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Predicting the Aspirations of Vocational Learners: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Since the late 1990's, both nationwide and local initiatives have been focussed on reducing the disparity in higher education (HE) participation for underrepresented groups. More commonly known as widening participation (WP), these initiatives increasingly focused on raising the awareness, aspirations and attainment levels of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It has been widely recognised that background characteristics may contribute to determining a young person's aspirations, influencing the educational or employment pathways they follow in the future.

This study explores the background characteristics and aspirations of student's studying vocational programmes (BTEC National Diploma) at further education (FE) colleges in the south west of England. The findings of the student sample demonstrate firstly that females are over three times more likely to aspire to attend university than males. Students who attend secondary schools with higher achievement rates are more likely to aspire to attend HE, and students who have two parents that have HE qualifications are over three times more likely to aspire to attend university themselves. The study concludes more widening participation interventions need to be implemented in order to raise aspirations and support young people on vocational pathways to attend HE.

Keywords: higher education, aspirations, vocational learners, widening participation, socioeconomic status

Introduction

Student Recruitment and the Higher Education Landscape

Higher education (HE) funding in the United Kingdom (UK) has increasingly shifted away from public funded institutions towards a model increasingly reliant on student tuition fees and nongovernmental sources of income (Woodhall, 2015). With the introduction and progressive rise of university fees from £3000 in 2006/7 (HEAct: 2004), to £9000 in 2012 (Brown Review: 2010), HE is now part of an increasingly marketised landscape where students are often viewed as consumers of education within a customer-service-provider model (Furedi, 2011, Maringe & Gibbs: 2010). The landscape of UK HE is expected to become ever more market driven in the coming decade through the introduction of the HE and Research Act (2017). This new legislation aims to open the sector up to more private providers by removing degree awarding powers and university title away from the Privy Council and into the new Office for Students (OfS). As the government promotes this bill as being mutually beneficial to both students and employers (alongside boosting productivity and providing better value for money for the taxpayer), current HE providers will face increased competition to recruit students due to universities becoming ever more reliant on student fees to survive.

Widening Participation

One area of student recruitment that has received significant attention over the past two decades is increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, commonly known as widening participation (WP). From a social justice perspective (Fraser: 2008), the WP agenda emerged in recognition of the recognised disparity in opportunities for certain groups of individuals to access HE (DEFS: 2003). The Dearing Report (1997), published during the New Labour government, led to the introduction of the Aimhigher programme in 2004, a nationwide initiative focussed on reducing the disparity in HE participation (Doyle & Griffin: 2012). Aimhigher was a pre-entry intervention with a focus on raising the awareness, aspirations and attainment of underrepresented populations (Hatt, Baxter & Tate, 2007), with the initiative becoming increasingly focussed on young people from lower socioeconomic groups. Aimhigher received substantial funding from the UK government across its tenure, operating across

national, regional and sub-regional areas. Despite this, its impact and has been difficult to measure, partly due to the difficulty in demonstrating causation between WP pre-entry interventions and changes in aspirations and rates of progression (Harrison: 2012). The programme was abolished in 2011 with the coalition government (2010-2015) citing a lack of evidence to its value (Doyle & Griffin: 2012). Although highly regarded by the young people, schools, parents and communities involved (Baxter, Tate & Hatt: 2007, Moore & Dunworth: 2011, Morris, Rutt, Yeshanew, 2005, Passy & Morris: 2010, Jones: 2008, Allerston, Baxter, Hatt & Tate, 2006), a number of core issues made the evaluation and measurement of the programmes success difficult. Since the abolition of Aimhigher, WP has now become the responsibility of all schools, further education (FE) colleges and HE institutions to continue to promote HE participation for underrepresented groups. The Office of Fair Access (OFFA) is currently responsible for setting national benchmarks surrounding WP targets, alongside validating HEI's access agreements. In terms of increasing participation from young people of low socioeconomic status (SES), universities are required to set WP targets as part of their access agreements. Targets are set by institutions and verified by OFFA using metrics including the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN) and the POLAR 3 statistics.

One metric that is not commonly used to target underrepresented groups however is that of first generation students (FGS's). The definition of what constitutes a FGS varies, however FGS's are commonly classified as individuals whose parents did not achieve a HE qualification. However, some consider FGS's to be those individuals whom neither parent has achieved a HE qualification, whereas others consider FGS's as those with at least one parent who hasn't achieved a HE qualification. Living arrangements can be problematic with this metric where young people live with either one, both, or neither of their biological parents. Issues also exist for individuals from reconstituted families (e.g. step parents, adopted parents etc.), those with experiences of HE within the extended family (Harrison, 2012) as well as those whose parents attended HE but did not achieve a qualification (Toutkoushian, Strollberg & Slaton, 2015). The lack of consensus in the field regarding the measurement of this metric maybe one reason why it is often used less in HE research and policy. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus amongst researchers that a strong correlation exists between the choices students make regarding HE and the educational attainment of their parents (Toutkoushian et al: 2015). A clear

link has also been established between parental education and the socioeconomic status of learners (Thomas & Quinn: 2007).

Progression

It is widely recognised both within the UK and overseas that background characteristics contribute significantly to determining future aspirations and educational choices (Ball, Macrae & Maguire, 1999, Rhodes, Bill, Biscomb, Nevill & Bruneau, 2002). Compared with A level students, those studying vocational programmes at Level-3 are more likely to have lower SES status, live in social housing, have parents with lower levels of education, and lower aspirations to attend HE (Bowers-Brown: 2004, Greenwood: 2004, UCAS: 2002, Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007). Therefore, vocational students are more likely to fall within underrepresented target groups, as reflected in their low rates of HE participation. Data from the universities and colleges admission service (UCAS) demonstrates that in 2014-15 the majority of 18-year-old students entered HE with A-Levels alone (Figure 1). The second most common route (although markedly less than A-Levels) was BTEC qualifications, followed by those entering with a combination of both A Levels and BTEC qualifications. It must be recognised that the number of those entering HE with only BTEC qualifications has nearly doubled since 2008, however these students remain a significant minority compared with those entering with academic qualifications.

Although progress has been made to increase HE participation from those studying vocational qualifications at Level-3 (UCAS: 2015), improvements can still be made. This study seeks to explore the potential factors influencing the aspirations of post-16 vocational learners, and discuss how universities target recruitment of this population of underrepresented young people.

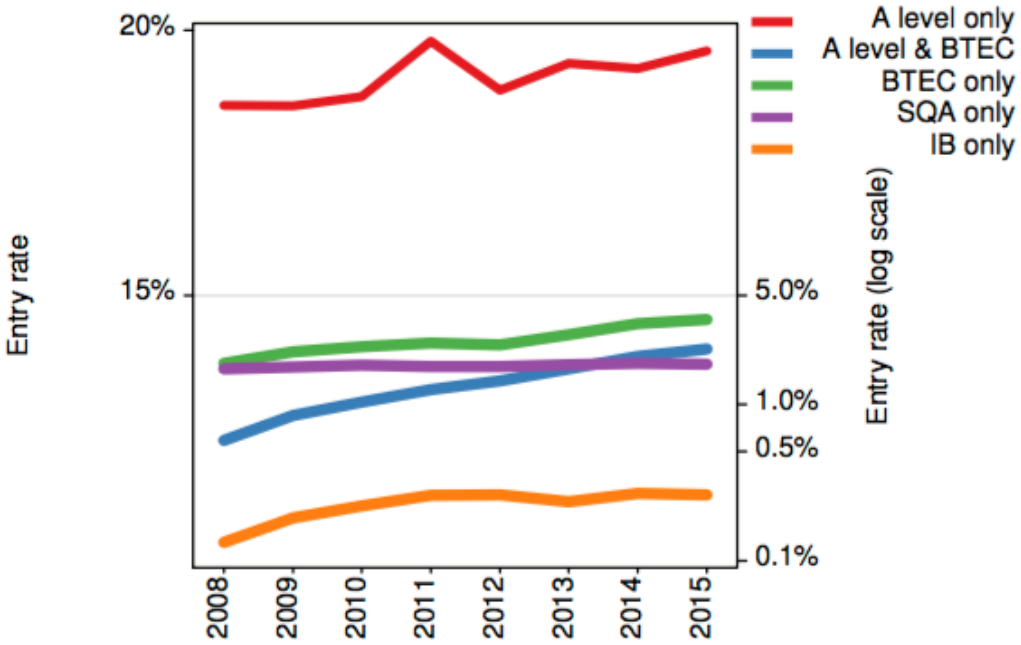
The research questions for this study were:

1. *What are the future aspirations of Level-3 vocational learners?*
2. *What factors may influence these aspirations?*
3. *In light of the findings, how can universities respond in order to increase recruitment from this student population?*

The aims of the study were to:

- Determine the background characteristics of learners studying Level-3 vocational qualifications
- Measure these student's aspirations and attitudes towards HE
- Explore to what extent demographic factors may impact or influence student's aspirations

Figure 1. UK 18-year-old entry rate by type of qualification held (logarithmic scale) (UCAS: 2015)



Methodology

From a philosophical perspective, the study is conducted from the viewpoint of critical realism, often viewed as a third way between empiricism and positivism on the one hand and interpretivism and social constructionism on the other. Critical realism challenges the common concepts around causation within social science research that causality occurs through a regular succession of structured events (Sayer: 2000). The development and redevelopment of student aspirations may be influenced by a multitude of factors within a complex open system (Bhasker: 2013). Factors identified to predict student aspiration must therefore be interpreted within the overall context of their lived experiences, and not as independent factors that have caused these aspirations to develop.

Sample

In order to understand how universities can maximise the recruitment of students from vocational pre-entry qualifications, it is necessary to explore the aspirations of students currently enrolled on these programmes. Using a repeat cross-sectional design, this study recruited a sample of 229 students currently enrolled on a BTEC National Diploma (ND) in either Public Services (PS) or Health and Social Care (HSC) throughout 2014 and 2015. Each student was in either their first or second year of study at one of three further education (FE) colleges in the South West of England. The sample of colleges were identified and recruited through previous contacts using a typical case sampling (TCS) approach. TCS is a type of purposive sampling that is a non-probabilistic technique where participants are selected as they are likely to share similar characteristics and be typical of a wider population (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen & Walker, 2013). Previous studies in the field of widening participation have demonstrated consistent similarities in the background characteristics of students studying vocational programmes (Bowers & Brown: 2004, Greenwood: 2004). The findings of this study may therefore provide insights on student aspiration that are transferable both regionally and nationally.

Methods

This study adopted a quantitative self-completion survey method (De Vaus: 2013). The survey collected demographic data from students including; gender, age, ethnicity and religion, alongside characteristics of their parents including; occupation, current work status and highest educational qualification. Students were asked questions about their aspirations both pre-and post-enrolment on their current vocational programme through both structured questions and a free-text box for open comments. The survey was distributed on paper to students within class time on a normal working day, however participation in the study was voluntary and there was no expectation for students to take part. All students were informed that participation (or non-participation) in the study would have no impact on their grades and they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication.

Indicators of SES

As discussed previously, students studying vocational programmes are often drawn from families of lower SES, and as such are often a target group for WP interventions. Although there is agreement on the need to target the social class gap in relation to participation in HE, a key difficulty for those evaluating the Aimhigher interventions was a lack of consensus with the menu of methods adopted to measure SES (Table 1).

Table 1. Different methods used to measure SES in Aimhigher Evaluations (Harrison: 2012)

1.	Socio-economic group (or social class), usually expressed through the NS-SEC system
2.	Family income (or economic disadvantage)
3.	Secondary school status
4.	Deprived geographical areas
5.	Families with no history of higher education
6.	Areas with historically low participation in HE, usually expressed through the POLAR3 system

For this study, parent's highest educational qualification has been adopted as the primary indicator of SES for a number of reasons. Firstly, students were often uncomfortable reporting or did not know their family income. Secondly, full postcode data was not collected from the students and thirdly, students often gave a loose/ambiguous description of parental occupation, causing difficultly to code against NS-SEC descriptors. Finally, Thomas and Quinn (2007) provide international evidence demonstrating that although there are recognised limitations with using parent education as a measure of SES (see above), this metric is a more sensitive and easier to collect indicator of SES compared with parental occupation, financial status or geography.

As secondary indicators of SES, metrics related to the performance and deprivation of secondary schools that each student attended are adopted. In terms of deprivation, secondary schools in the England use the pupil premium grant (PP) as an attempt to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Each state sponsored school receives an

additional payment for every child considered disadvantaged based on the criteria set by the UK government (Carpenter et al: 2013). These two measures are not however implemented as the primary indicator as they are not considered individualistic and therefore may provide a less accurate indicator of personal SES (Thomas & Quinn: 2007).

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the Plymouth University Research Ethics Policy (2013) as well as the British Education Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA: 2011), with ethical approval received from the Faculty of Business Research Ethics Committee at Plymouth University (Ref: FREC1314.22).

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was completed using the statistical analysis package SPSS 22.0 (IBM Corp: 2013). Descriptive statistics were produced to explore the background characteristics of students in the study, examining the demographic profile of the respondents and focussing on student's previous schooling and levels of parental education. Inferential statistics were performed to explore the relationship between student aspirations and their background characteristics, followed by a predictive model of aspiration by background characteristics using a Binary Logistic Regression (BLR) approach.

Results

Demographics

Table 2. demonstrates the characteristics of the 229 students that completed the survey. The majority of students were: between the ages of 16-18 (94%); White ethnicity (97%); and had no religious affiliation (80%). Around 71% of students were currently studying a BTEC ND PS, with 29% studying BTEC ND HSC. Categories of age, ethnicity and religion with zero responses have been removed from the table.

When exploring the differences between the two vocational subjects in the study, Table 3. demonstrates that of those studying PS, 71% were male and 29% female, with those studying HSC consisting of 9% male and 91% female. This difference can likely be attributable to the male and female dominance of career paths designed to follow these two subjects (Colley et al: 2003), however this cannot be verified from the data alone. Students studying PS were surveyed at each location, however HSC students were only surveyed at College 1 due to issues with obtaining access to the sample at College 2 and 3. Finally, the majority of students surveyed were in year one of their programme (PS= 85%, HSC= 79%).

Table 2. Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	%
Gender[1]	
Male	53
Female	47
Total	100
Age[2]	
16	18
17	48
18	28
19	4
20	1
21	1
Total	100
Ethnicity[3]	
White	96
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups	1
Asian/Asian British	2
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	1
Total	100
Religion[4]	
Christianity	19
Islam	1
Atheism	80
Total	100
Subject[5]	
BTEC ND Public Services	71
BTEC ND Health and Social Care	29
Total	100
College[6]	
College A	69
College B	13
College C	17
Total	100

[1,2]n=228, missing=1 [3,4]n=225, missing=4 [5,6]n=229, missing=0

Table 3. Participation of Public Services vs. Health and Social Care

	Public Services (%)	**Health and Social Care (%)**	**Total (%)**	***X²***	***d.f.***	***p***
Gender[1]				72.60	1	<0.05
Male (n=120)	71	9	100			
Female (n=108)	29	91	100			
College[2]				42.56	2	<0.05
College A (n=158)	56	46	100			
College B (n=31)	100	0	100			
College C (n=40)	100	0	100			
Year of Study[3]				1.26	1	>0.05
Year 1 (n=191)	85	15	100			
Year 2 (n=38)	79	21	100			

[1]n=228, missing=1, [2]n=229, missing=0, [1]n=229, missing=0

Student background – Parents

Tables 4 and 5 demonstrate the educational and employment status of respondents parents/guardians. Of those students that knew the highest educational qualification of their parents, 43% had one parent holding a HE qualification, 10% had both parents holding a HE qualification and 47% had neither parent holding a HE qualification. There was however a large percentage of students who did not know their parents highest educational qualification.

Table 4. Highest Education Qualification of Parents

	Parent 1 %	**Parent 2 %**
Degree Level or Higher	18	12
BTEC (Higher) BEC (Higher) TEC (Higher) HNC HND	1	0
A Level (Including NVQ L3)	12	8
BTEC (National) BEC (National) TEC (National) ONC OND	1	1
GCSE (Including NVQ L2)	6	8
CSE (Other than grade 1)	2	2
O Levels	12	10
No Formal Qualification	4	5
Other	1	0
Don't Know	43	54
Total	100	100

[1]n=211, missing=18, [2]n=199, missing=30

Table 5. HE Qualifications and Employment Status of Parents

	Neither Parent (%)	**One Parent (%)**	**Both Parents (%)**	**Total (%)**
HE Qualification (n=102)	47	43	10	100
Employment Status (Employed) (n=227)	2	20	78	100

[1]n=102, missing=127, [2]n=227, missing=2

Student background - Schooling

In terms of success rates, Figure 2. demonstrates the percentage of students that achieved 5 A*-C grades at GCSE at the secondary school they attended. The majority of students (77%) attended secondary schools where between 41-69% of students

achieved 5 A*-C. Only 2% of students attended schools with a low level of average attainment at GCSE (0-40%), with 21% of students attending schools with high levels of attainment (70-100%). Of the students in the sample, 99% studied at secondary schools with rates of PP allocation between 7-40%, with a mean value of 23% of students per secondary school (Figure 3.).

Figure 2. Average Percentage of Pupils Achieving 5 A*-C GCSE Grades at Participating Second)ary School (*n=218, missing=11)*

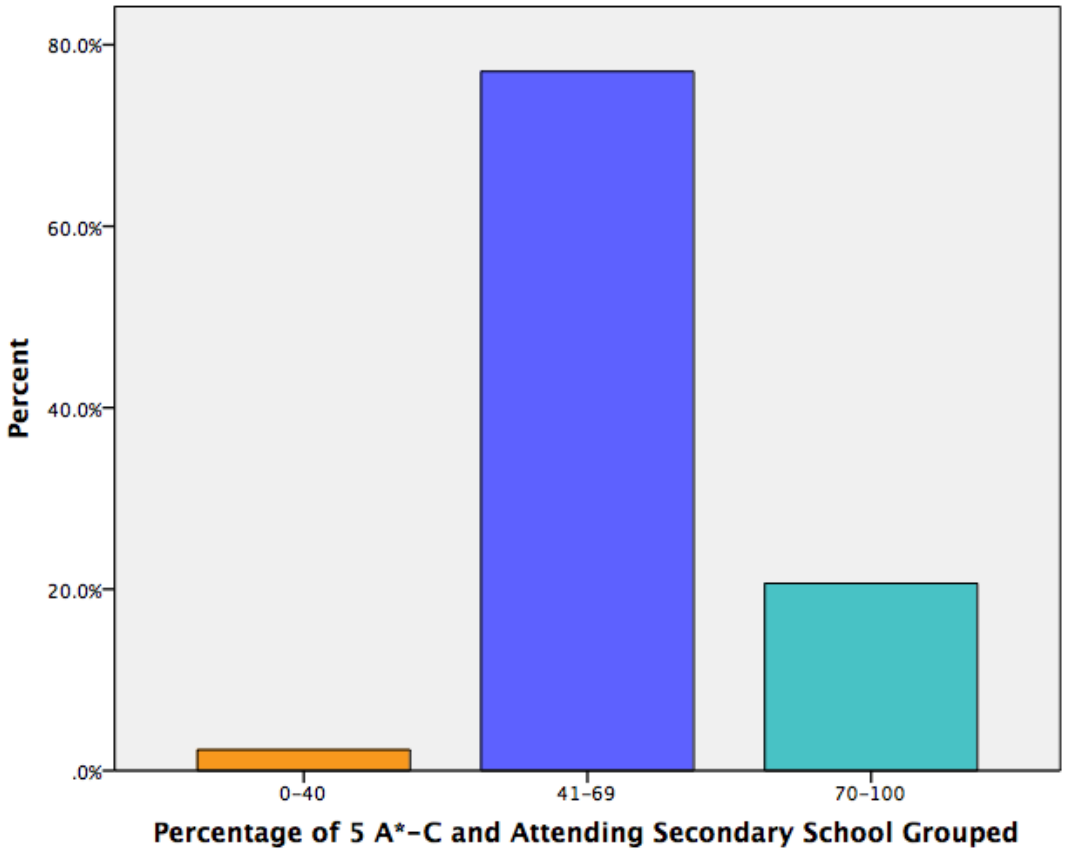
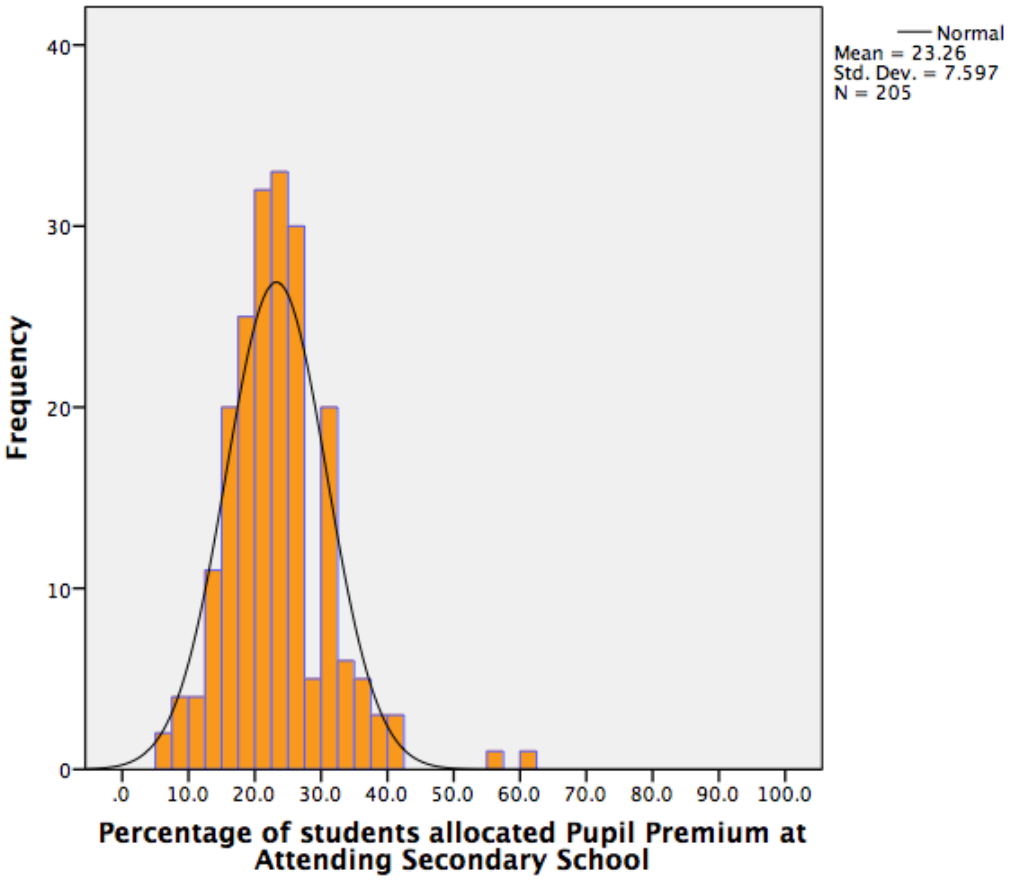


Figure 3. Distribution for Percentage of Pupil Premium Allocation at Secondary School attended (*n=205, missing=24)*



Student Aspirations – Past and Present

The vast majority of students who answered the question aspired to employment both before enrolment (55%) and at time of completing survey (54%) (Figure 4). Of these students, 69% had no change in aspiration across the time periods, with 10% changing to aspire to HE and 13% changing away from HE (Figure 5).

In order to explore any trends or patterns in aspiration within the study sample, cross tabulations and Pearson's Chi-square tests of distribution were undertaken. In terms of aspirations both pre and post enrolment, significant differences exist by student's gender and programme of study (Table 6 & 7.) Males were more likely to aspire to employment as opposed to HE compared with females and those studying PS were more likely to aspire to employment as opposed to HE compared with HSC. The differences may be

explained due to the differences in gender distribution across the two programmes and the subsequent differing requirements for career paths in HSC vs. PS students. There was also observable (but not significant) differences in the schooling and parental educational background of students in relation to their aspirations before enrolment, clearly demonstrating increased attitudes towards HE for those from schools with higher percentages of 5 A*-C and those with one or both parents having HE qualifications.

Figure 4. Students aspirations pre and post enrolment at current programme (n=184, missing=45)

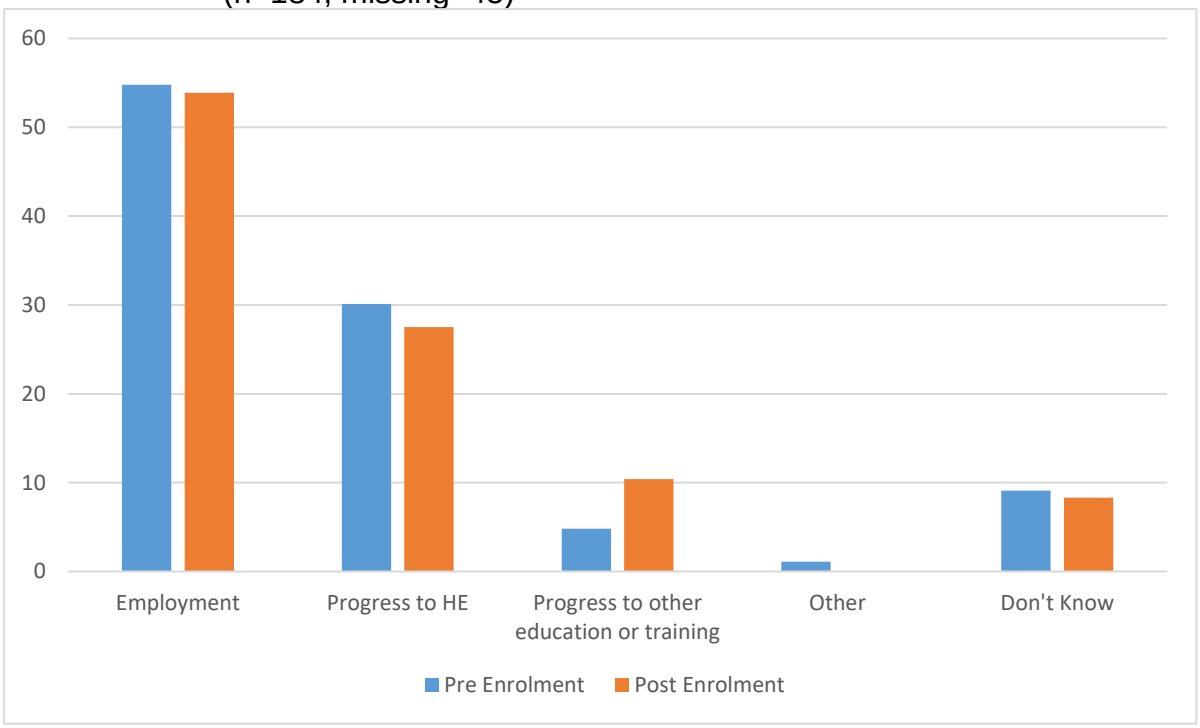
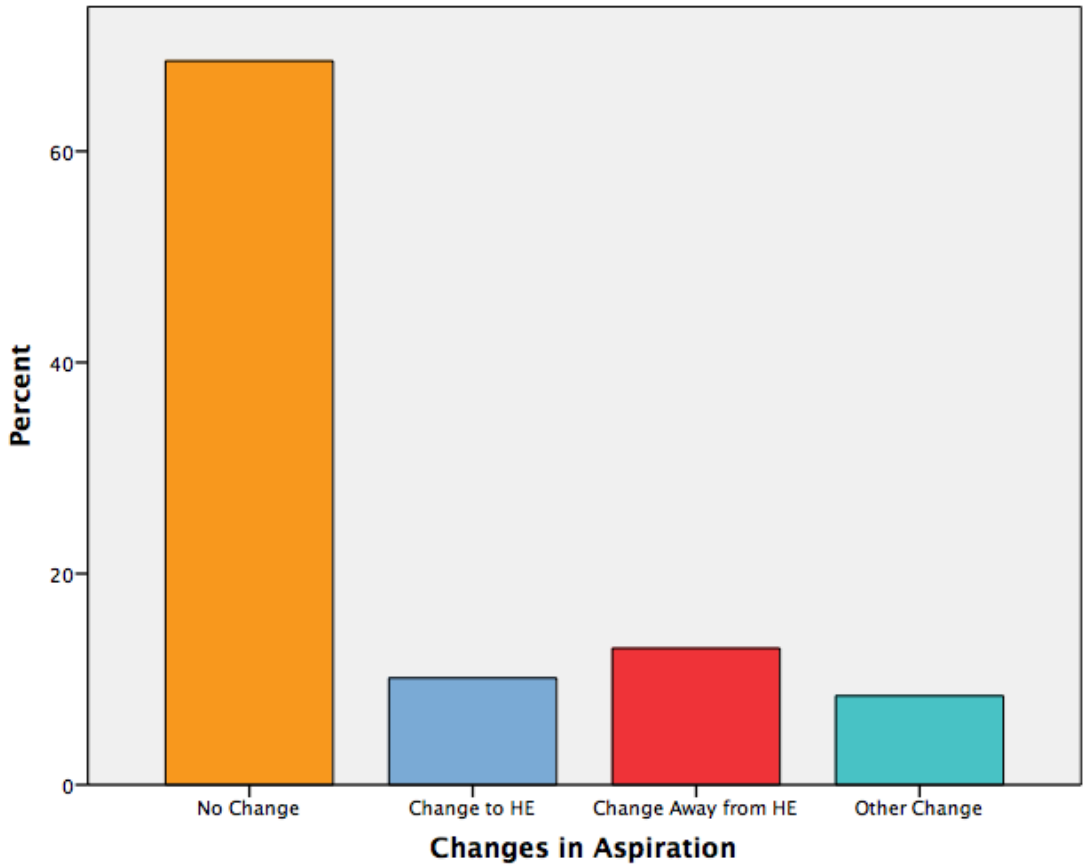


Figure 5. Change in student aspiration pre and post enrolment of current programme



n=178, missing=51

Table 6. Students aspirations before course completion by Gender, Subject, Percentage of Pupil Premium and Percentage of 5 A*-C, Parents Education

	Progress to Employment (%)	**Progress to HE (%)**	**Progress to Other Education (%)**	**Don't Know (%)**	**Total (%)**	***X²***	***d.f.***	***p***
Gender[1]						14.51	3	<0.05*
Male (n=100)	68	20	4	8	100			
Female (n=83)	41	43	5	11	100			
Subject[2]						19.43	6	<0.05*
PS (n=134)	66	19	5	10	100			
HSC (n=50)	26	62	4	8	100			
% of Pupil Premium[3]						7.36	6	>0.05
0-25% (n=11)	51	35	6	8	100			
26-50% (n=54)	64	19	6	11	100			
51-75% (n=1)	0	100	0	0	100			
76-100% (n=0)	-	-	-	-	-			
% of 5 A*-C[4]						3.25	6	>0.05
0-40% (n=3)	100	0	0	0	100			
41-69% (n=133)	56	30	5	8	100			
70-100% (n=39)	49	36	5	10	100			
Parents HE Qualification[5]						5.12	6	>0.05
Neither (n=44)	50	39	7	4	100			
One Parent (n=30)	40	43	7	10	100			
Both Parents (n=8)	25	75	0	0	100			

[1] *n=183, missing=46,* [2] *n=184, missing=45,* [3] *n=165, missing=54,* [4] *n=175, missing=64* [5] *n=82, missing=147*

Table 7. Students aspirations now by Gender, Subject, Percentage of Pupil Premium and Percentage of 5 A*-C, Parents Education
[1] [1]n=192, missing=37, [2] n=193, missing=36, [3] n=175, missing=54, [4] n=183, missing=46 [5] n=86, missing=143

	Progress to Employment (%)	**Progress to HE (%)**	**Progress to Other Education (%)**	**Don't Know (%)**	**Total (%)**	***X²***	***d.f.***	***p***
Gender[1]						27.03	3	<0.05*
Male (n=102)	67	15	6	12	100			
Female (n=90)	39	42	15	4	100			
Subject[2]						20.22	3	<0.05*
PS (n=139)	63	20	8	9	100			
HSC (n=54)	32	46	17	5	100			
% of Pupil Premium[3]						15.59	6	<0.05*
0-25% (n=115)	44	32	14	10	100			
26-50% (n=58)	71	17	7	5	100			
51-75% (n=2)	50	0	0	50	100			
76-100% (n=0)	-	-	-	-	-			
% of 5 A*-C[4]						10.62	6	>0.05
0-40% (n=3)	100	0	0	0	100			
41-69% (n=141)	58	23	11	8	100			
70-100% (n=39)	36	44	10	10	100			
Parents HE Qualification[5]						1.94	6	>0.05
Neither (n=45)	44	29	20	7	100			
One Parent (n=33)	42	40	12	6	100			
Both Parents (n=8)	38	38	12	12	100			

Predictive Model of Student Aspiration

This final stage of the results draws together the independent findings linking background factors to student aspirations to test a predicative model using regression analysis. Regression analyses are used to estimate the relationships between variables (Field: 2013) and for this model a binomial logistic regression (BLR) was performed to ascertain the effects of gender, parental education and average percentage of 5 A*-C grades at secondary school on the aspiration of students to attend a HE qualification (Table 8 & 9). The addition of pupil premium and subject choice still produced a significant model, however the predictive power was smaller so they were excluded. The regression model included 34% of respondents (n=78) and excluded 66% (n=151) because of missing data. The overall model is significant ($X^2(3) = 13.710, p<.05$, *2LL likelihood= 88.13*) and correctly predicts 74.4% of cases, rising from 64.1% with just the constant included. The model demonstrates a good fit (Hosmer and Lemeshow $X^2(3) = 2.36, d.f.=7, p>.05$) however the explained variation of the dependent variable is poor (Nagerlkerke= 22%).

Table 8. Dependent Variable in Model

Variable Label	Data Labels
What are your aspirations for when you finish your current qualification? (Progress to Higher Education)	0= No 1= Yes

Table 9. Independent Variables in Model

Variable Label	Data Labels
Do your parents hold a HE Qualification?	1 = Neither Parent/Guardian 2= One Parent/Guardian 3= Both Parents/Guardians
What is your Gender?	1= Male 2=Female
Percentage of 5 A*-C at Secondary School Attended	1= 0-40% 2= 41-69% 3= 70-100%

Table 10. Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of HE Aspiration based on Parents Education, Gender and Average Achievement Rates at Secondary School.

	B	SE	Wald	*d.f.*	*p*	Exp(B)
Do your parents hold a HE Qualification?	0.46	0.41	1.24	1	>0.05	1.58
What is your Gender?	1.23	0.58	4.55	1	<0.05	3.42
Percentage of 5 A*-C at Secondary School Attended	1.45	0.57	6.66	1	<0.05	4.33
Constant	-6.623	1.88	12.47	1	<0.05	0.001

Of the three predictor variables in the model, two were statistically significant: gender and average percentage of 5 A*-C grades at secondary school (Table 10). The results demonstrate that of the sample of students, females are 3.43 times more likely to aspire to attend university than males. Furthermore, a one-point increase in the average achievement rate of 5 A*-C GCSE grades at the secondary school attended, increases likelihood of HE aspirations by 4.33 times. Finally, although not statistically significant, the model predicts that students with one parent having studied a HE qualification are 1.57 times more likely, and those with both parents having studied a HE qualification 3.14 times more likely to aspire to attend HE in the future.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that in line with previous findings (Gorard et al: 2006, Bowers-Brown: 2004, Greenwood: 2004, UCAS: 2002, Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007,) Level-3 vocational programmes continue to recruit a significant percentage of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The research reinforces the previous recognition that personal characteristics correlate strongly with aspirations (Ball et al: 1999, Rhodes et al: 2002), with SES clearly related to future aspirations in this study cohort. What is of particular interest from the findings of this study is the relationship between gender, secondary school achievement, parental education and student aspiration.

Firstly, female students (most commonly enrolled on the HSC programme in this study) were over 3 times more likely to aspire to HE than males. This may reflect the differing pre-entry requirements for career paths between PS and HSC a many HSC career paths today require HE participation (e.g. Nursing, Social Work, Occupational Therapy etc.). It is however often a beneficial, yet not required qualification for many PS related jobs (e.g. Armed Forces, Police, Fire Brigade, etc.). This finding must also be considered within the wider HE context, where young women are 36% more likely to apply to HE than men (UCAS: 2016). Raising aspirations through targeted interventions at vocational programmes with higher concentrations of male students (e.g. PS), may start to address the gender imbalance in vocational student aspirations.

Secondly, although not an individual measure of high school success, this study demonstrates that students from low attaining secondary schools are over 8 times less likely to aspire to HE than those where it is high. It may be unsurprising that students from schools of high achievement are more likely to aspire to HE than those of low levels, however from both a HE recruitment and social justice perspective, many students likely to be capable of succeeding at HE from schools of low average attainment lack the aspiration (and possibly confidence) to pursue this path. Many universities already recruit above the national benchmark for students from state funded schools, however a continuing focus on low performing schools may help to recruit young people that otherwise would not consider a HE pathway.

Thirdly, this study supports with the findings of Hatt et al (2007) and Toutkoushian et al (2015) that young people of parents who attended HE are more likely to aspire to attend HE themselves. Parental education (as discussed above) is often a neglected measure to identify and target underrepresented groups in HE. This study however echoes the findings of others that despite its limitations, parental education is a more sensitive and easier to collect indicator of SES compared with parental occupation, financial status or geography, and therefore can (and should) be adopted as a key metric to target underrepresentation (Thomas & Quinn: 2007, Hatt et al: 2007, Gorard et al: 2006).

Finally, this study demonstrates that groups young people in vocational study, often of low SES, continue to hold low aspirations towards progressing to HE that remain do not change throughout their vocational programmes. More needs be done to ensure that all young people with the necessary skills have an equal opportunity of attending HE and are suitably supported throughout this process.

Limitations of the Study

There are recognised limitations to this study which have implications on the findings discussed. Firstly, demonstrating a causal relationship between a student's background and their aspirations is complex and therefore must be treated with caution. However, difficulty in demonstrating causation is a common and complex issue in social and evaluation research, also recognised as one of the core issues leading to the demise of the Aimhigher programme. Secondly, student's responses may have become contaminated throughout data collection as occasionally they discussed their answers, increasing the biases of social desirability and demand characteristics (Marsden & Wright, 2010, Mitchell & Jolley: 2012). Thirdly, more reliable measures of student background characteristics (using archival sources and surveying parents/guardians) are required to provide greater insight into the findings, as students were often unaware of their parents educational qualifications, job title, income etc. Fourthly, other Level-3 vocational programmes at more FE colleges need to surveyed in order to provide more generalisable findings. The non-random sampling technique used for this study reduces the opportunity for statistical generalisation from the findings (Field: 2013). Finally, Chilosi et al (2008) highlight that many studies focus too much on attitudes towards HE and not

enough on progression rates for WP students. This study suffers with this issue also largely due to the size and scale of the project.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has highlighted the relationship between background characteristics and the aspirations of vocational learners from students in the SW of England. The research demonstrates that on a programme level, WP interventions should increasingly target those vocational courses with typically high concentrations of male students. On an individual basis, those students from lower performing secondary schools should targeted. Finally, parental education should be used more frequently as a method for identifying underrepresented groups. From a social justice perspective, this research provides further evidence that there is still more to be done in order to raise aspirations and support young people from vocational programmes to attend HE and provide equal access to HE for young people of lower SES.

Future Work

Future work should focus on collecting a wider sample size of young people from vocational programmes throughout colleges across the UK. Adopting a mixed methods approach with qualitative interviews may help to provide insight into the relationship between low socioeconomic status, parental education and student aspirations. Retrieving archival data on rates of progression for students from WP target groups may also provide more rigour to the findings.

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