

Institute of Education



Final Report

**A Study of Students Studying Vocational Courses
in Further Education.**

By

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About the Report's authors

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Others reports and papers from the 14-19 Group include:

Final Report for Progress South Central:

An Investigation into the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provided for Year Eleven Students regarding their Post 16 Options.

By Carol Fuller, Tony Macfadyen, Elizabeth McCrum; September 2009

Fuller, C. Macfadyen, T. McCrum, E. Heighes, D. & Kempe, A. (2009)

'What should I do now?' An exploration of Information, Advice and Guidance provided for year 11 students? Paper presented at the British Education Research Conference, Manchester, September 2nd - 5th 2009

McCrum, E. Macfadyen, T. Fuller, C. & Kempe, A. (2009)

Vocational Education and Training: some perspectives from year 11 pupils. Paper presented at the British Education Research Conference, Manchester, September 2nd - 5th 2009

A Study of Students Studying Vocational Courses in Further Education.

Introduction

McCrum et al (2009) have pointed out that the arena of 14-19 education and training is fast moving and at times controversial. Debates have raged in various forums about the nature and purpose of education in this age range. 14-19 education and training is currently an area of considerable policy development and the recipient of significant resource because of its perceived potential to address a number of key Government priorities for young people. These priorities include an increase in educational attainment and participation rates, reductions in the number of young people who leave education before the age of 18 and the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

Yet the voices of young people have been largely absent from these debates. In an increasingly participatory culture where the Government emphasises greater involvement of young people in their education and the curriculum, young people's voices need to be heard and should play an important part in shaping the policies and practices which affect their lives (McCrum et al, 2009). This research aimed to make a contribution to this area by giving some young people, studying vocational courses, a chance to voice their opinions. With the onset of the Diploma (a work *related* course) some see vocational courses (e.g. BTEC) under threat so we believe this research to be well timed and pertinent.

Thus the two main purposes of the research were:

1. How students in further education (studying vocational courses) experience and perceive their training
2. How they are being prepared for either studying at Higher Education or the Work Place

This report outlines the key findings from the study exploring the experiences of students studying vocational courses in further educational (FE) establishments. The report presents findings that explore why these students opted to undertake vocational courses, their attitudes towards the training they are receiving as well as how relevant they feel their current courses are in terms of preparing them for future employment and/or higher education. The research was carried out by the Institute of Education at The University of Reading, on behalf of Progress South Central to whom we are very grateful for their support.

Method

Data was collected between January and June 2009 from forty students attending two FE establishments in the South East of England; one in Berkshire and one in Buckinghamshire. In total, ten focus groups were carried out with student volunteers on a variety of courses: Hairdressing, Hair and Beauty, Public Services, E-media, Computer Gaming, Music and Musical Theatre. The largest focus group was eight (1), the smallest three (4) with three to four participants being the average number involved in a group. Some of the students included were on one year courses and some students on two year courses; students on the two year courses were from both the first and second year, but mainly the latter.

Data was collected on students' attitudes to, and experiences of, their current course, why they had opted to undertake a vocational pathway and who students had spoken to for Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in terms of their decision making process. Focus groups also explored students' experiences of school and their plans for the future.

Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a content analysis. Interview transcripts were explored in terms of patterns and themes. Emergent themes identified related broadly to: *Motivation*, *Experience* and *Future*.

Prior to commencing this study ethical clearance was sought from The University of Reading's Ethics Committee and all ethical guidelines were complied with in carrying out this research.

Results

An analysis of the focus group transcriptions suggested three dominant themes, which encapsulate a number of sub-themes within them.

These themes and subthemes were:

Motivation: including reasons for doing the course, how students found out about their course, commitment to their study and links with educational self-identity.

Experience: of both school and experiences of the vocational course, relationships with staff and students and intellectual challenge.

Future: including confidence in the future and how well current courses are seen in terms of providing future skills, what students plan to do next and views on higher education and work.

1. Motivation

Reasons for Attending College:

A student's decision to attend an FE college as opposed to their school's sixth form resulted largely from their belief that they would neither enjoy nor be suitable for A level study. Indeed a few of the students interviewed had begun A levels and dropped out / moved across to a vocational course. For the students we spoke to, A levels were seen as being as prescribed as GCSEs, which for the large part were not enjoyable often because they were 'boring'. Opting to attend college was strongly associated with the view that college would offer a learning experience that would be in stark contrast to that of school. This view was then confirmed by the experience of college itself. For the large part, college courses were seen to offer a more relaxed approach to learning, were considered as better suited to different learning styles and, most importantly, were viewed as having more relevance to later life as many students seem to have a strong work ethic:

Typical responses included:

...it's really different and nicer than school because we have so much free rein to do what we like.

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

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

School is like more formal and stuff...

So I think definitely these kinds of courses seem to be a lot more... better, a lot of people seem to prefer the kind of teaching style that you get on these courses than say A level.

Information, Advice and Guidance and Decision Making

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

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

In one or two cases, Connexions provided the prospectus and a few students cited individual staff within a school as helpful, but the good practice was haphazard and sporadic from the students' perspective:

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

In a few cases mothers were instrumental in the first instance, by searching for courses they thought appropriate and finding out course specific information. A small number of the students had known for a long time what they wanted to do, so the route to employment, via a vocational course, was obvious to them:

My mum was a hairdresser and it's something I have always wanted to do [so that's why I did this course]

A few others displayed a similar sense of purpose:

G1 for me it was just personal experiences when I thought 'well the police don't really do much' so I thought I could add my experiences and maybe change stuff

B2 – I want to go into the police coz I want to do something quite meaningful ...

However, what was striking in talking to these young people was that many appeared to find their current courses almost by chance:

I found this by accident...I was dead against coming to this college...but I had a look at the Open Day at the Art and Design thing which just didn't appeal to me at all and literally as I was going to walk home I came across [this course] and I spoke to the guy there and it seemed really interesting so I went and had a look and thought "this is really interesting" and so I enrolled.

Basically my friend... said "oh I am doing a good course now" "Oh what are you doing? I said" "I'm doing the Games I want" "Where, where please tell me" "Oh, at college"

I was like "you have got to be joking", so I went to the Open Day. Mum was a bit worried going "oh but its only just one thing, its only going to give you one job, which you probably won't get" and I was like "thanks for the encouragement!" I went there, she was like firing questions like, "how many qualifications will he end up getting?" Well we end up to get 3 A levels at the end of this. So after that Mum was like: "Ok you can do that course now". I was like "brilliant".

When asked specifically about their IAG, there was almost unanimous consensus in students' views that they had received little that had been helpful to them:

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

Boy 1 – yeah, all you get at school is advice on brick laying, carpentry and that – you don't get told about these sorts of courses nor about colleges

Boy 2 – mostly they say 'stay on at sixth form or get a job' – nothing about colleges

Students were, in particular, critical of the provision of the Connexions service:

...when I went to Connexions like, I had one meeting with them then they actually did say to look at this college but that was already after I had found out about it and then I never heard from them again until my first month here! They actually sent me a letter saying "have you decided what you are going to do yet?" and I was like, "well yeah! It's a bit late now"!

Interviewer – did school have any role in helping you make the decision to come here?

Boy 1 – Connexions tried to help but they were useless

Interviewer – why?

Boy 1 – ‘coz they want to take you in the way they want to take you and they make it complicated – they take you the long way to get to where you want to be

Girl 1 – I found Connexions useless. They just taught me how to write a CV and that was it and then I went home. I was like ‘I thought you was supposed to help me!’

You go for a meeting with them, the Connexions advisor, and they tell you about the courses you could go on, where you can go for further education and what you can become. They didn’t do very well in it because they base it all around the stuff you are doing in school and the records that they have of you in school

...all they did was have a meeting with you once and after that you would never hear from them again...there was no way that you could go and talk to anyone else, to talk about careers

The comments of the students included in this study, regarding the Connexions service, resonate very strongly with those from our previous research for PSC exploring year 11 students’ IAG provision. Reflecting back on the provision of IAG in their previous schools, students in this research reiterated the points made by the year 11 students that Connexions was a very useful service for those who knew what they wanted to do post-16 but was not helpful for those that were unclear or undecided.

Many students expressed the view that IAG provision in school is largely geared towards a school’s own sixth form and is therefore biased:

All they wanted was everyone to go to sixth form ...whenever I mentioned college they just ignored it although, they didn’t really give anyone help any way to go outside. It was just ‘school, school, school’ and anything else and you’re on your own type of thing...

Alongside a sense of a lack of personalised support and direction in their post-16 choices, some students also felt that their previous school stratified choices: with non A levels routes implicitly seen as being non-traditional and for the academically less able:

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

*...my issue was that I went to a school where if you didn't get full A*s at GCSE you were not good...I went to a really, really academic school. When I told my school I was thinking about going to college they were like, 'college eh? Well, you can always drop out in the first couple of weeks and I am sure we would take you back'... even when I told my friends they just assumed it was because I wasn't expecting to pass my GCSEs and I was like 'no, I will pass them just fine and get good grades but I WANT to go to college'... I guess it's 'cause college itself has a really bad ring compared to sixth form. People think 'college – you obviously didn't get the grades!'*

Educational Identity

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

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

'coz at school I just plodded along but it's different here. They treat you like an adult and I still plod sometimes ...

I think what I am trying to say is that I thought I would be behind a lot but its not, I am still alright

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

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

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

I blended into the background so well it was unbelievable

... there was no-one you could personally go and talk to and the tutors weren't... [pause] you didn't feel like you could go and talk to them because they were all subject teachers so like "oh no its out of my area so you will have to go and find someone else to talk to". So you could be there forever trying to find someone that knows what you want to talk about

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

The majority of students did not enjoy school, with comments such as it was 'not great' and 'it was rubbish' being typical. To illustrate:

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

'I didn't like school at all from the start'

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

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

With school, I never liked going ...it was like "Oh no I've got maths today, I really can't be bothered with it'

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

It was too embarrassing to talk to your teachers because you always felt like the odd one out

All my teachers hated me and I didn't talk to none of them...unless they were shouting at me!

I didn't like talking to teachers so I didn't talk to them

School was sometimes seen as a negative experience because it lacked relevance:

Rubbish ... I think it was really just the lessons, doing 50 nearly, an hour of each subject that you don't want to do, doing an hour of maths, doing an hour of science. I don't care about fractions, I don't want to learn about that!

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

"I feel motivated and it makes me want to do well"

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

A large part of the positive attitudes towards current study was explained by the fact that students had chosen the course for themselves and had opted to do it:

I took a big risk coming here. I don't live round here and I did n't know what the course or college was like. All I knew was that they did musical theatre and I had n't seen one anywhere else and so I was attracted to it ... so I applied and did n't apply anywhere else.

"I feel like I have to try my best 'cause I am the one who chose to do it, no one made me"

...at school you gotta do the subjects but here you have chosen to do it so it's better

However, this was also linked to a student's sense of being able to achieve:

I have finally found something I am quite good at!

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

2. Experience

Relationships

As already illustrated, students were positive about their college experience and were, in the main, enjoying the courses they were undertaking. However, when asked to elaborate on the factors that made college a good place to be, interestingly students placed emphasis on their relationships both with tutors and fellow students.

Overwhelmingly, students refer to the positive relationships they enjoy with the tutors on their courses. Tutors are respected, not only for their credibility in terms of their 'hands on' experience (of the work place) that they bring to the subject but also because students feel they are treated very differently to school: as an equal, and as a consequence, feel respected:

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

...and even like the teachers, they treat you so differently. Like even though I am still the same age [as I was when at school] they treat me like I am an adult

People are a lot more open with teachers here than they are at school. You talk about things with your teacher and you seem to get on with them- in a way they are like friends.

They talk to you like you're a friend of theirs.

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

This led to a real feeling of a partnership:

At school you get told what you are doing, you go and do it, but then here it's more ... [pause] its half you, half them.

Relationships with fellow students are also very important and are seen to be positive.

Students' discussions highlighted the important sense of camaraderie they felt:

...before I came here I had no dance experience ... and I found it hard being at the bottom of the class but the people at the top were good – they encourage those at the bottom saying – “ oh this is how you do it” so over time you do improve

We all have the same aims so we support each other

Here we work together and help each other

Ideas of 'commonality' appeared to create a sense of unity for students and this contributed positively to the college experience:

And its good that we are all doing the same subject because you can talk to each other about it and you know you are not boring them

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

I think that because you all help each other and you all like motivate each other as well as your tutors so it's like, I think that works a lot better than what A levels did anyway.

Experience of the Course

College was seen as a very different place to school by most students:

...it's crazy different! Some of the lessons can be three hours! It's quite different to school so there is an emotional change – getting used to new people – and the physical change, like three hour lessons

It appeared many students wanted to leave school behind and make a new start:

This is the only college I really looked at because I wanted to get away from old [school] people and just change.

In the main students had received what they basically expected, for example:

I think that we sort of got told that we would be working in a really close group, like all of our class, and I think that is definitely true, which is nice.

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

I am pretty pleased with what I have got.

In some cases students felt they had been a little mis-led in the amount of practical, hands – on, work they would get and that the information was not always clear. Significantly, the quality of teaching and academic content was rarely referred to and was, at times, negative:

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

Interviewer – How did the teacher deal with the big difference in ability and experience?

Boy 2 No, basically she said “ I’m going to throw you all in at the deep end – it’s the only way you are going to learn” and we all adapted to that

Girl 2 But, like, I have a different look on it, like in dance I don’t feel I am improving any more because I have been dancing so long

Girl 1 like she’s got everyone to the same level

Girl 2 but I think like, when we are doing a routine she could add bits to make it a bit more challenging but we are always in together

At the start of the course, some students felt a little lost:

... they really throw you in at the deep end in the beginning ...I struggled

I guess that here is obviously much more of an adult environment and you are much more respected because as it is there is more equality but there is also, it is not very regular, it is not uniform, there is no bell, its very odd to me, because everything was so uniform back when I was in school, you would hear the bell and that would be it until break time but its very odd for a few weeks...

Whilst the academic experience varies amongst students, there is some consensus that the challenge is harder than they had initially anticipated:

I thought it would be a lot less than it actually is

I wasn't expecting it to be kind of as intense – it's kind of like we have got this much to do, this amount of time to do it, if you don't get it done then there is no way of like proceeding on; I didn't think it was going to be that fast!

I suppose it's a lot of pressureit's been quite stressful at the end

In focus groups, many students made a point of emphasising the academic credibility of their courses. They were keen to point out that they believed the demands of their study were more intense than for other more traditional courses:

There's stuff I find harder like doing anatomy and physiology and that's quite intense. You have got to know every system in your body. You have got to know every function and every part of your body and you have got to do that in a year, so it's quite intense ... I'd like to see our science teachers do that!

G 1 There was a lot more as soon as you get into it, it is a lot more complicated than you think it would be because of the things that you have to learn. So as we went along the subjects seem to have more depth

However, many students see a lot of the content as useful:

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

Paradoxically, the aspect of a vocational course that students are most positive about: that the experience is very different to school, is also the aspect of the college experience that students are most critical of. To illustrate, whilst students enjoy what they perceive as a more relaxed approach to learning and a greater sense of independence, some students criticised the lack of organisation:

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

We were told we had a trip but then we wasn't told what time! We were just told what day it was and then about a day or so before, we got a bit of paper saying it was like at this site, and then I think it was the day before the trip, the last lesson of the day, before we actually had to go they finally organised that these people would be getting a bus there, and if you lived locally you could make your own way there and it was kind of pretty unorganised. I think a lot of things are down to the teachers or the course tutors, the leaders of the course.

However, students from all the courses perceived a lack of organisation around the assessment of their course as the biggest down side to their experience:

I had no notification about this exam at all!

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

I wish they write it down on a piece of paper and hand out leaflets rather than just verbal. That's what everyone says....

Everything just comes in one go!

Furthermore, the relaxed style of staff leadership giving students' their independence is also a significant challenge. For example, some students find the greater responsibility in self deadline setting for course work as well as prioritising work loads difficult to manage:

I find it hard, cos I am lazy, despite choosing this course

I can leave it 'til the last minute which is stupid but I do... I think they should watch a bit more maybe

Some students also referred to differences in teachers' approaches as being problematic:

I think the worst thing is that because of the teachers different standards, like you have a teacher like A who like expects it to be absolutely perfect, and then you have teachers like B who like give you a little bit of leeway... they like all have different standards and different ways they like you to stand, or cut and just do different things and I think they all need to have one sort of level standard so you are not trying to adapt to each teacher and each lesson.

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

A lack of work experience was also cited as a source of disappointment for many, (though notably not Hair and Beauty where it was strength and to some extent Hair Dressing) with students believing that much more would be available:

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

Its not what I expected, as I thought there would be more going out on work placement, I thought it would be more about work placement and coming to college to talk about it

A shortage of practical work was also criticised as was a lack of sector guest speakers:

I think I expected it to be a lot more hands on - whereas its not

You learn more about the stuff being taught but I did think you would go out on more day trips to have insight on that aspect that you need to learn.

.. I thought it would be a bit more of an insight into the whole thing but actually it's just talking ...I understand that it's trying to get us in the mind frame of the services ..but a bit more practical stuff that actually lets us see what it's like would have been good

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

Because our lecturers have had a hand, and still are, working in the industry they do tend to try and get us little bits of work like Y: he was working on an animation and he got us involved making some of the characters for it. So they do things like that [discusses another work experience opportunity] ...just to get us some work experience will be really helpful in getting jobs.

...a lot of the tutors here have actually been here to do their training, so they have got a lot in common with us and they know exactly how we feel in our assessments and exactly what we are doing and I just find that all of them are really professional and they do really help you out ..they can tell you what worked for them and what didn't work for them but it is not the same for everyone and they can give you advice on where to go

The fact they [tutors] have done it helps a lot because they see when we are struggling, they understand and they can see where we want to go and they can see our interest; whereas teachers could have a completely different upbringing from me.

Some students were also influenced by advice from people working in the field (e.g. when they did go on work experience):

B 1 *'I went to interview the other week with X salon and they are like massive and basically the owner there basically said, if we don't offer you a job don't go back to college and do level three there. I asked him why, and he said well because every level three we have hired we have had to retrain them because they just did more basic stuff and you don't need it in the salon, so they do it exactly the same training there but in a different way.'*

Interviewer: *'How influential would someone's opinion like that be to you?'*

B 1 *'Quite big, because if we want to go into the industry and like I had my interview with a guy called Y, he is X's son, so he is huge and he has just won two major awards and if he says basically don't go to college then you have got to take it and basically listen to him.*

3. Progression and Future Plans

Students were asked about their future plans once their current course had finished; whether they intended further study, planned to go to University and how well they felt their current vocational courses were preparing them for future work.

Overall, students were very committed to their current vocation with many wanting to stay in the same area. In terms of immediate plans, responses were mixed. Some students planned to take the second year of their current course, a few to take a completely different course whilst many planned to leave and find work. Most, however, had no plans or ambition to go to University. When asked why students had not considered University, most were adamant that it was not 'for them':

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

... the only thing that would attract me would be the parties and the girls! I just couldn't see myself there for so many years – I just wanna be out there working!!

Some students did not see that University could offer them any more career progression than their current course, in terms of relevance to the job market:

A lot of jobs would rather take on maybe people they can teach like apprentices and that - a lot of people are doing that because it's cheaper. So if I left college now with say this qualification some company may take me on and teach me what they do on the job and then I would get like training from them as well

I want to go to University but then part of me is kind of thinking that's a lot more studying and years that I will be in University where I could be, with the qualifications I get from this – could get me a good job. So I am kind of thinking whether or not University is worth the extra years just to get maybe a higher job whereas I could get a good job from this already.

I am not sure about it because I could get a good job with the qualifications that I get from this course so I kind of question whether or not the extra years of studying is a waste of time.

I think, in the kind of subject we are kind of into its more important to have the skills than say the actual degree as such. You could have absolutely no qualifications in animation or anything but if you self taught yourself and had a really high standard of what you could send in your work to a job and get a job so I think on a course like this, the actual qualification itself is almost irrelevant it's more the skills that you pick up whilst you are taking it.

Indeed for some students, University was considered as a backward step in terms of their future career plans:

Boy 2 – the thing is you can go to university and get a BA hons in Musical Theatre but if you go to an audition they don't look at that...

Boy 1 – in this industry it's not so much about what qualifications you've got it's more about where you got them.

Girl 1 – that's why theatre school is better than university because it is the bottom of the list in this area...

I have thought about it and I did really want to go to London College for Arts and Fashion, because Fashion is kind of what I wanted to go into like catwalks and magazines and stuff like that. So I thought that might help, but then I thought I wanted to do something a bit more. I couldn't go from my vocational course into that, I couldn't go from that one to the other; I would want to go straight into work I think.

Some students viewed the potential debt as a deterrent to higher education:

I would hate to go to University and get in all that debt and then find out 'oh actually I don't really like animation' or 'I am not vey good at it, I will try something else but now'; I have got all this debt and no job, nowhere to go

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

Strikingly many students had little knowledge of University itself and did not view progression into higher education as a natural step. Lack of information included possible courses they could do, student loans, and available grants. What little information students did have, they had mainly found for themselves:

No one's told us nothing.

...if they had information on all relevant courses, which they could have shown us, that would have been probably very helpful.

We weren't given the information straight out – we were told over last summer that we should be researching Universities but we weren't actually given any straight information. We only know what we found out.

There were also some misconceptions about University:

Interviewer: *What do you think university will be like?*

B1 *A big step up*

B2 *I am thinking it's going to be mind boggling*

B1 *And it's going to be on your own back, I don't think there would be [pause] there would be support not like college...like we are being shown where we can find information, whereas if you go to university you probably have to write it all down.*

B2 *You won't be given things like handouts. You have to write down what you hear and get books and things or you will suffer...you will need to find your own information which is quite harsh since I am terrible at finding information on the internet because it is so unreliable.*

Link with Future Work

Students were mainly ‘hopeful’ about their future job prospects, suggesting that with hard work they could probably achieve their ambition. Most expressed a clear confidence that their current courses were preparing them well for the future work place, providing skills that were both important and desirable to employers:

... it gives you techniques and skills – how to work in a team and communicate and all that

However where anxiety existed, it was in relation to students’ concerns as to their actual ability to secure work, particularly in the current economic climate:

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

...I think trying to find a way in, I mean even if it’s just starting down there and working your way up, its just going to be trying to find that bit to then work your way up in. I think it is going to be the hardest bit ... but I am not really panicking about it at the moment.

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

The fact it is not easy is sometimes reinforced by staff and older students:

Some believe it’s ‘hit and miss’ and with new people each year, very competitive also.

Report Summary

Young people need to be provided with education and training that they value, which suits their individual needs, and which enables them to fulfil their ambitions for the future. For the large part the students we spoke to find college to be far more rewarding and engaging than their previous school experience and almost unanimously state that their relationships with fellow students and tutors contributes vastly to this. Students feel respected and supported and, perhaps more importantly, feel a sense of autonomy in their learning. In addition to the positive learning experience, the background and ‘hands on’ experience of the tutors gave courses a greater credibility, relevance and connection to the work place, enhancing significantly students’ opinions overall.

Whilst students discuss with enthusiasm many aspects of studying for a vocational qualification, some areas of weakness were identified. In particular, these related to a lack of good IAG in the process of finding their course, a lack of practical lectures / guest speakers, work experience and poor organisation of assessment. A lack of information and guidance regarding progression into higher education was also identified.

On a more implicit level, a sense of academic under achievement and/or failure also appeared to underpin many of the educational identities of students included in this study. This suggests that for some students at least, the choice to undertake a vocational course was a last resort for those who did not deem themselves suitable for A level study. Whilst many considered the academic requirements of their vocational course more challenging than traditional courses such as A levels, clearly negative stereotypes surrounding what type of learner undertakes a vocational course exists.

We did not undertake a direct comparison between the two institutions included in this study; however some differences were evident in terms of overall attitudes and experiences. Students in one institution were far more positive and enthusiastic than those in the other. However, it is impossible to know in a qualitative study of this kind whether these differences reflect inherent institutional differences or are simply differences related to the different type of vocational course and the students enrolled on them.

Recommendations

1. Continuing Professional Development for school staff in terms of attitudes' towards and understanding of vocational education.
2. For students not wanting to do A levels, schools could consider giving these students extra input about future options since they are the ones who seem to be in most need of support and direction. In simple terms this could mean providing greater interaction and collaboration between the school and local colleges.
3. Improved IAG for students studying vocational courses at FE colleges, including:
 - ✚ The presentation of balanced and well rounded arguments to the pros and cons of higher education or starting work, including information debunking any myths that have grown up around a particular sector
 - ✚ Information on life at University grounded in the experiences of current graduates (particularly from vocational backgrounds)
 - ✚ Information on costs, loans and bursaries for higher education
 - ✚ Specific information on which University courses, both locally and further afield, could be of interest to students on certain courses
 - ✚ A more integrated approach to IAG within FE Institutions (as students currently seem to rely on subject tutors whose knowledge may be limited)
 - ✚ Mentoring and coaching of vocational students by University students / recent graduates (e.g. to raise aspirations to higher education)
4. More work experience which is closely monitored by Course Tutors to ensure quality
5. Greater opportunities to meet those already working in the sector
6. Ensure staff are given enough opportunities to moderate practical work
7. Where required, for staff to work closely with students to ensure they understand the assessment arrangements.
8. Where required, more support for students in planning out their work schedules

Appendix 1

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

FURTHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF VOCATIONAL COURSES

Why did you come to this institution?
How do *you* see vocational courses?

Why did you choose *this* course? Was it your first choice of things to do?
Who was most influential in helping you decide on this course?
What was the best advice you were given?

Is the course what you expected? [In what ways is it the same / different?]
What do you think of the course? [Are you enjoying it? Strong and weak points?]
Is it what you *want*?
What sort of things do you do on your course?

Do you think the course is helping you in what you want to achieve?
How else is the college helping you to achieve your goal?
What more could be done *now* to help you with I.A.G. for your next step?
What is the quality of the careers guidance like?

How is what you do here different from school? [What is better? Anything not so good?]
Did you enjoy school? Why / why not? How much did this influence what you are doing now?
What was your school careers advice like? Why/why not helpful?

Who thinks getting a degree is important? For what reasons?
Who wants to go to University after this? Why?
If yes, where do you want to go to University and why?
How hard do you think University will be? [A big step up or not?]
Do you think this course is preparing you for University? Why / why not?

Who wants to get a job next? Why?
Do you think this course is preparing you for the work place?

How likely do you think it is that you will achieve your goal?