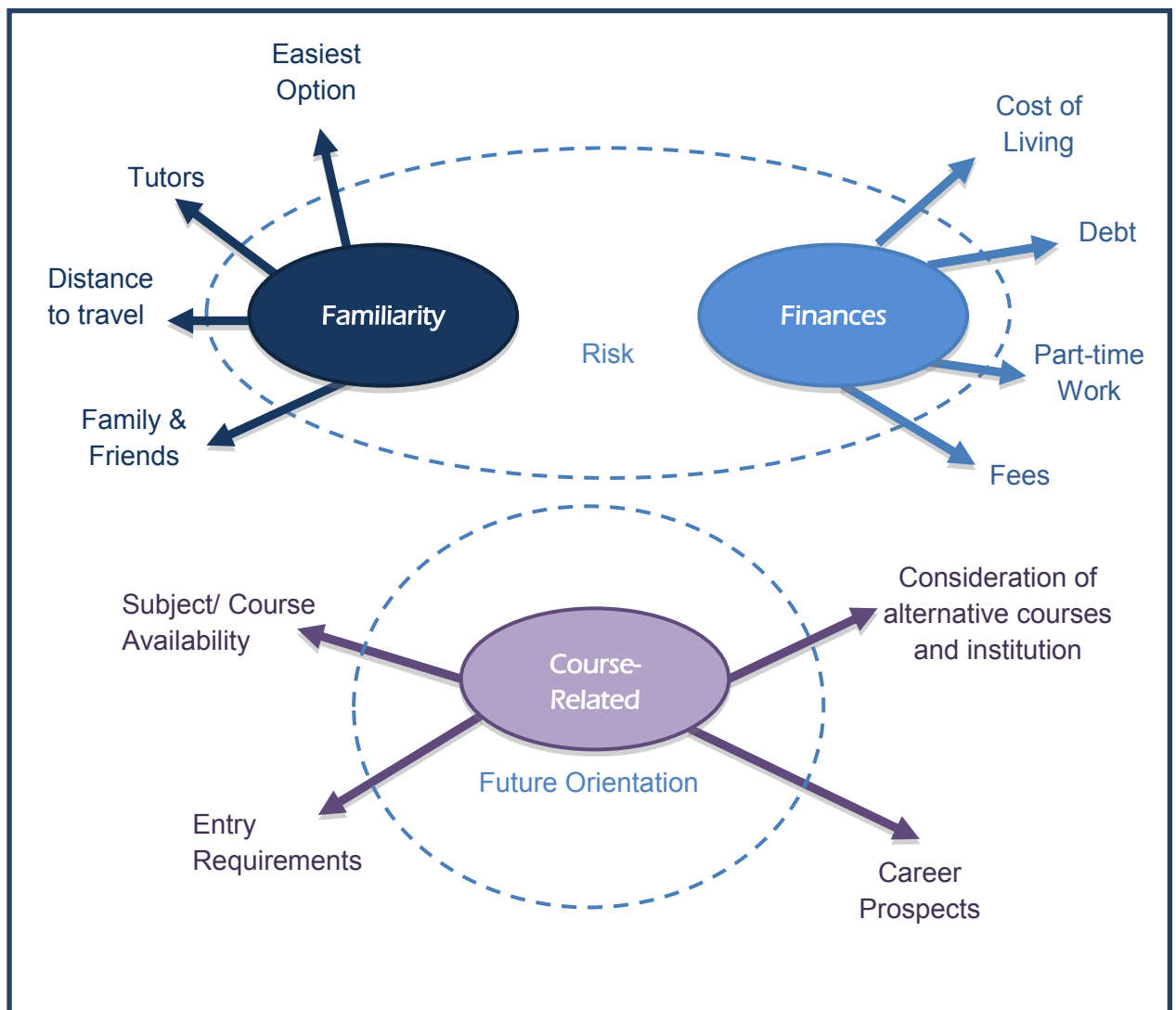
Figure 5.1 Areas of consideration when deciding to undertake HE

This informs our understanding of why some non-traditional students choose to study HE in FECs and others at university. The mind-set at the stage of decision-making is already different and students are in fact prioritising whether the present or the future are most important and then making a life-style choice as Reay et al (2005) proposed.

Those choosing colleges are more likely to be risk-averse and although those choosing university are not necessarily risk takers they appear to be better able to assimilate the risk and therefore manage it. We could conclude that those choosing university are risk managers and those choosing college are risk-averse.

Students who choose university are more likely to have considered factors that affect their future so are thinking ahead, appear future orientated and are willing to make changes now to achieve their goals, characteristics more commonly associated with traditional university students. College students are more likely to have considered factors that impact on their current life situation, which are often risk related and seem unable to orientate their decision in terms of the future. This approach is in keeping with the findings of Hutchings and Archer (2010) who found students reluctant to think beyond the present, having just started their level three study considering HE was too far in the future. We could therefore conclude that those choosing university are future orientated while those choosing college are orientated in the present.

5.2   Perceptions of Information, Advice and Guidance

The need to supply more and better IAG has been identified as a theme of policy makers since 1997 (NCIHE, 1997 and Kennedy, 1997) so it is interesting that students, many of whom would just have been commencing their compulsory education, are still identifying a gap. This supports the suggestion by Brooks (2004) that not only is there a lack of IAG available to WP students but that this inequity adversley affects the putting into practice of WP policies.

The construct of those in HE and government promoting IAG is likely based on their own experiences of HE, often as more traditional university students. As such they may be advocating better IAG based on their own experiences of using it rather than from the perspective of the WP student. By, for example, assuming students consider undertaking research, have the time and resources to do so, which Reay et al (2005) have suggested they do not, and that students are able to assimilate the information, which Smith (2011) points out they find problematic, the WP perspective may have been overlooked.

Based on the quantitative data students appeared relatively happy with the IAG available to them, which is at odds to previous research from Connor and Dewson (2001). The main area of dissatisfaction identified in the quantitative data was sufficient access to IAG on HE throughout compulsory education. This however is not the whole story as the qualitative data presented a contrasting picture similar to previous research.

The research question asked: *do widening participation students' perceptions of the information, advice and guidance available to them differ between those undertaking higher education in a university and those undertaking it in a further education college?*

This has been considered in terms of students use of IAG classified as 'hot', 'warm' or 'cold' based on the descriptions by Slack et al (2012) and the concept of the embedded or contingent chooser as described by Ball et al (2002b).

College students in this study favoured people for their IAG suggesting a preference for 'warm' or 'hot' sources. University students favoured marketing materials such as

websites and prospectuses for their IAG indicating a preference for the 'cold' sources.

5.2.1 'Hot' IAG

Students, from both groups did not necessarily feel that they had help from their parents regarding their choices, the quantitative and qualitative data indicated about a 50/50 split from both student groups. This may be because the majority of students in both groups were first generation HE attenders and as previous authors have discussed (Thomas, 2001; Brooks, 2002, 2004; and Reay et al, 2005) the parents lacked the social capital and habitus to be able to offer the IAG that their children were seeking.

The qualitative data suggested that students were often faced with negative reactions from family members when discussing entering HE and although not exclusive to college students it was more apparent in their discussions. This negativity was mostly from male family members with female family members inclined to be supportive even if they felt unable to offer advice. This is similar to the findings of Brooks (2004) and Reay et al (2005). If students are faced with this negativity some could be deterred from entering HE altogether while for those who do it could have a negative impact on their learner identity.

The access of all of these students to the more traditional definition of 'hot' knowledge from within their own close social networks was clearly limited which is typical of the uneven social distribution of this type of knowledge as described by Ball and Vincent (1998).

5.2.2 'Warm' IAG

College students predominantly felt their main source of IAG was from their school or college tutors and were very positive about the advice they had received. Of the college students who identified their tutor as a source of IAG, 50% found them to be the *most* useful information source. Shaw's (2012) findings also indicated that tutors were the primary IAG source for college students. The faith college students had in their tutors was a theme throughout the focus groups, although they did also recognise that there was a level of bias with some pressure to continue with the college. Despite acknowledging this they still seemed happy to follow the advice and continue with the college and were less than positive in their comments regarding formal sources of IAG, as were the students in Shaw's (2012) study.

College students favoured advice from people, which was also described by Connor and Dewson (2001). In the absence of advice from those with experience of HE in their own social networks college students looked favourably on advice from anyone in education, be that university staff, student ambassadors, teachers, tutors or careers advisors. The quantitative data shows that 34% of college students that accessed these people rated them *most* useful. This indicates a preference for 'hot' (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Hutchings, 2003) and 'warm' knowledge as described by Slack et al (2012).

University students were less positive about school and college tutors, those students who had accessed them found them *least* useful and based on the qualitative data this may be due to their experiences of poor information from these sources and a healthy scepticism that the advice may be biased towards their continuation at the college which was identified as an issue by Ball et al (2000).

University students identified people in general, be this friends, family or education staff, as *least* useful sources of information. During the qualitative phase the one area where this was contradicted was open events. University students described a very different experience of university open days to college students. University students in the main rated everything to do with these events highly. College students discussed attending but appeared to experience them from a distance not engaging with staff or ambassadors perceiving that staff were not interested in them. College students on the other hand rated open events at the college, an environment they were familiar with, very highly.

It is unlikely that staff would treat students differently but it is possible that these students were already feeling daunted by the experience, had not undertaken any research prior to attending, were unsure what to ask therefore less ready to approach staff and already building a negative impression. University students by comparison had done their research, had questions ready and were therefore willing to approach staff. On the whole however university students demonstrated less interest in the 'hot' and 'warm' IAG sources.

5.2.3 'Cold' IAG

University students favoured marketing information from institutions. Not surprisingly in today's technological era the most commonly accessed source of IAG were websites with 84% of students accessing either a university or college website, 78% of students accessed either a college or university prospectus, 57% accessed either their school or college tutors and 53% attended either a college or university open

day. The less well known sources of IAG such as KIS, NSS and league tables were infrequently accessed and there was a certain amount of suspicion from students about these as sources.

Of those university students who accessed institution websites 39% found them the *most* useful source of IAG. This was followed by any aspect of an open day, be that attending the event or speaking to staff and/or students at the event, so of those who did so 21% rated it *most* useful. Finally 18% of those who accessed prospectuses rated this *most* highly with none rating college tutors or school teachers most useful.

This is a different picture to previous research that has shown prospectuses to be most influential although as in this case open days were rated highly (Connor et al,1999 and Slack et al, 2012). Considering the work of Connor et al this could be a reflection of the times in which studies were conducted and the growing familiarity and ease of access young people particularly have with electronic information. Those participating in the Slack study much more recently however were still not listing websites as most influential.

While league tables were considered by about 30% of university students, college students did not consider them at all. This difference is interesting, along with the general disinterest in this type of IAG. This is not dissimilar to the findings of Slack et al (2012) who found that only 40% of students who looked at the NSS results during their research found them useful and Hoelscher et al (2008) who found students with vocational qualifications did not tend to consider university rankings or what was the RAE.

College students were reluctant in general to make use of any type of marketing material and those that did were often negative about it. This may link to the theme of researching identified in the qualitative data where university students discussed researching HE in a number of contexts unlike college students who did not seem to approach IAG in the same way. Shaw (2012), suggested there was a reluctance among HE in FE students to use formal sources of IAG. Reay et al (2005), found that WP students in general, being low on social capital, were less likely to undertake extensive research to find the best fit. Previous research has suggested that in relation to WP students there are a number of factors preventing them effectively undertaking research into HE options (Reay et al, 2005 and Smith, 2011). These include uncertainty about what to research, time poverty as a result of personal commitments, financial concerns (around travel to open days), information overload and an inability to assimilate and linked to this a lack of understanding for the need to question the validity of sources. Although Shaw's (2012) work was specific to FE in HE students, Reay et al (2005) were considering the WP population as a whole so what is interesting here is that those WP students electing to undertake their HE in an HEI are exhibiting behaviours of more traditional HE students. As Hayton and Paczuska, (2002) and Smith (2011) suggest therefore the WP student needs guidance and support in the process of selecting the right option for them and schools and colleges could do more to facilitate this.

University students were more likely to consider IAG had influenced their final decision and that it had resulted in them making a decision different to their initial expectations. This indicates careful consideration of the IAG resources they made use of and an ability to assimilate, validate and draw conclusions. The fact that

college students were less likely to feel IAG had influenced their decision-making suggests either an inability to use IAG effectively, a reluctance to use IAG in the first place and/or contentment with decisions, informed or otherwise.

5.2.4 General Observations

Students did not necessarily feel that sufficient IAG had been available to them during their compulsory education and this was reiterated in the qualitative data with students feeling that limited access to careers guidance advisors had been a particular issue.

Students from both groups felt that more contact with careers guidance advisors and better information about the careers available based on degree choice would be helpful. They also felt that there should be more opportunities for graduates to visit schools as ambassadors for HE or for their own teachers, or other professionals, to talk about their experiences of HE.

Another emerging theme was that those with experience of the HE sector could have done more and while college students preferred the IAG from their college tutors to other sources of information they felt everyone they encountered during their compulsory education could have done more to enlighten them about university. There was a strong feeling from both groups of students that teachers and careers advisors had experienced university but never shared their own experiences. Similarly they felt they would have liked to hear from other graduates about their journey through education and into employment.

College students described having been admitted onto programmes without a clear idea of what they could reasonably expect in terms of graduate employment or without having considered what they wanted to do afterwards and if the course therefore was appropriate. University students also described poor advice which had resulted in them pursuing awards that they would not be admitted on to or being recruited on to courses that were unsuitable to fulfil their needs despite believing they had asked the appropriate questions.

A number of authors (Gorard and Rees, 2002; Moogan, 2011 and Slack et al, 2012) have commented previously on the mistakes students make in their pursuit of HE as a result of poor advice and an inability to question, but now in the days of higher fees these mistakes are potentially much more costly.

This is particularly concerning for students from WP backgrounds who are more likely to be concerned about money as they are being disadvantaged in a number of ways. Firstly they are having a negative experience of education that could knock their confidence reinforcing their tentative learner identity as described by Shaw (2012) and not encouraging them to become independent learners. Secondly they are lengthening their time in education, which costs more upfront and reduces their earning capacity as they extend their time in education unnecessarily.

5.2.5   *Summary*

Figure 5.2 illustrates how students from the two groups used IAG when deciding on their HE. For students attending FECs they weighted more heavily the 'hot' and 'warm' IAG and were contingent on their use of it, university students in contrast

weighted more heavily the 'cold' IAG sources and were keen to research this but without the advantages of the typical embedded chooser.

Embedded Choosers
- Use 'hot', 'cold' and 'warm' IAG
- Wide range of friends and family with HE experience
- Able to research, validate and assimilate IAG

Pseudo-Embedded Choosers
- Use 'hot', 'cold' and 'warm' IAG, preferring 'cold'
- Limited or no friends and family with HE experience
- Able to research and assimilate IAG but not always to validate

Contingent Choosers
- Use predominantly 'hot' and 'warm' IAG
- Limited or no friends and family with HE experience but reliance on college tutors
- Unable or unwilling to research, assimilate and validate IAG

Figure 5.2 Chooser typology – 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' IAG

University students identified people in general, be this friends, family or education staff, as least useful sources of information. In the absence of social networks with the ability to give experiential IAG they showed a preference for hard or 'cold' data they could research and assimilate and less interest in the softer, 'warm' data preferred by their college peers. They have shown themselves to be more aligned to

the embedded chooser although without necessarily having the same degree of first-hand experience to draw on that is usually associated with the embedded chooser so perhaps need their own descriptor as 'pseudo-embedded choosers' who have the skills to research and assimilate 'cold' knowledge but lack the family networks with experience of HE. We can therefore conclude that university WP students rely on 'cold' IAG and are pseudo-embedded choosers.

College WP students on the whole preferred the 'hot' and 'warm' knowledge sources and were less likely to undertake research to find the best fit. They were particularly influenced by the advice of their college tutors despite some suggesting that this may have been biased and others indicating a certain amount of pressure to remain at the college. We can therefore conclude that college students, who in the main get their IAG from the colleges prefer 'hot' and 'warm' IAG, have an approach typical of the contingent chooser and are more inclined to remain at the college for their HE.

5.3   Perceived Differences between HE in University and FECs

Although on the whole respondents from both settings were in agreement about their perceptions of the differences between HE delivered in a university and a college there were some areas where the amount of agreement or disagreement was stronger in one group than the other.

In the qualitative data there was a strong and unexpected theme that emerged in terms of a perceived difference in status between HE in an HEI and a FEC. This was particularly strong from college participants who felt that others perceived studying HE at a college to be less prestigious than at a university. This was clearly based on

personal experience and was influencing the way they discussed their HE with others. A large number were giving the impression they attended a university rather than explain the role of FECs in supporting HE. This is unfortunate, as with the exception of one student, they did not see themselves as advocates with the ability to influence this perception. This is echoed in concerns raised already in relation to a stratified system of HE with 'elite' universities which select the more traditional student and the post-92s who are more likely to recruit the WP students (Hoelscher et al, 2008; Hutchings and Archer, 2010). Offering HE in FECs appears to be adding a further level of stratification to the hierarchy of HE in England and potentially damaging the learner identity of those who have chosen an FEC.

This pattern of status issues was also apparent in the quantitative data although there was some ambiguity so while students, particularly those students from university, did not perceive FE and HE to be distinct in their delivery of HE and that both delivered undergraduate programmes they did perceive degrees only to be offered in university. Those from university were also more likely to disagree that a FD was equivalent to the first two years of a bachelors degree and perceive that assignments were more difficult in a university. In addition university students perceived their employment prospects to be better. Parry et al (2012) noted that HE in FE students in their study did not perceive they would be gaining an advantage in terms of their employability.

The research question asked: *what are widening participation students' perceptions of the differences between universities and further education colleges as providers of higher education?*

The bulk of these perceived differences have been considered in terms of an instrumental or a transformational approach to higher education as described by Robinson (2012).

5.3.1 The Instrumental View

College students were more likely to take an instrumental view and discuss their perceptions in terms of tangible characteristics.

One of the differences they identified was in terms of fee level and affordability, more respondents from a college setting agreeing more strongly than those from a university setting that this was a difference. This is in keeping with their decision-making behaviour where college students were more likely to consider fees as important as discussed in section 5.1.2, and as colleges are known to promote their lower fees to attract students to their HE routes (HEFCE, 2009) they should be more aware of this.

College students were more likely to perceive they had access to more support than their contemporaries studying at a university which is similar to the findings of Parry et al (2012). Their perceptions about teaching related areas were that class sizes were smaller in an FEC facilitating more one-to-one tutor support. They generally only considered support in terms of their tutors and made no mention of wider support systems available through students' union, library services and other routes open to students studying in a university. While they focused on the one-to-one support they could get from their lecturers some suggested that they were reassured by the opportunity to access this level of support rather than as one student said

'abusing it'. The perception however of some college students was certainly that they would not have survived without the support.

This desire for more tutor contact does indicate a lack of confidence as identified by Crozier et al (2008) and a tentative learner identity as described by Shaw (2012). It may be that the constant availability of support is not enabling students to gain the confidence they needed in their learner identity therefore becoming a hindrance to their development as independent learners. As many FECs actively market tutor support as a benefit of undertaking HE in an FEC, couching it in terms of small class size and access to personal tutors (HEFCE, 2009) there is a risk they are inadvertently undermining their own students' confidence in their ability as learners. If we revisit the work of Crozier et al (2008) what they suggest is a hierachical differentiation in terms of student support where the FEC students are supported by individual tutors, the post-92's have a very general support system but the 'elite' university is able to offer targeted support and feedback. Being unlikely to have contact with students from elite institutions the WP student is formulating their impression based on interactions with students who Crozier et al (2008) suggest experience an approach of generalist support.

An interesting theme that emerged from the focus groups in terms of differences was that college students associated university with temptation, distractions and a need for self-motivation, a phenomena also observed by Parry et al (2012). Students were concerned that the social side would tempt them away from their studies, that living in halls would be too distracting or that the lack of accountability to a tutor would mean they would get away with not paying attention or undertaking work. This suggests a concern about their capacity for motivation if they were in a less

structured environment with tutors that they perceived as more distant, indicating a struggle for self-motivation and governance possibly linking to the tentative learner identity described by Shaw (2012). It also indicates a focus on the ultimate goal of the final qualification and a lack of appreciation of the wider university experience, which is a more instrumental view of HE as described by Robinson (2012) and was typical of the FD students in her study.

College students, especially those who lacked exposure to universities, did not seem to perceive facilities and resources made a difference to their learning experience and some felt they had access to everything they needed. There was however a dissenting voice which came from students who had either started at a university then elected to change to their local college or those who had attended a number of open days at universities. These students had a comparator and although they felt facilities were better at a university clearly did not feel the effect on their learning experience was sufficiently negative to make them choose a university. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) in their research into students' perceptions of HE identified facilities as one of the characteristics students identified in assessing the value of their HE. A lack of concern about facilities may indicate that students choosing HE in FE are less concerned about the value of their qualification than the university students participating in the Kandiko and Mawer (2013) study. Parry et al (2012) also identified FE students' perceptions of college facilities to be not as good or that students did not know indicating this was not important to them.

For college students it was the final qualification that mattered therefore as long as they were still able to graduate, if facilities were not available as often as they would like or they did not have the correct equipment and were improvising, this was not

perceived as an issue that would prevent them graduating. This is in keeping with the findings of Creasy (2013) in regards to the focus on the final qualification and the loss of the scholarly element of the wider HE experience.

College students perceived a university setting as daunting but a college setting to be friendlier and this links back to their need for familiarity as described by Hoelscher et al (2008) in relation to students on vocational programmes. The reason colleges are perceived as more friendly appears to be because students already know people there, tutors, friends from previous courses or friends from their local community. While previous studies have not compared the views of those from WP backgrounds in FECs and HEIs they have found that those from lower socio-economic classes need to feel they will fit at the institution they choose (Cooke et al, 2004). This could be even more of a concern for those selecting the FE route into HE.

In terms of the wider university experience it was interesting to hear the difference in views between those college students who had not tried university first and those who had. Those who had gone directly to college for their HE did not feel they missed out, except for 'fresher's week' whereas those who had experienced university, however briefly, felt that they and their fellow students missed out on the opportunity to broaden their views by mixing with people from other parts of the country or even world and people from other courses. Some college students had a very narrow view here making statements such as *'how does the views of someone doing politics help me?'* These views reinforce the findings of Creasy (2013) that for some students HE is purely about the qualification and the instrumental approach described by Robinson (2012).

5.3.2 The Transformational View

A number of factors identified indicate that the WP students choosing to attend university for their HE took a more transformational view of their HE. For example while students on the whole perceived a university setting as daunting, university students were not deterred by this seeing it as part of their development. University students while agreeing they were more independent as learners and had less support were positive about how this was developed through the three years allowing them to grow as learners and were not unhappy about the level of support available to them. This demonstrates their more confident approach to learning, in contrast to the tentative learner identity described by Shaw (2012), with students in fact perceiving university as a step up in their education and ability as independent learners.

University students considered the wider experience, viewing university as a place dedicated to degree level study and therefore able to support all aspects of that as well as somewhere they could easily find out about postgraduate study. They also were cognisant of the opportunities available to them outside of the course and how these were important in demonstrating the wider skill set they had developed during their time at university indicating a more transformational view of HE as described by Robinson (2012).

For the university student their HE was about more than gaining a degree so the whole learning experience was important to them including learning resources and facilities. They agreed with their college peers that facilities were better in HEIs than colleges, the difference being they perceived this would negatively impact the learning experience of the FEC student. University students also expected that they

would have access to all the resources that were necessary for them to complete their degree successfully. This could be explained by the consumerism described by Ritzer (2002) and Fox (2002) and students' perception of value as described by Kandiko and Mawer (2013). If value is a concern and university students are paying a higher fee than college students it is unsurprising students want to feel they had better value for money.

University students perceived there to be a difference in both the qualification level and experience of tutors in the two settings as well as teaching style and felt this was to their advantage. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) suggest that HE students want to know what qualifications those who are teaching them hold and what experience they have.

While university students were positive about the social activities available they were also cognisant of their workloads and other commitments such as family responsibilities, long commutes or part-time jobs. Both groups of students therefore felt they would not be able to participate in the social activities, possibly because of their similar backgrounds not having the privileges of a more traditional university student with no family responsibilities or no need to undertake part-time work to support their studies. This is in keeping with the literature suggesting that WP students have a different experience of university (Moogan, 2011 and Parry et al, 2012).

5.3.3 Summary

College students seemed under the impression that the independent learning they associated with HE in a university meant they could not ask for help or would not get it because the tutors had too many students and therefore not enough time for everyone. This appeared to be based on anecdotal information from friends or siblings. They had not considered its reliability and that if friends perceived a status difference, as had been indicated, they might want to perpetuate this by giving the impression there was no help available to them and they were going it alone.

While the perceptions of these two groups of students in terms of differences were very similar, how they justified and valued these varied resulting in students having contrasting expectations of their HE.

University students' expectations were for a transformational experience while college students were more likely to focus on the instrumental aspects of the HE experience. As a result:

- University students expected experienced, well qualified tutors while college students were more concerned about having regular one-to-one contact with their tutors

- University students expected to have all the facilities and equipment they needed available and in good condition while college students were more tolerant of limited resources or poor quality equipment

- University students appreciated the wider university experience while college students had a more insular view of their HE experience

- Fees were important to college students only in terms of the amount of money involved but to university students it was more about the value

- College students were more concerned with the final outcome and being supported and nurtured at an individual level while university students were positive about independent learning and while also wanting the final qualification appreciated that HE had more to offer than a qualification

While both groups of students described similar differences between HE delivered in an HEI and a FEC their response to this, as described above, was different.   Figure 5.3 illustrates the different approaches. For university students it mattered that they had the best possible experience and they couched this in terms of expecting university to be a transformative experience where they would develop as individuals as well as gaining a degree. For college students it did not matter that they might be missing out on some of the experiences their peers at a university were able to access or that they were making do with facilities and resources as long as they were able to graduate with a degree.

Transformational

Knowledge development and independent learning

Opportunities for growth

The value of a quality HE experience

Concern for facilities and availability of resources

The journey to the final qualification

Knowledge transfer and supported learning

Insular experience

The cost of HE

Facilities and resources tolerated

The final qualification

Instrumental

Figure 5.3 A transformational or instrumental view of HE

5.4   Aspirations

There were clear differences in aspiration between the two groups of students depending on where they chose to undertake their HE. The research question asked: *to what extent do widening participation students' aspirations differ between those undertaking their higher education in a university and those undertaking their higher education in a further education college?*

The surprising differences were in terms of their current aspirations and this was apparent in both the quantitative and qualitative data where there seemed to be a

clear difference between those who had chosen to undertake their HE at a college and those who chose university.

This section considers those differences and explores their impact on decision-making, perceptions and use of IAG. Ball et al (2000) described aspiration in terms of imagined futures identifying three classes of future. This study has identified students within each of the three classifications and this framework is used to discuss the findings.

5.4.1 Mapped Journey to Imagined Future

The first grouping Ball et al (2000) identified were students with a passage charted towards a future they had aspired to based on their own interests and family expectations. From this study it was mainly students who had chosen to attend university that fit comfortably in this group.

The quantitative data identified university students were more likely to agree that they had planned to gain a degree for as long as they could remember and that their parents had planned for them to undertake HE. They had selected their course with a specific career goal in mind and were thinking beyond graduation to their future career.

At the time of participating in this research university students were very clear about the career path they wished to take upon graduation, and in some cases had mapped out exactly what they wanted to do, even if they had not been clear during their compulsory education.

5.4.2 Uncertain Journey to Imagined Future

The second group Ball et al (2000) identified had a focus on the future but with some uncertainty and lacked the family experience to guide them through uncharted territory.

The quantitative data identified college students were more likely not to have aspired to attend HE for as long as they could remember, that their parents had not planned for them to undertake HE and that gaining a degree had been beyond their earlier expectations. While students from both settings indicated that they had not considered HE until suggested by college tutors, this was more common for those attending FECs. This is a welcome change and at odds with Baird et al (2012) who suggest that colleges could do more to raise aspirations of their students to attend HE. It may be that with the ability to offer more HE within their own institution there is a bigger incentive to persuade students to continue on to HE and, because students perceive it as less risky to be at a FEC, tutors are able to offer the required reassurances about HE in FE but in so doing reinforce students' doubts about HE in the more traditional university setting.

Within the quantitative data although it appeared that more college students (45%) than university students aspired to professional careers this was skewed considerably by the majority wishing to be teachers. From the focus groups it transpired that this was often a default choice rather than a long-standing desire. In most cases students had not selected their HE with the goal of becoming a teacher, so none of them were undertaking education awards, but had chosen to continue on at the college and then discovered there were limited career options without additional qualifications so would have to continue in education after the completion

of their degree to undertake a postgraduate certificate. This reflects findings from HEFCE (2005) that showed an increased participation in postgraduate teaching qualifications by graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were nearly twice as likely as other students to pursue this route.

5.4.3 No Imagined Future

The final group Ball et al (2000) identified do not have an imagined future beyond the short-term or even the present and lack a learner identity. This group are still adrift in a sea of choice and opportunity.

College students were less likely to have clarity about the career path they wished to take upon graduation during their compulsory education but significantly 31 % were still unsure at the time of participating in this research. It appeared that for some college students their aspiration was simply to gain their degree and they did not have career aspirations. They had mainly commenced their FD with the intention of progressing to the university to gain a bachelors degree and this was their next goal. Baird et al (2012) found the level three college students in their study only to have vague career aspirations and this appears still to be the case as students move through levels four and five at an FEC. Students from a WP background have been shown to make the decision to continue to HE rather than leave education at 18, this being not the norm, Ball et al (2002a), but their career path either as learners or professionals is still unclear and subject to change. Shaw (2012) found the students in her study although able to articulate future career ambitions then had no clear ambitions at the time of enrolling on the programme.

In terms of their personal expectation college students were inclined to agree that gaining a degree had been beyond their expectations. This also supports the work of Baird et al (2012) who found college students less likely to have academic aspirations. For some students the decision to continue to HE was heavily influenced by their tutors during their level three study which may account for the lack of clarity in terms of career aspirations.

5.4.4 Summary

While university students were most likely to fall into the category of a clearly mapped out imagined future college students were most likely to fit into the other two categories having either an imagined future but lacking clarity on how to get there or no imagined future beyond their current education success. These differences in terms of the reality of any imagined future must have had an impact on student choices and decision-making when entering HE.

The focus on the future and appreciation of the delayed benefits of HE of those with an imagined future compared to the live for today approach of those without an imagined future who appear to be living in the present is in keeping with the findings of Robertson and Hillman (1997) who described the difference in orientation of students.

Figure 5.4 illustrates the different imagined futures.

Passage charted to an imagined future

- Clarity of aspiration
- Career decision made
- Certainty about how to get there
- Confident learner identity

An imagined future with some uncharted territory

- Aspiration but less clarity
- Career path remains flexible but has some focus
- Uncertainty about some aspects of journey
- Tentative learner identity

No imagined future - still adrift

- Future does not extend beyond the present
- Focus on current educational achievement
- Career aspirations limited to better prospects but without clarity of a final career
- Lacking learner identity

Figure 5.4 Aspiration viewed as imagined futures

5.5   Conclusion

Viewing all of the research questions individually, although it is easy to identify differences between the two student groups, it is difficult to suggest reasons for these and draw conclusions. Considering the research as a whole it is possible to identify overarching themes, draw conclusions and suggest possible reasons for the differences between the two student groups.

The findings inform our understanding of why some non-traditional students choose to study HE in FECs and others at university. The mind-set at the stage of decision-making is already different and students are prioritising whether the present or the future is most important and then making a life-style choice as Reay et al (2005) proposed based on this.

Those choosing colleges are more likely to be risk-averse and although those choosing university are not necessarily risk takers they appear to be better able to assimilate the risk and therefore manage it. We could therefore conclude that those choosing university are risk managers and those choosing college are risk-averse.

Students who choose university are more likely to have considered factors that affect their future so are thinking ahead, appear future orientated and are willing to make changes now to achieve their goals, characteristics more commonly associated with traditional university students. College students are more likely to have considered factors that impact on their current life situation, which are often risk related and seem unable to orientate their decision in terms of the future. This approach is in keeping with the findings of Hutchings and Archer (2010) who found students reluctant to think beyond the present, having just started their level three study considering HE was too far in the future for them. We could therefore conclude that those choosing university are future orientated while those choosing college are orientated in the present as identified by Robertson and Hillman (1997).

Pulling this together we can conclude that those WP students who choose to undertake their HE in a university are future orientated and able to manage risk with a transformational approach to their HE. As a result they have clear expectations of

their HE experience and an understanding of the wider university experience and delayed benefits of a HE degree. These students are likely to be embedded choosers with a secure learner identity who have the self-confidence and motivation to pursue their educational and career aspirations.

Those WP students who choose a FEC for their HE on the other hand are likely to be orientated in the present and risk-averse with an instrumental approach to their HE. As a result these students are accepting of a different HE experience, with fewer expectations. These students are most likely to be pseudo-embedded choosers or contingent choosers with at best a tentative learner identity who lack self-confidence and motivation needing a structured environment with governance and without distraction. As a result they are focused on current tangible issues such as achieving the next step, either to move to level six study or to graduate.

Figure 5.5 summarises the overall differences of the two groups of students but acknowledges that although there are two extremes of students represented in this study there is also a continuum with a range of positions possible within this.

Embedded (University Chooser)	Contingent (College) Chooser
☐ Risk Manager	☐ Risk-Averse
☐ Future Orientated	☐ Orientated in the Present
☐ Freedom of Learning	☐ Structured Learning
☐ Transformational Expectation	☐ Instrumental Expectation
☐ Future Successfully Charted	☐ Future Uncharted
☐ Value Education Experience	☐ Value Qualification

Non-Traditional HE Student Learner Continuum

Figure 5.5 Learner continuum of the non-traditional HE student

These conclusions should be treated with caution because as with all non-experimental research there are numerous variables that could not be controlled for. It does however give a sound basis for further research to support or refute these suggestions.

The next chapter will summarise the previous chapters and make recommendations, based on the conclusions relating to this research. These conclusions and recommendations will support leaders in the field of HE to work with policy makers, potential students and compulsory education providers to continue the WP agenda and increase participation in HE from those groups of the population currently under-represented in HE.

6   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The introduction set out the intended purpose of the thesis, the research questions and the reasons why the subject was of interest. The literature review enabled these to be positioned within the context of the existing published knowledge, identified gaps and has given a warrant and justification for the research. Chapter three has described and justified the research design, data collection methods and methods of data analysis used. Chapter four presented the findings from the quantitative and qualitative research. In chapter five the quantitative and qualitative findings were discussed, linking them together and placing them in the context of the contemporary literature to draw conclusions from the research.

The conclusions and recommendations that follow in this chapter are therefore based on the work described in the previous five chapters. This final chapter re-visits the research questions that formed the basis for this study (see 1.3 in chapter one). The first five sections begin with a reminder of the research question and then present the answer based on the research.

The chapter proceeds to consider the contribution of this research in relation to the wider thesis and identifies areas for further research. The concluding summary answers the key questions of the thesis in the context of leadership of HE particularly in dual sector institutions using the student voice being cognisant of students as partners in their learning experience.

It must be acknowledged that this is a small-scale study with a number of limitations however it presents the views of students and this is a voice the sector, particularly leaders, should be listening to.

6.1   Choice and Decision-Making

What are the factors that influence a widening participation student to choose to undertake their higher education in a further education college as compared to those undertaking it in a university?

Although there is extensive literature around student choice in relation to HE (Ball et al, 2000; Reay et al, 2001a, 2002, 2005; Archer et al 2003; Gilchrist et al, 2003) what is clear from this thesis is that an understanding of choice and decision-making in relation to those choosing to undertake their HE in an FEC is limited. This small-scale study has shed light on the different approaches and priorities to decision-making between non-traditional HE students choosing to study at university and those choosing to study at college.

Lifestyle choice as described by Reay et al (2005) in relation to WP students' choice of university seems to be equally valid in terms of the relative importance of factors students considered in this study.

The use of the word choice should be considered in context as while some students describe making an informed decision to undertake HE at a college, others' decisions were clearly less well informed and in some cases where students describe 'staying on to HE' it sounds like a default option rather than a conscious choice.

This small-scale study indicates that the students undertaking the FE route to HE were more risk-averse, those opting for university conversely appeared to understand the long-term risk and be able to assimilate this in terms of their career aspirations and potential salary. This would indicate that the WP students opting for the university route have found a way to assimilate the risk areas identified by authors such as Gilchrist et al (2003) and Shaw (2012) whereas those from a similar WP background who choose to undertake their HE in FE are risk-averse, particularly in terms of debt.

This study indicates that students who chose HE in FE were less future focused and less well informed about the options available to them. The students appeared to be bound in the here and now and concerned with tangible issues that constrained their ability to take a longer view. Conversely those WP students who chose to undertake their HE at university were better informed, future focused and goal orientated. This therefore suggests there is a difference in the mind-set and approach between these two groups of students from similar backgrounds who have made different decisions about where to undertake their HE.

6.2   Information, Advice and Guidance

Do widening participation students' perceptions of the information, advice and guidance available to them differ between those undertaking higher education in a university and those undertaking it in a further education college?

While much has been written about the need for better information, particularly in respect of the WP student (Kennedy, 1997; NCIHE, 1997; HM Government 2009 and

BIS, 2011) from this small-scale study it is apparent that while students' perceptions of the IAG were broadly similar how they used and prioritised it was quite different.

Although successive governments and HE policy makers have focused attention on the quality and availability of IAG as part of their strategy for WP this is probably not getting to the learners they are aiming to reach. This small-scale study indicates that those from a WP background with the aspiration and motivation to set their sights on HE during their compulsory education are already seeking out IAG and using it effectively. They are able to use and validate 'cold' IAG sources and make informed decisions. The WP students choosing colleges for their HE however often lack confidence in using the IAG they have available to them, are inclined to rely heavily on tutors and other sources of 'warm' IAG and do not necessarily have the resources to question its validity. There is therefore a spectrum of the WP student in college from those who have made a genuinely informed decision, through those who believe they have made an informed decision, through those who have chosen an FEC but not through an informed process of decision-making to those who by default have ended up 'staying on to HE' in an FEC.

The groups that need to be targeted are those Shaw (2012) describes as having a tentative learner identity, to build their confidence as learners, encourage their aspirations and give them the encouragement and motivation to believe these to be achievable. These learners need to be supported in making earlier decisions about HE and given the ability to research, understand and assimilate all the IAG that is already available and map it to their aspirations. The ability to effectively use IAG students from non-traditional backgrounds have access to has been identified as an issue previously by Hutchings (2003) and Smith (2011).

A particular gap identified in relation to IAG was availability of careers guidance and this was apparent across both student groups, even those who entered HE with a clear career objective discussed a number of changes of direction before settling on their final choice. This need for flexibility and ongoing, individualised advice has previously been identified by Hayton and Paczuska (2002).

As Moogan (2011) identified in her research, students in this study also experienced misinformation that led to mistakes in the decision-making process. Principally this seems to have been poorly informed individuals giving advice about areas beyond their expertise rather than directing students to other sources. There does however seem to have been an element of being more concerned about recruiting students rather than ensuring a good fit.

Where selection is the aim rather than recruiting, consideration is given to things such as does the prospective student understand what this course will ultimately enable them to do. For example it is not unusual to come across someone determined to be a midwife because they like children but this demonstrates a lack of understanding of the profession as children's nursing is likely to be a better fit and this should be discussed with the applicant. Another example is the applicant who believes they want to be a physiotherapist because they want to work for a sports team but they are not keen on hospitals or do not feel empathy with older people this will be the majority of the programme so there should be a discussion about Sports Therapy as an alternative.

6.3   Differences in Aspiration

To what extent do widening participation students' aspirations differ between those undertaking their higher education in a university and those undertaking their higher education in a further education college?

This small-scale study has demonstrated that although all students participating had the aspiration to enter HE and associated this with better job prospects the clarity with which they were able to articulate their actual career aspirations varied greatly which reinforces the findings of Connor and Dewson (2001).

The difference between the two student groups was marked with university students being more likely to describe a particular career they aspired to before they entered HE. Those who chose to undertake their HE in a college by contrast were often still unsure about their career goals as they entered their second year of HE study.

Despite the rhetoric around the need to raise aspirations of young people (HEFCE, 2009; DfE, 2012; BIS, 2011) the results from this study reinforce the findings of Slack (2003) and Archer et al (2014) who believe the need is not for aspiration raising but guidance and support for those from non-traditional backgrounds to achieve their goals.

The difference in career aspiration could have been down to the fact that for the college students their next step was to achieve their FD and progress to level six study at a university whereas for university students their next step was graduation and finding graduate employment.

There appears to be a link between aspiration and institution choice and whether students are contingent or embedded choosers. This difference could, as Reay et al (2005) and Smith (2011) suggest, be a result of the students who are aspiring to undertake their HE in a university being better prepared or more able to research and assimilate available information. From the focus groups it was clear that college students were often reluctant to do this and seemed happier just to listen to the recommendations of their tutor rather than undertake their own independent research.

From the qualitative data the most striking theme that emerged was the number of false starts students from both settings had experienced. The difference seemed to be that the university students in the study now had clear goals they were aiming for whereas the college students still seemed uncertain to the point it was unclear that this was not another false start for them. A number of students were already talking about having to undertake teaching qualifications or masters degrees in order to pursue a relevant career. Some were still unsure what they wanted to do or even could do at the end of their degree and one was so unhappy with his choice he was considering not progressing to level six despite the huge encouragement he was getting from his peers to see it through.

Students studying at an FEC were more likely to make mistakes in their decision-making. They had or were potentially extending their time in education and incurring more debt by switching from course to course in level three, having started a level four course elsewhere and then returned the following year to undertake a FD at the college or by later appreciating that the degree was not the correct one for the career they were only now deciding on. While students from both sectors had experienced

this to some extent, those in HEIs were not concerned about fees and debt in the same way and had gained clarity about their goals before starting their current course.

These differences may be indicative of the different approaches to learning and level of confidence in their own learner identity as described by Shaw (2012). They could also reflect the different priorities of students with university students prioritising the learning and being motivated by their aspirations while college students are fitting in their learning around other competing priorities such as paid work and family commitments being motivated by an end product and not a career goal. As Robertson and Hillman (1997) suggest the difference is the university students' future orientation and ability to appreciate the delayed benefits of HE while college students are orientated in the present. Or as Ball et al (2000) propose it is the ability to imagine a future or not.

6.4   Differences between HE delivered in University and FECs

What are widening participation students' perceptions of the differences between universities and further education colleges as providers of higher education?

This small-scale study has shown that students perceive there to be differences between HE in an HEI and an FEC although the perceptions were very similar for both groups of students. They did however have different expectations from those institutions depending on where they had elected to undertake their HE.

Perceived differences were not unexpected and in keeping with the work of other authors, although in different contexts (Crozier et al, 2008; Hutchings and Archer, 2010; Parry et al, 2012 and Robinson, 2012). Students perceived there to be differences in relation to:

- Cost and affordability

- Level of education and difficulty of assignments

- Status associated with undertaking HE in an FEC or an HEI

- Level of independent learning

- Class sizes

- Friendliness of the institution

- Age range

- Wider university experience and social life particularly

- Facilities available to students

How important these were to students was the main difference. University students expected a package of learning in a suitable environment that would enable them to grow and be challenged as learners on a journey. College students' expectations were limited to being supported in their learning in order to achieve the final qualification with as little risk as possible and were willing to overlook the perceived deficiencies of HE in FE to achieve this. As Robinson (2012) described this shows the aspiration for a transformational experience by university students compared to the rather more instrumental aspiration of those undertaking their HE in a college.

Interestingly college students perceived the social opportunities of attending a university as a risk. This indicated a lack of confidence in their self-motivation, self-

governance and ability to self-direct their learning as well as a lack of ability to effectively manage their own time and take responsibility for their own learning.

6.5   Implications for Managers, Leaders and Policy Makers

What are the implications of the widening participation students' perspective for managers, leaders and policy makers in the higher and further education sector?

This small-scale study indicates differences in the two groups of students researched. While all students were classed as WP the definition is still broad. None the less the research indicates that within this group differences are emerging with some students more willing to consider a traditional university education while others either actively choose or default to at least starting[1] their HE in a college. Understanding the drivers behind these decisions is important for leaders and policy in the sector.

Considering this thesis in the context of dual sector institutions therefore it is clear that as Parry et al (2012) and Fenge (2011) suggest, FECs have a role to play in offering HE to WP students who either as a result of informed or in some cases uninformed decision-making choose not to commence their HE at university.

While concerns regarding the equivalence of the learning experience for students undertaking their HE in FECs (Fenge, 2011; Leahy, 2012 and Creasy, 2013) may be valid this study does indicate that without this option some students would not reach

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[1] Most of the FECs in this study only delivered the foundation degree but as most students had enrolled with the intention to continue on to the top-up route they were aware they would have to undertake their final year at the partner university or apply elsewhere. One of the colleges participating in the focus groups was in the process of extending its provision to include the top-up year.

their potential and would choose not to participate rather than risk attending university, a concern shared by Shaw (2012). Instead we should focus as Leahy (2012) and Creasy (2013) suggest on the different and positive contribution to HE and the development of potential that FECs make.

Lumby's (2001) assertion that colleges offer a more inclusive and supportive environment is borne out by the findings of this small-scale study. The partnership approach to leadership identified by Briggs (2010) along with involvement of students (Lumby, 20001, 2010 and Rhodes and Brundrett, 2010) will be important in further developing the role of FECs in HE and ensuring students are making informed decisions.

Various authors (Greenbank, 2006; Lumby, 2001, 2010; Gorard et al, 2007 and Rhodes and Brundrett,, 2010) have been critical of the lack of the student voice in relation to WP policy and leadership in the HE/FE sector. This small-scale study has shown the valuable contribution students have to make in helping leaders make their own informed decision in relation to HE in dual sector institutions.

Further it has shown that there is a place for HE in FE and for dual sector institutions. FE is not only the choice of those who did not achieve the grades for university or a default choice for those who may be less well versed with universities and HE but a deliberate choice made by those who do have the grades but feel the HE in FE delivery and environment better suits their learning style or current situation.

As this small-scale study demonstrates without the option of HE in FE some young people would fail to achieve their potential. As others have suggested (Leahy, 2012; Parry et al, 2012 and Creasy, 2013) HE in FE needs to be recognised as being

distinct and part of the continuum of HE learning. There is therefore a need for leaders to appreciate the difference and support its diversity using the student voice as a guide to future direction and quality improvement.

What leaders and policy makers alike must not lose sight of is the difference between increasing and widening participation, ensuring the correct metrics are in play in determining if participation is representative (Gorard et al, 2007) and finally ensuring that the practices advocated to address this are evidence based and targeted at the correct groups to make the biggest difference.

Indeed it has been suggested that the emphasis on the student viewpoint coupled with recent government policy bring the role of the FD and the need to understand the student viewpoint as a consumer back to the forefront of thinking in relation to HE and FE (Ooms et al. 2012). This small-scale study confirms the need for leaders and policy makers to be mindful of the different priorities and therefore needs of different students.

6.6   Overall Implications

When considering the thesis as a whole there are areas which impact on more than one research question. For example the ability to research and assimilate information sources has implications not only for choice and decision-making and use of IAG around HE but also career planning, financial planning and perceptions of difference of the HE environment. As a result of lack of research and poor advice students were making mistakes and those students who were most concerned about debt were ultimately paying a higher price to achieve their goals despite believing they were

saving money. This unplanned approach to education is costing these students not just in terms of additional fees but also time out of the work place and therefore less opportunity to earn a graduate salary at an earlier stage in their life.

Although this small-scale study would indicate the higher fees have not had an impact on those choosing university it would appear to have had an impact on the decision-making of some who selected colleges for their HE. There was a tangible fear of debt amongst many of the college students and this aversion to risk and debt is magnified by their lack of understanding of the fees system, specifically the repayment mechanism, along with their lack of career focus, leading these students to view fees as a greater risk than other WP students selecting university. As a result of their lack of understanding many were overestimating the long-term cost and risk of a university education and were unable to view the debt in the context of a graduate salary. Linking their concern with debt with their lack of clear goals it becomes easy to understand why fees are so important.

Conversely a student studying Sports Therapy, for example, at university would have a clear idea on application about their potential earnings on graduation and understanding the loan process could work out their potential monthly salary, loan repayment and loan duration.

Aspiration is relevant in the broader sense in that while all students aspired to better job opportunities those selecting colleges were more likely, as Crozier et al (2008) suggest, to see the qualification simply as their route to a more advantageous future. Their approach to decision-making was therefore pragmatic and based around immediate concerns such as distance rather than a consideration of the best option

to support any specific career choices. A lack of understanding of how the wider university experience may also impact on their aspirations for a better future for themselves and their family through their participation in HE is further likely to hinder these students achieving their full potential despite opting to enter HE. This also links to their lack of future orientation.

This lack of future focus and concern with current tangible issues has a wide ranging impact so students are unable to consider their decisions around HE in the context of future earnings and career success, only considering the current hardships they perceive continuing in HE to bring. They do not have the ability, described by Greenbank (2009), of the middle classes who understand the concept of making sacrifices now for the long-term reward. This inability to see beyond their immediate concern of gaining a degree also means due consideration has not been given to the career possibilities available and if these are indeed of interest and realistic. Beyond this it also means that without career direction the risk of making the wrong course decision is increased.

Those undertaking HE in a college appeared to have made no conscious decision in relation to the difference between HE delivered in an FE setting and HE at a university at the time of decision-making. To them it was about getting a degree and where it was from, what the career opportunities would be and to some extent in what subject were irrelevant at that time.

6.7   Recommendations

1) Schools and Colleges should be encouraged to develop the confidence of non-traditional HE students to give them a stronger learner identity and enable them to have a future orientation and consider the transformational nature of the HE experience (see fig 5.3 and 5.4).

The challenge here is for leaders to consider how to support students in building their learner identity and their confidence. Rather than reinforcing a mis-matched learner identity by promoting the small class size and personalised support often associated with HE in FE settings leaders in schools and colleges should consider ways to develop students as independent learners. A personal approach in terms of career guidance and plans to realise aspirations is an area that could support students in achieving their potential through informed decision-making.

Leaders need to consider how to present the differences between HE in different settings positively focusing on the benefits, in a way that does not reinforce a mis-matched learner identity, and the best fit for students to fulfil their aspirations. This is especially true of leaders in FECs delivering HE who face the challenge of recruiting students to their own courses and need to balance this against supporting students to develop a learner identity and future focus that may result in them undertaking their HE elsewhere.

2) Those recruiting students to HE should explore with students their career aspirations in the context of the degree they are considering to ensure alignment so they enter HE with clarity about the options available to them,

the potential graduate salary they can expect and are aware of further study that might be required after graduation (see fig 5.1 and 5.4).

The challenge here for leaders is adequate resource to be able to provide individualised advice and support to students who may not have thought beyond higher education to their ultimate career aspirations. This is particularly true when it is recognised that these career aspirations may still be changing with some regularity. Leaders therefore need to identify ways of supporting students when completing their application for HE to consider whether this is the first or final step towards students achieving their career ambitions and highlight where choices may result in the need for further study.

Leaders should also ensure students have sufficient information and understanding of risk, finance and cost/benefit analysis to make informed decisions based on future circumstances and not just their present situation. The challenge here is for leaders to support ways to encourage students to take a longer view of their circumstances during their decision-making.

Leaders need to consider if and how information around decision-making for HE such as researching, assimilating and validating information, identifying and managing risk and understanding fees and finance for HE can be integrated into the curriculum.

These recommendations do present a challenge for leaders however these are key to ensuring that students, particularly those without experience of HE through their own networks, are adequately supported in making informed decisions about their HE. HE in FE is a unique HE offer which suits some students better than a more traditional university but it is important to ensure students are selecting it as the right

option for them to achieve their long-term career aspirations rather simply staying on at the college to get a degree.

6.8   Contribution

This was a small-scale study that did not set out to find out why students held different perceptions but if there were differences between students who had been identified as WP and the implications for leaders in dual sector institutions. From the research we can conclude that there are differences in perception and approach, and that understanding these differences will be of value to those in leadership positions in the sector particularly those with a role in recruitment.

The main areas of contribution to knowledge are:

1) Enabling the student voice to be heard in relation to HE delivered in dual sector institutions

2) Making comparisons between non-traditional students entering HE in a university and HE in a college

3) Identifying that non-traditional students' approaches to choice and decision-making about HE vary and this has implications for their choice of traditional HE or HE in FE

4) Identifying that non-traditional students use of IAG is varied and that this has implications for the decisions they make about their HE

5) Consideration of aspiration of non-traditional HE students in the HE setting and understanding that students from non-traditional backgrounds choosing HE in FE are often entering and progressing through HE without clear career aspirations

6) Highlighting the perceived differences and expectations non-traditional HE students have of HE in university compared to HE in college

7) Identifying the need to align leadership in dual sector institutions with student perceptions of HE

8) Building on the work of Ball and Vincent (1998) to add pseudo-embedded choosers as a category

These are important messages for leaders in the HE sector as working with schools and colleges to ensure students consider and enter HE with career goals in mind, an understanding of the fees system and their financial prospects would ensure students are better informed. They may make the same decision but it will be with an appreciation of all the facts and therefore an informed decision.

6.9   Further Research

There are a number of indications for further research as outlined in **Table 6.1**

Further Research	Possible Research Questions
Exploring causality between the decision-making and perceptions of WP students choosing to commence their HE in a FEC and those WP students choosing a university.	How do the different perceptions of WP students impact on their decision to attend a university or an FEC for their HE?
While the impact of fees on non-participants was beyond the scope of this study the impact of students' perceptions around higher fees on the decision-making of some WP students would suggest this is a barrier to participation because of poor understanding of the system and is an area for further research.	Do non-participants understand the new fees system and how they are re-paid? Are fees a barrier to WP students entering HE?
It appears those WP students opting to undertake their HE in a university are behaving more like the more traditional student in terms of the factors considered, the IAG accessed and their expectations of HE, suggesting a stratification within the non-traditional student groups. This study was too small to classify that stratification but this could be an area for further research.	Is there a stratification within HE of non-traditional student groups and can this be classified?
The importance of college tutors in the decision-making process for students who then opted to stay at the college in the context of ethical recruiting. While it is good that college tutors are encouraging WP students to enter HE there should be a responsibility to ensure that these students are fully informed about other options available to them and any limitations that could be associated with their decision to remain at the college.	Are potential HE students from FECs fully informed about the options available to them and making informed decisions that will support their future career aspirations?
Further research with more thorough student biographies to be able to compare based on matched samples.	Re-use research questions from this study

Table 6.1 Indications for further research

In terms of improvements to this study it would have been interesting to review students' aspirations and perceptions of HE at different points on their HE journey. A longitudinal study surveying students on entry, during their second year and just before graduation, particularly for those moving from the FEC to the HEI environment, to see if students had more clearly defined aspirations or changed their perceptions in relation to the differences between an HEI and FEC would achieve this.

The inability to coordinate focus groups with mixed student groups has disadvantaged this study as just by hearing the different views from students who were attending college but had originally gone to university compared to those who had not considered anything other than their local college showed clear differences in perceptions and led to interesting discussion.

This small-scale study gives some interesting glimpses into students' expectations and perceptions of HE that should generate useful debate and provide a base for further studies to provide evidence based information that leaders can utilise to influence change that responds to the student voice. Dual sector institutions play an important role in enabling some students from non-traditional backgrounds in achieving their potential in relation to HE where an HEI might not. There is a large group of students the literature discusses in relation to those from non-traditional backgrounds but the differences within this diverse group in terms of their choice of college or university suggest differing perceptions and priorities within the group that have implications on their choices, how they make decisions, their aspirations and perceptions. As such this thesis has identified the student voice can have an influential role in developing HE in dual sector institutions and they should be

facilitated to have a role in the development of leadership, policy and practice in the

development of HE in FE.

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Dear Respondent,

This questionnaire is part of my research for the award of EdD at the University of Birmingham. The attached covering letter explains the purpose of this survey and issues relating to confidentiality and anonymity. By completing and returning this questionnaire you are consenting to the detail in that letter. The questionnaire will take approximately fifteen minutes to complete, and is voluntary. Your time is greatly appreciated.

Where questions have a shaded box please place a cross in the appropriate box ⊠
Where questions have an un-shaded box a figure is required | 13 |

Where there is a scale from *1 strongly disagree* to *7 strongly agree* please circle the number that best represents your view on that question.

Strongly
agree

Strongly
disagree

| B1. Further Education and Higher Education institutions are aimed at different learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

For Higher Education Institution read 'University' for Further Education Institution read 'Further Education College/Sixth Form College'

Linda Harty

Section A: Personal Information

1. Gender	Female ☐ Male ☐
2. Age	17 – 21 ☐ 22 – 26 ☐ 27 – 31 ☐ 32 – 41 ☐ 42 – 46 ☐ 47 – 51 ☐ 52 + ☐

3. Ethnic Origin
 	
Please tick <u>one only</u> in category A, B, C, D or E.
 	
The ethnic origins used here are based on standard classifications used by Human Resources Departments in their equality questionnaires.
	A. Asian or Asian British
	
	1. Indian ☐
	
	2. Pakistani ☐
	
	3. Bangladeshi ☐
	
	4. Any other Asian background ☐
	
	    (please state) _____
	
	B. Mixed
	
	1. White and Black Caribbean ☐
	
	2. White and Black African ☐
	
	3. White and Asian ☐
	
	4. Any other mixed background ☐
	
	    (please state) _____
	
	C. Caribbean, African and any other black background
	
	1. Caribbean ☐
	
	2. African ☐
	
	3. Any other Black background ☐
	
	    (please state) _____
	
	D. White
	
	1. British ☐
	
	2. Irish ☐
	
	3. Any other White background ☐
	
	(please state) _____
	
	E. Chinese/Other
	
	1. Chinese ☐

	Any other background ☐ **(please state)** _____
4. What was the Post Code of the home you lived in <u>before</u> going to college/university?	
5. Do you class yourself as having a disability?	Yes ☐ No ☐
6. Are you the first in your family to undertake Higher Education at College or University?	Yes ☐ No ☐
7. Are you attending a College or a University?	University ☐ College ☐
8. Are you currently undertaking a Higher Education qualification?	Yes ☐ No ☐
9. What course are you undertaking?	
10. Which College/ University are you attending?	
11. Were you at school or college immediately before starting this course?	School ☐ Sixth Form College ☐ Further Education College ☐
12. What Qualifications Do You Have?	GCSEs ☐ A Levels ☐ Access Qualification ☐ ☐ HNC ☐ HND ☐ Other _____
13. Did you get your place through clearing.	Yes ☐ No ☐
14. What sort of job are you hoping to get after you graduate?	

Section B: Perceptions of Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE)

In this section the questions all relate to Higher Education whether it is delivered in a University (Higher Education Institution) or a College (Further Education Institution).

For this section please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate number, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, through to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
B1. Further Education and Higher Education institutions are aimed at different learners	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B2. Further Education and Higher Education institutions offer different subjects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B3. Further Education courses are at a different level to Higher Education courses	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B4. Further Education institutions are more affordable than Higher Education institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B5. There is no cross over between Further and Higher Education, they are distinct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B6. Degrees are only offered in Universities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B7. You get more support from the tutors in Higher Education Institutions than in Further Education Institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B8. You are expected to be more independent in Higher Education institutions than Further Education institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B9. The library facilities are better in Higher Education institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B10. The teaching facilities are better in Higher Education institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B11. The class size is much smaller in Further Education institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B12. The assignments are harder in Higher Education institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
B13. There is a difference in the student experience between Higher Education Institutions and Further Education Institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B14.There is a difference in the teaching between Higher Education and Further Education Institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B15. There is a difference in the level of qualifications held by the tutors in Higher Education and Further Education Institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B16. There is a better social life for students at a Higher Education Institution compared to a Further Education Institution.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B17. There is a difference between the employment opportunities for students from Further Education and Higher Education Institutions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B18. Higher Education Institutions are more daunting than Further Education Institutions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B19 Further Education Institutions seem more welcoming and friendly than Higher Education Institutions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B20 There is a big difference between HE delivered in a Higher Education Institution and HE delivered in a Further Education Institution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B21 Undergraduate Programmes can be delivered in Further Education Colleges	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B22 A Foundation Degree is equivalent to the first 2 years of an Undergraduate Degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please feel free to make any further comments in relation to your views on the differences between Higher and Further Education.

Section C: Choices

This section relates to the factors that influenced your choices when you were considering Higher Education.

Which of the factors below influenced your choice? *Please tick all that apply.*

		✓			✓
1	Distance to travel		10	Influence of friends	
2	Accommodation		11	Course availability	
3	Cost of Fees		12	Family responsibilities	
4	Other financial factors		13	Facilities	
5	League tables		14	Social experience	
6	Influence of teachers/tutors		15	Location	
7	Influence of family		16	Anticipated/Actual exam results	
8	Reputation		17	Clearing vacancies	
9	Career prospects		18	Other (please state)	

Which of the factors you ticked was:
most important (please give number)

least important (please give number)

C1. Did you consider any other courses, other than the one you are currently undertaking?

Yes ☐   No ☐   I don't feel I had a choice ☐

C2. Did you consider any other attending any other colleges or /universities, other than the one you are currently attending?

Yes ☐   No ☐   I don't feel I had a choice ☐

C3. Was choosing a course and institution a difficult decision to make?

Yes ☐   No ☐   I don't feel I had a choice ☐

Please feel free to make any further comments in relation to the choices you made.

Section D: Information, advice and guidance

This section relates to the information, advice and guidance that was available to you when you were considering where to study and which subject/course to undertake.

For this section please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate number, where 1 = Strongly Disagree through to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
D1. There was plenty of Information, Advice and Guidance available to me about my on-going study options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D2. I knew where to look to find out the information I wanted to support my decision to undertake Higher Education.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D3. The Information, Advice and Guidance I had access to was easily understandable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D4. The information, advice and guidance was available in a range of formats (e.g. Website/flyer/talk)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D5. The information, advice and guidance was available to me at the right time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D6. Information, advice and guidance about continuing education was available throughout compulsory education	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D7. The information, advice and guidance available to me gave me the information I was looking for	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D8. My parents gave me lots of help and advice in selecting my choices	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D9. I was able to discuss the options available to me with a number of friends and family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D10. I only had information, advice and guidance from my school/college tutors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D11. The information, advice and guidance that was available helped me make informed choices about my future education	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
D12. The information, advice and guidance available to me was helpful in my decision making about which course to choose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D13. The information, advice and guidance available to me was helpful in my decision making about where to study	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D14. The information, advice and guidance I accessed resulted in me making different decisions to those I had originally anticipated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D15. The information, advice and guidance I accessed had no impact on my decision	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please tick the different sources of information, advice and guidance you accessed. *Please tick all that apply:*

	✓		✓		✓
1. University Prospectus		9. University Open Day		17. University Staff at Open days	
2. College Prospectus		10. College Open Day		18. Parents	
3. University Website		11. HE Fairs		19. Relatives	
4. College Website		12. School Teachers		20. Family Friends	
5. Student Room Web Site		13. College Tutors		21.Careers guidance officers	
6. League Tables		14. Friends already in Higher Education		22.Other please state:	
7. National Student Survey data		15. Friends looking to start courses at the same time		23.Other please state:	
8. Key Information Sets		16. Student Ambassadors at open days		24.Other Please state:	

Of the above sources that you accessed:
Which was most useful (please give number)

Which was least useful (please give number)

Please feel free to make any further comments in relation to the information, advice and guidance available to you.

Section E: Your expectations and aspirations:

This section relates to your expectations of higher education and your aspirations.

For this section please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate number, where 1 = Strongly Disagree through to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
E1. Gaining a degree will enhance my job prospects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E2. Gaining a degree will enable me to earn more money	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E3. It is important to me to have the opportunity to enter Higher Education and complete a degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E4. It is important to me to get a good degree (2:1 or above)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E5. I have planned to go on to Higher Education and gain a degree for as long as I can remember	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E6. Attending College/University has/will give(n) me more confidence	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E7. Gaining a degree was at one point beyond my expectations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E8. I feel very comfortable completing a degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E9. I feel completely at home at College/University	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E10. My parents had planned for me to undertake Higher Education	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E11. I will continue on to post graduate qualifications after I complete my degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E12. Gaining a degree is as much about the experience as the qualification	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please feel free to make any further comments in relation to your expectations and aspirations.


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Many thanks for taking the time to complete this questionnaire!

I will be undertaking a series of focus groups relating to this topic over the next few months if you would like to participate please email me at ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ using the subject header 'HE in FE Focus Group' so I am able to contact you.

All participants in the focus groups will be entered into a prize draw to win a £50 Amazon Voucher and refreshments will be available at the groups.

Please return this survey in the stamped addressed envelope provided to:
Mrs Linda Harty,
EdD student,
School of Education,
University of Birmingham,
Edgbaston,
Birmingham
B15 2TT

Dear

I am a post-graduate student at the University of Birmingham and am currently completing an EdD (Doctorate in Education). For my Thesis, I am examining student's perceptions of Higher Education by investigating the factors that influence a student to choose or not choose the Further Education (FE) route into Higher Education (HE), discovering more about students' perceptions of the difference between HE and FE institutions, finding out what information, advice and guidance is available/utilised by students considering entering HE and finally exploring to what extent students' expectations and aspirations differ, if at all, between those directly entering HE and those entering HE through FE.

Because you were in your first year of a higher education course during the 2012-13 academic year, I am inviting you to participate in this research study by completing the attached questionnaire. The questionnaire will require approximately fifteen minutes of your time to complete. In order to ensure that all information will remain confidential, please do not include your name.

The data collected will only be available to my Supervisor for this Thesis and possibly the external examiner. Any information discussed in the published Thesis or resulting papers will be anonymised. The study has received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham and permission from the Research, Enterprise and Advanced Scholarship Committee at your University and will be conducted in line with research ethics procedures.
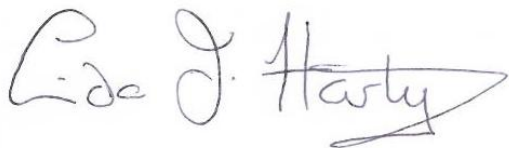
If you choose to participate in this research, please answer all questions as honestly as possible and return the completed questionnaire promptly in the stamped

addressed envelope provided. Participation is strictly voluntary and you may refuse to participate at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me with this research. The data collected will provide useful information for leaders and policy makers in the education sector.

Completion and return of the questionnaire will indicate your willingness to participate in this study. If you wish to contact me in relation to this study please do so via the email address ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ using the subject line 'HE in FE study'.

Yours faithfully,

Linda Harty

Supervisor: Dr Tom Bisschoff
Telephone ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
Email: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Distance to Travel * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Distance to Travel	Did not influence Choice	8	17	25
	Influenced Choice	31	25	56
Total		39	42	81

Accommodation * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Accommodation	Did not influence Choice	18	35	53
	Influenced Choice	21	7	28
Total		39	42	81

Cost of Fees * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Cost of Fees	0	15	26	41
	1	24	16	40
Total		39	42	81

Other financial factors * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Other financial factors	Did not influence Choice	31	31	62
	Influenced Choice	8	11	19
Total		39	42	81

League Tables * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
League Tables	Did not influence Choice	39	29	68
	Influenced Choice	0	13	13
Total		39	42	81

Influence of teachers/tutors * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Influence of teachers/tutors	Did not influence Choice	15	33	48
	Influenced Choice	24	9	33
Total		39	42	81

Influence of family * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Influence of family	Did not influence Choice	26	29	55
	Influenced Choice	13	13	26
Total		39	42	81

Reputation * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Reputation	Did not influence Choice	31	28	59
	Influenced Choice	8	14	22
Total		39	42	81

Career Prospects * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Career Prospects	Did not influence Choice	26	13	39
	Influenced Choice	13	29	42
Total		39	42	81

237

Influence of friends * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Influence of friends		0	1	1
	Did not influence Choice	22	39	61
	Influenced Choice	17	2	19
Total		39	42	81

Course availability * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Course availability	Did not influence Choice	17	11	28
	Influenced Choice	22	31	53
Total		39	42	81

Family responsibilities * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Family responsibilities	Did not influence Choice	33	32	65
	Influenced Choice	6	10	16
Total		39	42	81

Facilities * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Facilities	Did not influence Choice	32	26	58
	Influenced Choice	7	16	23
Total		39	42	81

Social Experience * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Social Experience	Did not influence Choice	32	33	65
	Influenced Choice	7	9	16
Total		39	42	81

Location * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Location	Did not influence Choice	11	24	35
	Influenced Choice	28	18	46
Total		39	42	81

Anticipated/Actual Exam Results * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Anticipated/Actual Exam Results	Did not influence Choice	35	34	69
	Influenced Choice	4	8	12
Total		39	42	81

Clearing vacancies * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Clearing vacancies	Did not influence Choice	39	26	65
	Influenced Choice	0	16	16
Total		39	42	81

Other * Are you attending a College or University?

Crosstab

Count

		Are you attending a College or University?		Total
		College	University	
Other	Did not influence Choice	37	42	79
	Influenced Choice	2	0	2
Total		39	42	81

Interviewer: The first thing I'm interested in is your journey to undergraduate study. Did you come straight from college or school, that sort of thing really?

Interviewee: Right well I'm 25 in March so I've obviously had a bit of a break between. When I left school, I went to college, when I left college I actually went to university in XX. And I did a very similar subject of sports rehabilitation so it's the same subject it's just under a different association. But I only did one semester and it really just wasn't for me at that time. So I came home and I worked full-time for a few years then I came here because it's still really been something that I've always wanted to do. I always wanted to do this but being that far away from home at that time wasn't right for me.

Interviewer: You said that when you left school you went to college what did you want to do, was it to do A-levels or something else?

Interviewee: I actually did a BTEC it was a BTEC in Health Studies. So it was quite science-based so I thought it would help.

Interviewer: Are you local?

Interviewee: Yes, yes I am I'm from XXX I did my BTEC at XXXX college.

Interviewer: So when you were at the college did you speak to the staff there about your choices and the subjects that you might do?

Interviewee: No not really, they already knew what I wanted to do, I've always wanted to do something based around physio from when I was quite young and I've always been really really sporty. I think it was either at school or maybe college we were given a website, I don't know if it was through the UCAS site I can't remember but it's like a big questionnaire that you fill out and then it gives you a list of subjects which you are suited to. It then also tells you the universities which you could study the subject you are suited to. I think I did that a couple of times and I always got the same subject for my first and second options.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to do a BTEC?

Interviewee: Because I was so rubbish at exams. BTEC's don't have any exams and I've always been much better at coursework. I've always done better in the coursework than in the exam so it made more sense that I was going to get higher grades and things doing a BTEC.

Interviewer: So that was a conscious decision to leave school after you did your GCSE's and to go to college so you could do a BTEC?

Interviewee: Yes

Interviewer: So you didn't start to do A-levels at school?

Interviewee: Yes I did actually, I started A-levels but I just didn't do very well because I was so rubbish at exams.

Interviewer: So when you said you started A-levels did you complete them or did you give up halfway through?

Interviewee: I finished the first year but I didn't do very well, so there would be no point in me continuing in the second year, it'd of just got me nowhere so I just went straight to college then.

Interviewer: And did you find that better?

Interviewee: Yes, mainly for the fact that there was no exams but you also got more support. College was more like university than school, the lecturer's had more time for you than the teachers at school did. You always felt more able to go and speak to them.

Interviewer: So when you went to university in XX did you apply to other universities as well and for other subjects?

Interviewee: Yes I did at that time, I applied for, um, is it 5 you can apply for, yes I think it was it was 5. I applied to 5 and got into 3, I didn't get into one and the other I was offered an interview for but didn't go. The one I really wanted to go to was the only one I didn't get into. So I ended up basing it on the open days. They were all quite a long way away and sports therapy didn't seem to be around then. So they were all really far away from home, there was even one in Ireland, then xxxx and xxxx and I can't remember where the others were. Basically they were all very far away.

Interviewer: So when you were at xxx and you were struggling with being so far away from home did you get any helpful/support from the staff there about what your options might be?

Interviewee: No, I just went home at the end of one semester and didn't go back. I think they realised I was struggling because I didn't turn up to quite a few lectures so they did speak to me. Then I came home for Christmas, I didn't just leave, I phoned and spoke to the course leader and she phoned me again over Christmas and she was really nice to be fair, she said if I wanted to come back I could take the rest of the year out and come back the next year. She said I could start again the following year and she would save me a place. But I think by then I'd already made up my mind that it just wasn't right.

Interviewer: So you then had a period working, did you work in healthcare or sport?

Interviewee: No. Before I left to go to uni I had a part-time job already in a sportswear shop, and they were kind enough to take me back when I came back home but it wasn't full time it was still only part time. So I just then started applying everywhere to get full-time work and ended up at xxxxx and I still work there now part-time. Before I came back to university I worked full time at xxxxx for 3 years.

Interviewer: So what was it that made you decide to apply to come back to university?

Interviewee: It just sort of felt like the right time and I found this course at XXX so you know I wouldn't have to leave, I could stay at home and still work in my job and it's something I've always wanted to do. There was never really any doubt of me wanting to do it. I thought, well, it sounds a bit cliché, but I felt like I'd grown as a person. Probably with working full-time with the public, yeah I was always really shy and reserved before but having to speak to the public and different people every day you kind of grow in confidence. So I think that helped a lot really.

Interviewer: So when you found the course at XXX did you apply to anywhere else?

Interviewee: No, I didn't want to go away again, I wanted to stay locally and when the course I wanted to do was running here there didn't seem much point, it was the right option.

Interviewer: So did you discuss you decision with friends and family at all?

Interviewee: Yes, I discussed it with family yeah and with close friends actually, I discussed it with everyone.

Interviewer: So were they supportive?

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah all very good.

Interviewer: So you were now coming back to university at a time when the fees had changed dramatically from the last time you went to university. Did this have an impact on the decision?

Interviewee: No, not at all because the way I see it is that by the time I've graduated and I have a job in this field I'm already going to be earning a lot more than I'm earning now so what does go out of my wage I'm not going to miss. You only payback the fees when you're earning over a certain amount anyway so, so I just don't think it really affects anybody that much. I haven't really researched it particularly because it just doesn't bother me so I assume that it still stands that if you haven't paid off the fees in a certain amount of years it still gets wiped away anyway, so either way it doesn't really change things because although the fees have gone up, the amount you have to earn before you start paying it back has gone up as well so it's all just the same. It's just the numbers seem bigger and so it's a different way of looking at it.

Interviewer: So what do you understand to be the difference between a university and a college degree?

Interviewee: Well I didn't actually know you could do degrees at college until you mentioned it and I took part in the study. I just didn't know.

Interviewer: So what do you think the difference is?

Interviewee: Ehm, for me it's just the level of your education to me university is a higher level of education than college, college to me is where you go to do A-levels, BTEC's and that sort of thing, that's it really. At a university you do degrees, masters, doctorates.

Interviewer: So had they done your course at the college would you have applied there?

Interviewee: No, probably not, just because thinking for the long-term I don't know how employers would look at that, would they favour someone with a university degree over someone who'd done one at college?

Nodes

	Name	Created On	Description
	Great Quotes	01/10/2014 21:03	Quotes that might be useful for write up
	IAG	01/10/2014 20:59	Any reference to IAG sources used
	Careers Guidance	15/10/2014 22:46	Any reference to carrers guidance
	Friends and Family	15/10/2014 22:51	Friends and Family as a sounding Board
	Online	16/10/2014 00:01	Where students accessed websites and gathered their IAG online
	Open Days and Fairs	01/10/2014 21:00	Open Days and fairs as a source of IAG
	Prospectus	15/10/2014 22:43	Any reference to University or College Prospectus
	Research	15/10/2014 23:32	Where students talk about researching various aspects of progres
	student ambassador influence	01/10/2014 21:25	where current students have had an impact on decision to enrol
	Tutor or Institution Advice	01/10/2014 21:24	Advice and influence from tutors and institutions
	UCAS	15/10/2014 22:50	Any reference made to UCAS as a source of IAG
	What's Missing	15/10/2014 22:44	Information students wishhad been available to them.
	On Reflection	07/10/2014 19:52	Where students would have done things differently knowing what t
	Route to HE	22/10/2014 19:40	
	Previous Paid Work	03/10/2014 00:41	Where students have had experience of the workplace prior to Uni
	Qualifications	01/10/2014 21:02	All references to qualifications or lack of
	A Level	01/10/2014 21:38	Any reference made to A levels
	BTEC	01/10/2014 21:31	Any reference made to a BTEC qualification
	New to Study or No Quals	01/10/2014 21:38	No previous level 3 experience
	Time Out	03/10/2014 00:35	Where participants made reference to having time out between Co
	Widening Participation	01/10/2014 21:03	Any reference to background, BME, disability including MH, first in

Nodes

Name	Created On	Description
People	02/10/2014 18:34	Profiles from focus groups and interviews
Themes	02/10/2014 18:32	
Aspirations	01/10/2014 20:51	Students with some sense of aspiration, maybe failure, changing o
Career Aspirations	02/10/2014 21:26	Reference to future career or study and path to get to HE - often th
Further study	22/10/2014 19:38	PG study?
Progression from FD to level 6	01/10/2014 21:07	Are students considering, expecting to continue to Level 6 from a
Opportunities	07/10/2014 15:15	Specific mention of opportunities arrising as a result of HE attenda
Reasons for entering HE	01/10/2014 21:01	Why students chose to attend HE
Better Job Opportunities	01/10/2014 21:41	Mention of HE as a gateway to better job opportunities and and Mo
It's What You Do	15/10/2014 22:07	HE is the expected route but no thought behind why they are going
Recognise Importance of Ed	01/10/2014 21:40	Recognition of Importance of Ed and or express a desire to learn
Where to work	22/10/2014 19:17	Local, nationwide, global
Differences between HE and FE	01/10/2014 21:08	Any percieved difference mentioned
Age Differences	17/10/2014 20:28	Any reference to the age differences between FE and HE
Facilities and Equipment	17/10/2014 19:38	Perceptions of different facilities available
Lecturer Experience - Teaching	17/10/2014 21:58	Level of experience or coments re teaching style
Level of Support	17/10/2014 19:33	Perception of different levels of support offered
Level of tutor support	03/03/2015 16:12	Where reference is made to the level of support given from tutors
Spoon Fed	17/10/2014 21:10	Where the term 'spoon fed' has been used in terms of college teac
Narrow View	17/10/2014 21:55	Comments about a wider perspective on life because of mix of peo
Preparedness for HE	17/10/2014 21:49	Comments re how prepared are as independant learners
Self Reliance and Independance	01/10/2014 21:44	Includes concerns of lonliness, distractions, ability to look after self
Social Aspect	17/10/2014 20:25	Any reference to the difference between social aspects of FEC an
Temptation - focus - engagement	17/10/2014 20:05	Students made reference to temptation at University because of so
The University Experience	17/10/2014 21:54	Reference to the abstract concept of the University Experience
Uni Status	03/10/2014 00:36	Where participants made reference to the 'status' associated with

247

Nodes

Name	Created On	Description
Factors Influencing Choice	01/10/2014 20:58	Any factor that was considered in making the decision where to stu
Access to facilities	01/10/2014 21:46	Important or not important
Accommodation	07/10/2014 18:10	References made to living in accommodation/halls
Age	01/10/2014 21:07	Any reference made to age
Choice of Institution	01/10/2014 20:53	Why did they ultimately choose the place of study they did
Consideration given to alternatives	01/10/2014 21:06	Did students consider other subjects, institutions or not?
Cost	01/10/2014 20:54	All elements of cost of being a student from fees to travel and how
cost of living	01/10/2014 21:19	Cost of things other than fees
Cost of travel	01/10/2014 21:19	Concerns around cost of travel
Debt	01/10/2014 21:20	Concerns re debt
Fees	01/10/2014 21:18	Views on fees
part-time work	01/10/2014 21:21	need for students to undertake part-time work to afford to study
Course Choice	07/10/2014 20:24	Why did participants choose their course, subject area?
Family Responsibilities	01/10/2014 21:42	Where family responsibilities have driven decisions
Grades	15/10/2014 20:46	Where grades had an impact on decision/Choice
Learning Style	01/10/2014 21:47	Comments about different learning styles and how they impact on
Location	01/10/2014 21:45	All aspects of location including need not to travel
Homebird	01/10/2014 21:45	Descriptions of being a 'homebird' or the need to be near home/fa
Need for support from Family	01/10/2014 21:42	Where choice was limited because of need to be local and have su
Placement	07/10/2014 20:24	Where students make reference to any type of placement
Risk	17/10/2014 17:00	More general perceptions of risk - failure, not fitting in etc
Confidence, Pressure, Stress	07/10/2014 17:18	Where students have made reference to confidence levels, feelin
Financial	17/10/2014 17:28	Perceived risks in relation to finances and debt concerns
Going for it	03/10/2014 16:09	
Learner Identity	17/10/2014 17:01	Lack of confidence as a learner and need for support and reassura
Simplest Progression Option	01/10/2014 21:18	Where it was just easier to stay on than think about other options
Support of Family	02/10/2014 23:30	Where participants made reference to the support they received fr

248

Differences between HE and FE/Temptation-focus-engagement

<Internals\\Focus Groups\\Focus Group 3 Transcript> - § 4 references coded [2.99% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.13% Coverage

It's easier to not engage at university if you're in the big lecture theatres because they can't notice everyone so if you want to just sit back and go to sleep or to play on your phone, you could for like the whole two hours and they'd never notice. But here it's more of an enclosed group so people are more focused.

Reference 2 - 0.67% Coverage

I'd probably say temptation, because my brother was one of them students that used to go out every night and then sat at the back of the lecture hall and fell asleep in lectures the next day.

Reference 3 - 0.63% Coverage

Yeah, I'd find it hard to get the work done, if there was other people around all the time I just wouldn't get it done but living at home I can get on with it without temptation.

Reference 4 - 0.56% Coverage

For some people that might put their focus off their study because they're more interested in the new things and new friends whereas here it's easier to focus.

<Internals\\Focus Groups\\Focus Group 2 Transcript> - § 1 reference coded [0.82% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.82% Coverage

I went up to one of my mates at XX University in half term and they had this amazing flat and were playing cards to early hours of the morning and chilling and I was thinking yeah this could be me but then I thought I'd get no work done because they are slipping back and they're skint as well.

<Internals\\Focus Groups\\Focus Group 1 Transcript> - § 2 references coded [3.42% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.73% Coverage

 Plus with it being a smaller group you don't get distracted as much, so you can concentrate easier.

Reference 2 - 2.69% Coverage

I think it's more of an advantage to me as well like, being here at college because when I talk to my mates, they just don't get on with their work, it's up to them whether they do it or not and even though they are really smart they just don't do it. Where being here and being away from them it means I can concentrate on my work, so I feel that's the big advantage.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Interview Transcript – Interview Chloe> - § 1 reference coded [0.65% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.65% Coverage

if I'm honest if I'd come straight from school I think I would have missed half the lectures.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Interview Transcription - Interview Catherine> - § 1 reference coded [0.93% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.93% Coverage

you can see that those who want to achieve will achieve whereas those who are just here for the social aspect they are not as committed.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Transcription Interview Jaz> - § 2 references coded [3.30% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.17% Coverage

some of the students who were living in halls in the first year weren't attending lectures even though they just lived around the corner, they were enjoying the social life

Reference 2 - 2.13% Coverage

I didn't know if that's because at college students are coming from home and their parents were making sure they attended because they were checking they were out of the house maybe that's why some have issues now at the university – having too good a time and not concentrating on the studies.

A	Professionals such as doctors, lawyers and dentists, chartered architects and engineers. Individuals with a large degree of responsibility such as senior executives and senior managers, higher grade civil servants and higher ranks of the armed services.
B	University lecturers, heads of local government departments, executive officers of the civil service, middle managers, qualified scientists, bank managers, police inspectors and senior ranks of the armed services
C1	Nurses, technicians, pharmacists, salesmen, publicans, clerical workers, clerical officers within the civil service, police sergeants and constables and senior non-commissioned officers within the armed services.
C2	Skilled manual workers who have served apprenticeships; foremen, manual workers with special qualifications such as long distance lorry drivers, security officers and other non-commissioned officers within the armed services.
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, including labourers and people serving apprenticeships; clerical assistants in the civil service, machine minders, farm labourers, laboratory assistants, postmen and all other members of the armed services.
E	Pensioners, casual workers, long term unemployed people, and others with relatively low or fixed levels of income.

Source: www.Checkmyarea.com

Credit Reporting Agency, 2014

APPENDIX 8 – HEAT MAPS ILLUSTRATING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FE AND HE.
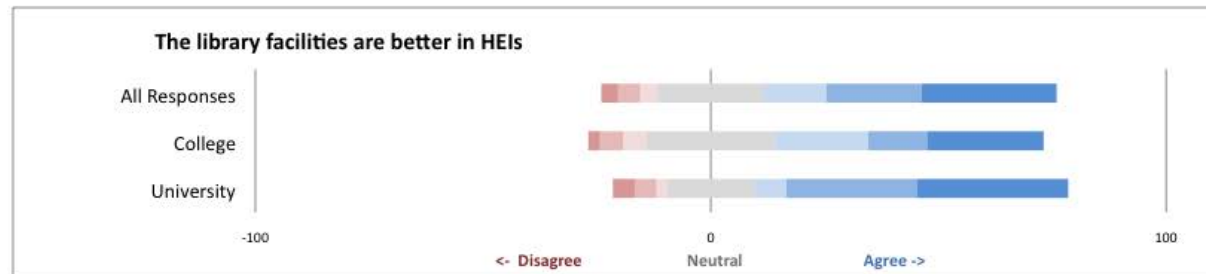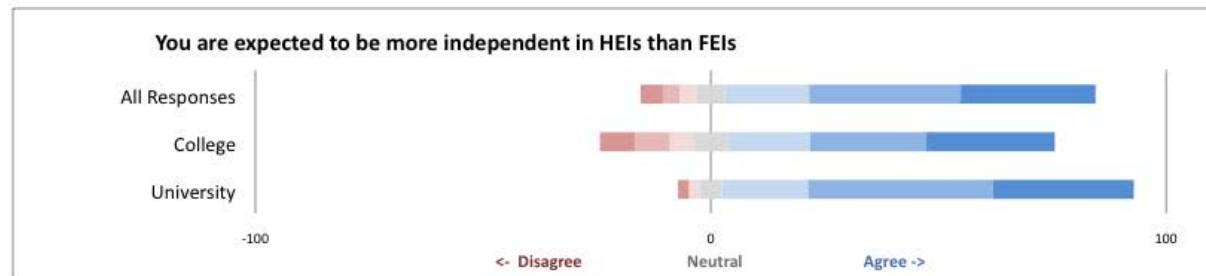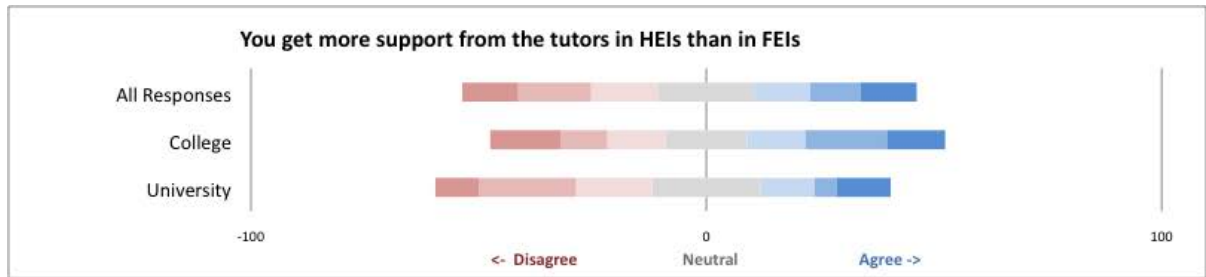
Respondents were presented with 22 statements and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A small number of statements were left blank by a small number of respondents so the percentage is based on the number of responses to each statement; the smallest number of responses to any statement was 78 and the maximum 81.
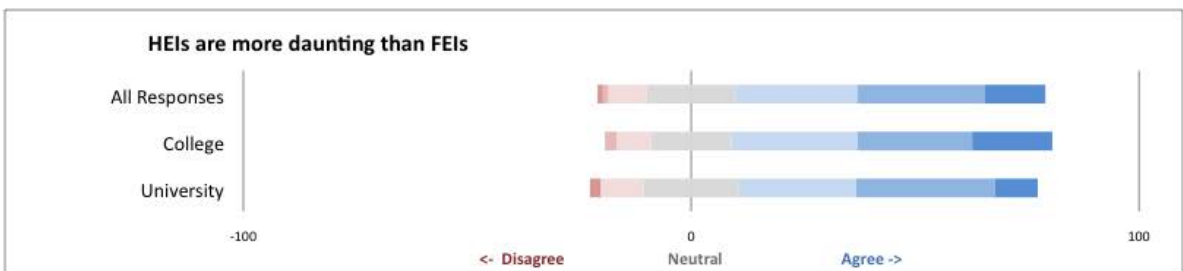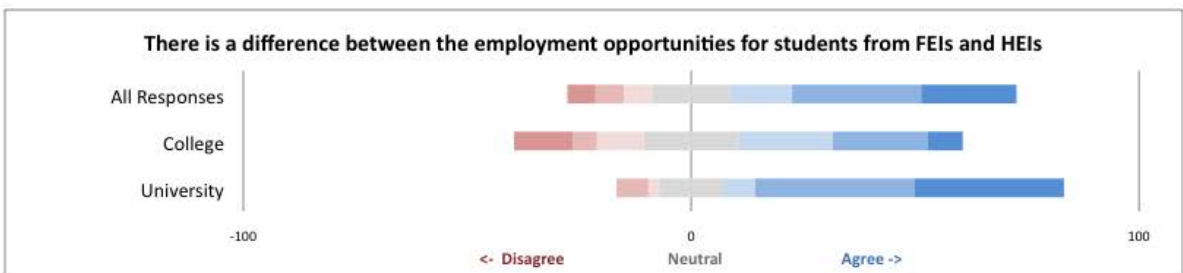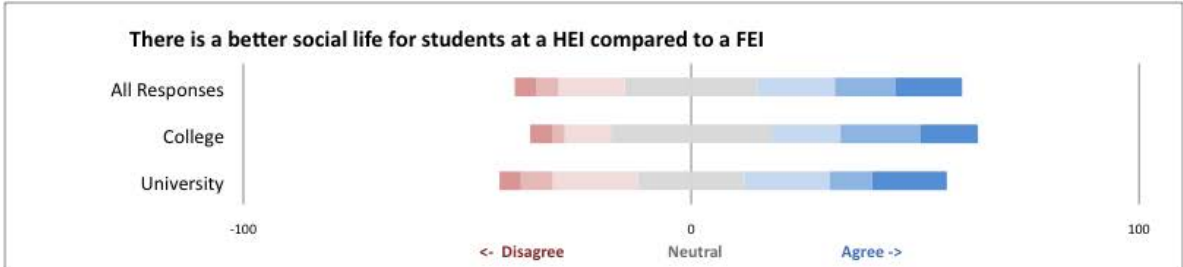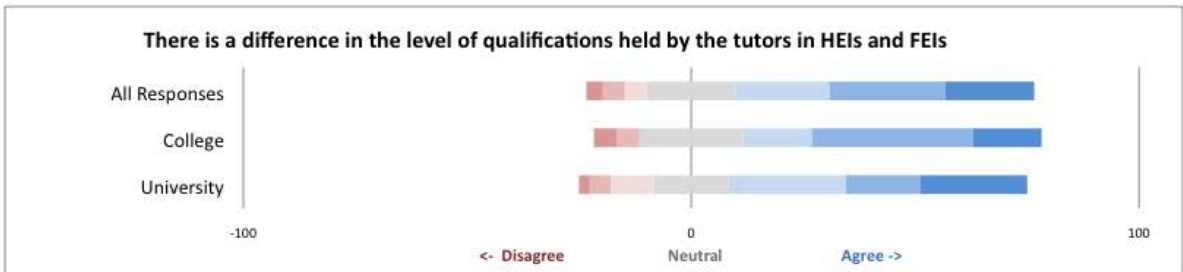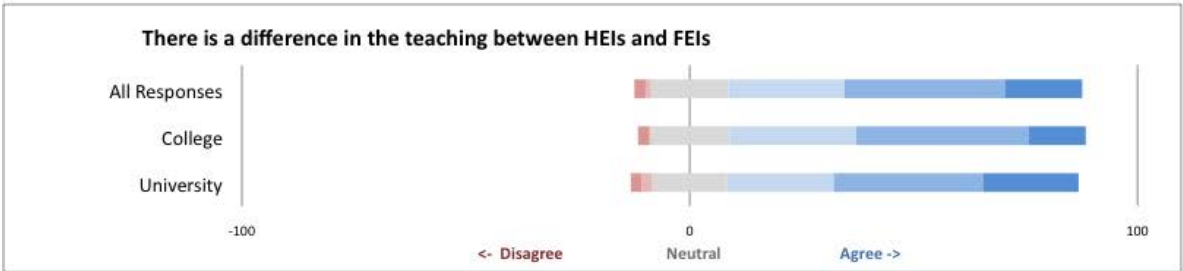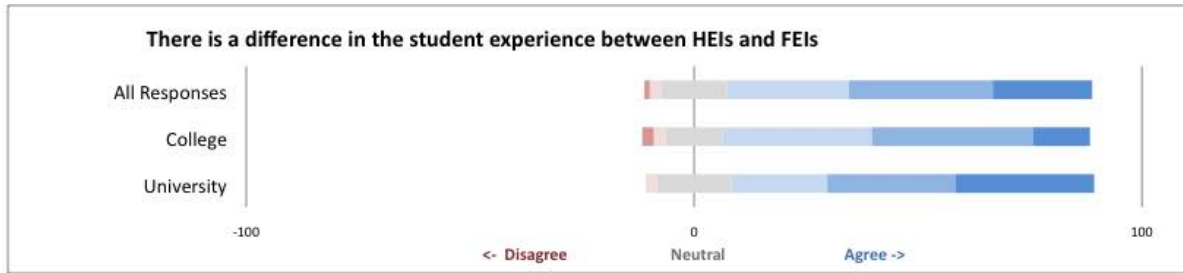
The heat maps below illustrate the extent of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Where the majority of the bar is to the right of neutral it illustrates agreement with the statement and where the majority of the bar is to the left of neutral it illustrates disagreement. The grey section illustrates the degree of neutrality to the statement and the intensity of the blue the degree of agreement and the intensity of the pink the degree of disagreement.
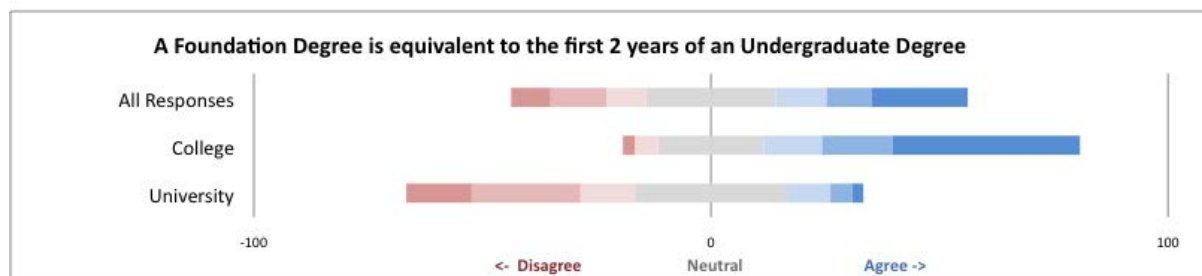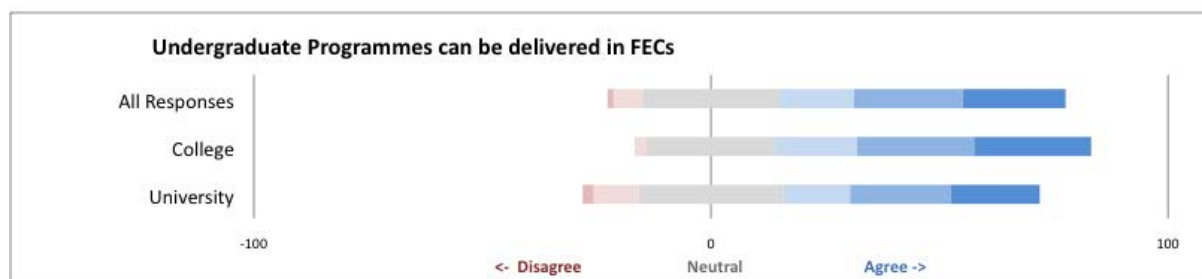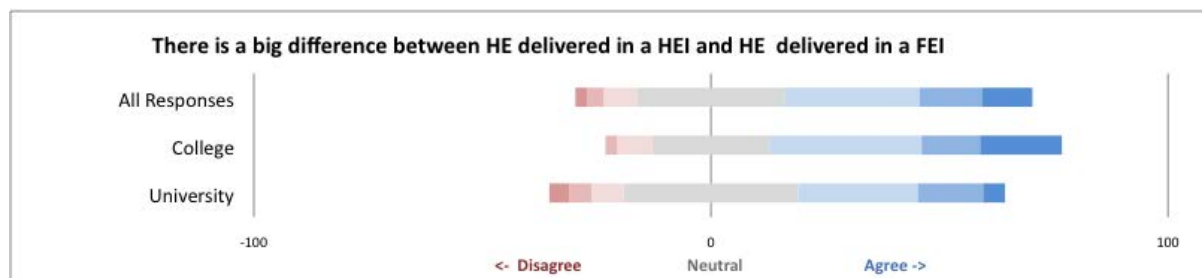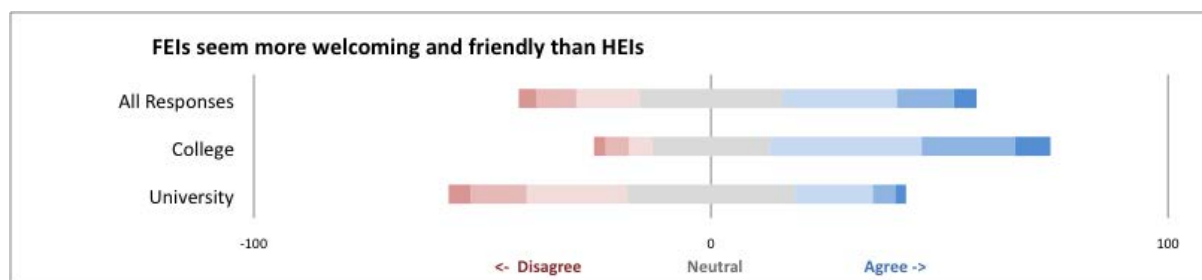
The less alignment between the College and University bar the more opinion between these two groups of students varied.

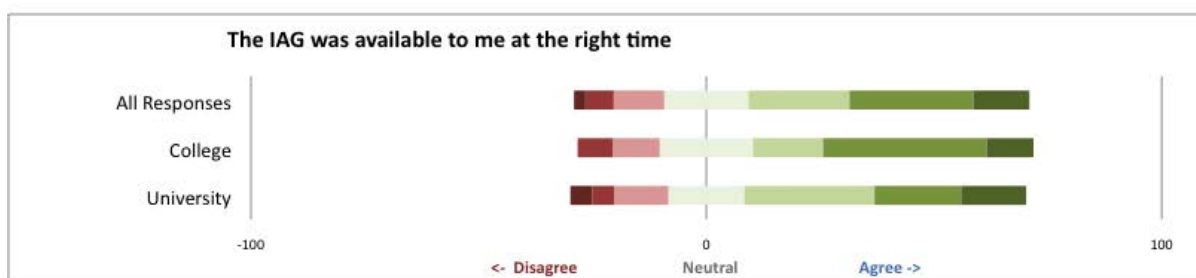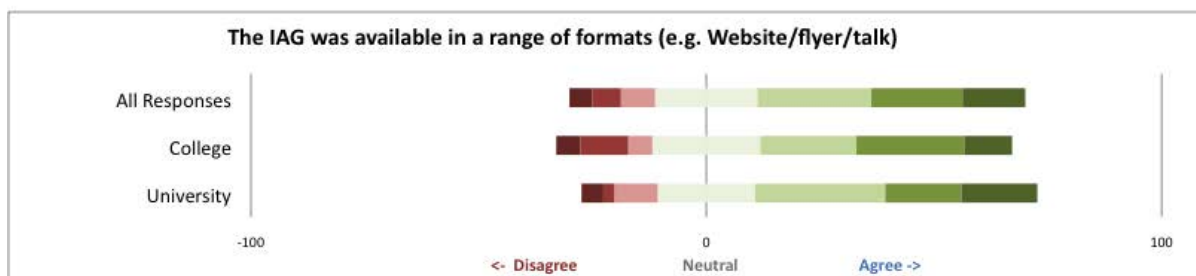**FE and HE institutions are aimed at different learners**

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

FE and HE institutions offer different subjects

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

FE courses are at a different level to HE courses

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

FEIs are more affordable than HEIs

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

There is no cross over between FE and HE, they are distinct

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

Degrees are only offered in Universities

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

253

You get more support from the tutors in HEIs than in FEIs

All Responses	
College	
University	

-100   <- Disagree   0 Neutral   Agree ->   100

You are expected to be more independent in HEIs than FEIs

All Responses	
College	
University	

-100   <- Disagree   0 Neutral   Agree ->   100

The library facilities are better in HEIs

All Responses	
College	
University	

-100   <- Disagree   0 Neutral   Agree ->   100

The teaching facilities are better in HEIs

All Responses	
College	
University	

-100   <- Disagree   0 Neutral   Agree ->   100

The class size is much smaller in FEIs

All Responses	
College	
University	

-100   <- Disagree   0 Neutral   Agree ->   100

The assignments are harder in HEIs

All Responses	
College	
University	

-100   <- Disagree   0 Neutral   Agree ->   100

254

There is a difference in the student experience between HEIs and FEIs

There is a difference in the teaching between HEIs and FEIs

There is a difference in the level of qualifications held by the tutors in HEIs and FEIs

There is a better social life for students at a HEI compared to a FEI

There is a difference between the employment opportunities for students from FEIs and HEIs

HEIs are more daunting than FEIs

255

FEIs seem more welcoming and friendly than HEIs

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

There is a big difference between HE delivered in a HEI and HE delivered in a FEI

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

Undergraduate Programmes can be delivered in FECs

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

A Foundation Degree is equivalent to the first 2 years of an Undergraduate Degree

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

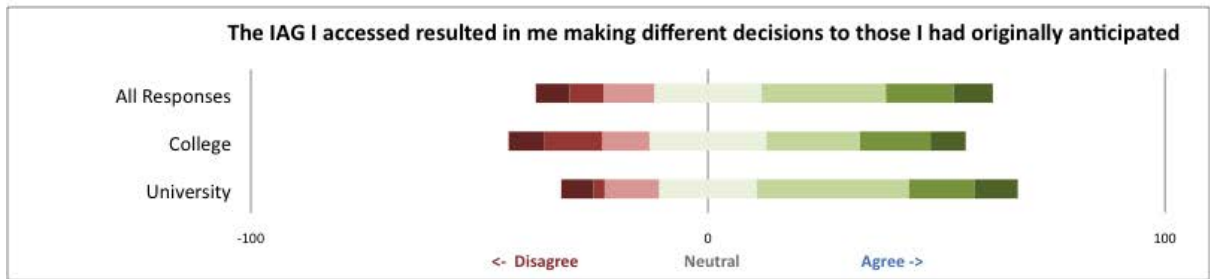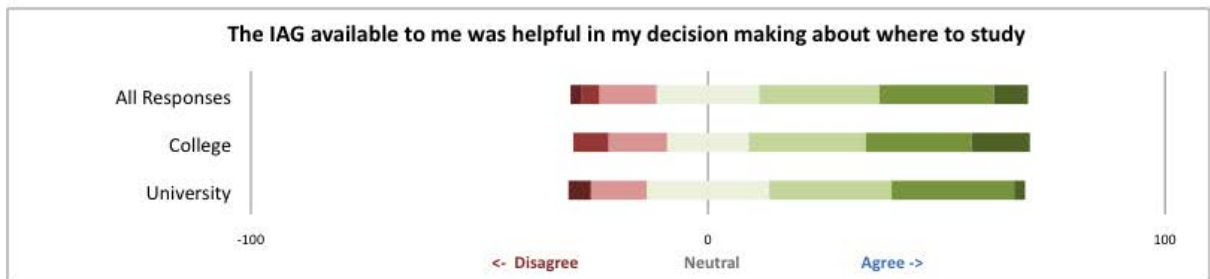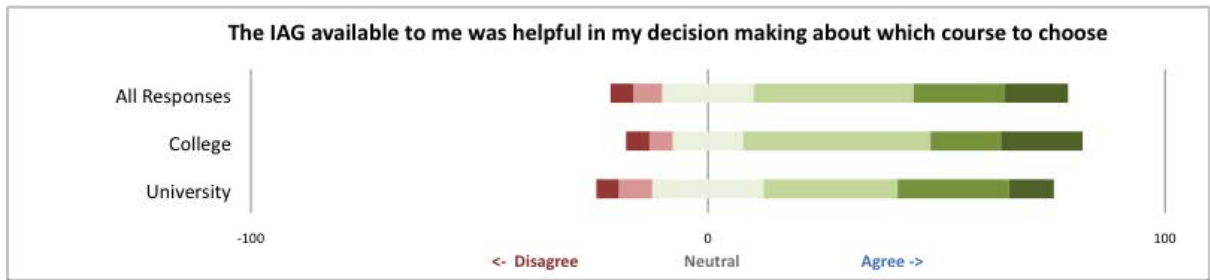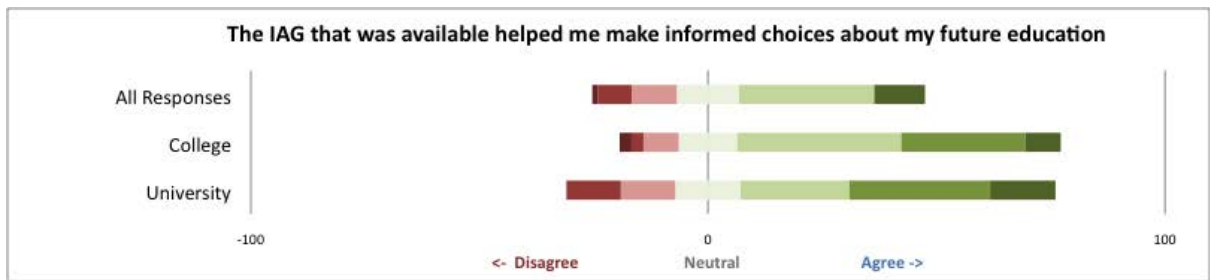<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

256

Respondents were presented with 15 statements about IAG and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A small number of statements were left blank by a small number of respondents so the percentage is based on the number of responses to each statement, the smallest number of responses to any statement was 78 and the maximum 81.

The heat maps below illustrate the extent of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Where the majority of the bar is to the right of neutral it illustrates agreement with the statement and where the majority of the bar is to the left of neutral it illustrates disagreement. The grey section illustrates the degree of neutrality to the statement and the intensity of the green the degree of agreement and the intensity of the red the degree of disagreement.

The less alignment between the College and University bar the more opinion between these two groups of students varied.

There was plenty of IAG available to me about my on-going study options

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I knew where to look to find out the information I wanted to support my decision to undertake HE

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

The IAG I had access to was easily understandable

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

The IAG was available in a range of formats (e.g. Website/flyer/talk)

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

The IAG was available to me at the right time

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

IAG about continuing education was available throughout compulsory education

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

The IAG available to me gave me the information I was looking for

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

My parents gave me lots of help and advice in selecting my choices

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I was able to discuss the options available to me with a number of friends and family

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I only had IAG from my school/college tutors

All Responses

College

University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

259

The IAG that was available helped me make informed choices about my future education

The IAG available to me was helpful in my decision making about which course to choose

The IAG available to me was helpful in my decision making about where to study

The IAG I accessed resulted in me making different decisions to those I had originally anticipated

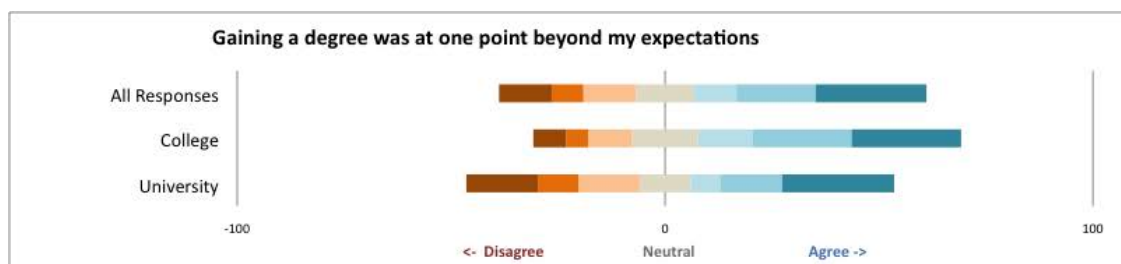The IAG I accessed had no impact on my decision

260

Respondents were presented with 12 statements about aspirations and expectations and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A small number of statements were left blank by a small number of respondents so the percentage is based on the number of responses to each statement, the smallest number of responses to any statement was 78 and the maximum 81.

The heat maps below illustrate the extent of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Where the majority of the bar is to the right of neutral it illustrates agreement with the statement and where the majority of the bar is to the left of neutral it illustrates disagreement. The grey section illustrates the degree of neutrality to the statement and the intensity of the blue the degree of agreement and the intensity of the orange the degree of disagreement.

The less alignment between the College and University bar the more opinion between these two groups of students varied.

Gaining a degree will enhance my job prospects

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

Gaining a degree will enable me to earn more money

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

It is important to me to have the opportunity to enter Higher Education and complete a degree

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

It is important to me to get a good degree (2:1 or above)

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I have planned to go on to Higher Education and gain a degree for as long as I can remember

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

Attending College/University has/will give(n) me more confidence

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

262

Gaining a degree was at one point beyond my expectations

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I feel very comfortable completing a degree

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I feel completely at home at College/University

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

My parents had planned for me to undertake Higher Education

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

I will continue on to post graduate qualifications after I complete my degree

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

Gaining a degree is as much about the experience as the qualification

All Responses
College
University

-100   0   100

<- Disagree   Neutral   Agree ->

263

Nodes

	Name	Created On	Description
	People	02/10/2014 18:34	Profiles from focus groups and interviews
	College 1	02/10/2014 19:13	Town/No University/Good public transport
	Charlie	02/10/2014 19:12	Male/17-21/White B
	Colin	02/10/2014 19:17	Male/17-21/White
	Diane	02/10/2014 18:35	Female/22-26/White
	Gareth	02/10/2014 18:46	Male/17-21/White
	Hayley	02/10/2014 19:17	Female/17-21/White
	Naveen	02/10/2014 18:48	Male/17-21/Asian
	Rory	02/10/2014 18:45	Male/17-12/White
	Sujit	02/10/2014 18:43	Male/17-21/Asian
	College 2	02/10/2014 19:29	Town/University/Good Public Transport
	Cameron	02/10/2014 19:32	Male/22-26/White
	David	02/10/2014 19:29	Male/17-21/White
	Deepak	02/10/2014 19:37	Male/17-21/White
	Duncan	02/10/2014 19:35	Male/17-21/White
	Emily	02/10/2014 19:33	Female/17-21/White
	Jo	02/10/2014 19:34	Female/17-21/White
	Kain	02/10/2014 19:34	Male/17-21/White
	Louis	02/10/2014 19:33	Male/17-21/White
	Mark	02/10/2014 19:35	Male/17-21/White
	Martin	02/10/2014 19:31	Male/17-21/White
	Mike	02/10/2014 19:30	Male/17-21/White
	Toby	02/10/2014 19:36	Male/17-21/White
	William	02/10/2014 19:36	Male/17-21/White
	College 3	02/10/2014 19:18	Rural/No University/Public Transport Reasonable
	Andy	02/10/2014 19:24	Male/17-21/White
	Austin	02/10/2014 19:23	Male/17-21/White
	Ben	02/10/2014 19:22	Male/17-21/Mixed
	Ed	02/10/2014 19:21	Male/17-21/White
	Finn	02/10/2014 19:20	Male/17-21/White
	Gemma	02/10/2014 19:23	Female/17-21/White
	Harry	02/10/2014 19:28	Male/17-21/White
	Jason	02/10/2014 19:26	Male/17-21/White
	Joe	02/10/2014 19:26	Male/17-21/White
	Kelly	02/10/2014 19:19	Female/17-21/White
	Lizzie	02/10/2014 19:28	Female/17-21/White
	Nick	02/10/2014 19:24	Male/17-21/White
	Rachel	02/10/2014 19:27	Female/17-21/White
	Interviews	20/10/2014 21:25	University Participants
	Ashley	20/10/2014 22:04	Female/17-21/White

Nodes

Name	Created On	Description
Catherine	20/10/2014 22:00	Female/22-26/White
Chloe	20/10/2014 21:53	Female/22-26/White
Jaz	20/10/2014 21:52	Male/32-36/Black African
Jonathon	20/10/2014 21:54	Male/22-26/White Irish
Katy	20/10/2014 22:02	Female/22-26/White
Mary	20/10/2014 21:27	Female/42-46/White
Pippa	20/10/2014 21:57	Female/17-21/White
Work Shop	02/10/2014 19:37	University and College
Aiesha	02/10/2014 19:39	Female/17-21/Black Caribbean/U
Beth	02/10/2014 19:42	Female/17-21/White/U
Carla	02/10/2014 19:44	Female/17-21/White/C
Derek	02/10/2014 19:44	Male/17-21/White/U
Elisha	02/10/2014 19:45	Female/17-21/Black Caribbean/U
Fatuma	02/10/2014 19:45	Female/17-21/Black African/U
Themes	02/10/2014 18:32	

People Nodes from NVivo file listing each participant by pseudonym with their description of characteristics.

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