

**Social Class, School-to-College Transitions, and the Student
Further Education College Experience in England**

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Abstract

Whilst research on further education has provided a view of the nature of learning, governance, and professionalism in the sector, little is known about student participation in and experience of further education and how this is influenced by social class. This mixed-methods study explores the relationship between social class, school-to-college transitions, and further education participation and experience in further education. This study contributes timely evidence to contemporary debates on the sector by foregrounding social class in questions of further education transitions and student experience; an area where limited recent research exists in the sociology of education.

Drawing on the theoretical ideas of Pierre Bourdieu in both its theoretical underpinning and methodological design, this study explores how economic, cultural, and social dimensions of social class shape the school-to-college transition and college experiences. In doing so, this research will show how habitus and class-based capitals come to shape the choice of qualification and subject of study in college. The study therefore contributes to prior scholarship exploring the merits of applying a multi-dimensional operationalisation of social class in mixed-methods educational research.

Furthermore, the college experience is shown to be one of opportunity (a) for the rediscovery of a positive learning identity and (b) for the conversion of unequally distributed capitals to strengthen the college experience. Thus, this research contributes important findings on an area which has increasing policy significance, but which is perennially under-researched.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Today, further education is, yet again, at a crossroads and being debated and redesigned in response to the looming financial failure of many colleges revealed in the *Independent review of college financial oversight* (Ney, 2019). The *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth* White Paper demonstrates the interest among policymakers to rethink, and strengthen, the role of further education in the lives of young people and the wider economy in a post-pandemic world (Department for Education, 2021). Moreover, the formation of *The Independent Commission on the College of the Future* (2020) is indicative of the crisis and opportunity that appears to be simultaneously facing the sector. Both the White Paper and the Independent Commission's report envisages the further education sector of the future as (a) more connected to employers in a similar fashion to the German dual system, (b) delivering high skills in areas of skill shortage, and (c) characterised by a different, less competitive relationship between college institutions. Further education also occupies centre stage in the UK government's skills revolution and its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic (Prime Minister's Office, 2021), especially following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) and the impact that this is projected to have on the supply of skills to the national economy (Hubble et al., 2021b). These repackaged purposes of further education are posited at the same time as the sector is expected to meet 'wider societal and political goals and values' (Keep, 2018, p. 13).

Therefore, the time appears ripe for research on further education, school-to-college transitions, and student experiences of college environments. Also pertinent to this thesis is the historical connection the sector has to social class, with its roots strongly embedded in the history of the working population during the nineteenth century (Foreman-Peck, 2004; Simmons, 2017). The most privileged have historically been concentrated amongst the most advantageous areas of post-secondary education (e.g., academic, school-based provision), whereas the working-class initially had relatively low participation levels across all areas of education, which gradually increased throughout the second half of the twentieth century as the state education system expanded. In a context of growing social inequality, where social class remains a strong predictor of educational participation, experience, and outcomes (Reay, 2017; Thompson, 2019; Social Mobility Commission, 2021), understanding the relationship between the further education college sector and the social class background of students is vital. This is because the transition into further education is a significant process which shapes the future choices, opportunities, and trajectories available to young people. What young people study in further education simultaneously opens-up and closes-off options that can be pursued in the future, such as the future area of work, the option to study

at university, the type of university available, and the subject area to be studied. By identifying how social class influences the school-to-college transition and the experience of college environments upon entry, this study is well positioned to contribute to contemporary debates on the rethinking of the further education sector.

In this introductory chapter, the policy and research context informing this study is discussed and, thereafter, the structure of the thesis and purpose of each chapter is outlined. In doing so, this research study will be justified as contributing to an area of relevance to contemporary policy reforms and a perpetually under-researched area within the sociology of education literature.

1.1. Background

Exploring how young people make decisions during the school-to-college transition and experience college environments is important because of the role of such choices made on the future opportunities available to young people. School-leavers must remain in some form of education and training following completing their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, be that in full-time college study, apprenticeship training or in part-time study alongside working (HM Government, 2021). This means that over 650,000 16-18-year-olds are currently studying in English colleges of varying types (Association for Colleges, 2021) and each year most young people leaving secondary education undergo this transition. However, at present little is known of the mechanisms shaping the transition from school into further education and specifically how social class shapes college participation and experience in England. Where research has been conducted in further education this has tended to focus on the important questions of policymaking, governance, professionalism and models of teaching and learning in the sector (e.g., Gleeson, 2005; Gleeson & James, 2007; James & Biesta, 2007; Bailey & Unwin, 2014; Greatbatch & Tate, 2018; Hanley & Orr, 2019; James et al., 2021).

The lack of research on social class and further education thus means only a partial understanding of how the sector contributes to social mobility and questions of social justice is available. Most studies on participation patterns in further education have relied on historic secondary data, adopted occupational measurements of social class background, and/or have focused on only one area of provision such as admission to A-Level study (Thompson, 2009; Dilnot, 2016; Moulton et al., 2018). Therefore, this may limit the applicability of findings

to the contemporary further education sector and understanding of how social class shapes participation across areas of provision not studied. For example, research on A-Level subject choice is unlikely to illuminate how social class shapes entry into vocational further education pathways. Studies of further education student experience are equally scarce. Providing rich accounts of what studying in further education means to young people and lifelong learners alike, existing studies have explored the learning environments and contexts in further education institutions (e.g., Hyland & Merrill, 2003). Yet, the application of theories of social class-based educational inequality, such as that provided in Bourdieusian sociology, is limited in most studies of further education student experience. Excluding the work of James and Biesta (2007), which adopts a sociological theory of teaching and learning processes in further education, most other research only reports on generic characteristics of the further education student experience (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 1997; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Hyland & Merrill, 2003) or where social class is discussed the research is now over 20 years old (e.g., Ball et al., 2000). Thus, whilst of value in contributing evidence of further education learning environments, there is a need for more theoretically informed empirical analyses of being a college student in England.

However, research on educational decision-making during the transition into and trajectory throughout further education have drawn more clearly on sociological theory. These studies have chiefly offered sociological critiques of the hegemonic human capital theory of educational decision-making (e.g., Fevre et al., 1999; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Hodkinson and Sparkes's sociological theory of *Careership* represents a Bourdieusian-inspired approach to post-secondary educational transitions, which uses the notion of pragmatic rationality to articulate how the decisions made by young people when entering tertiary education are socially situated. Yet, since this work there has been limited application of Bourdieu's conceptual tools to understanding the school-to-college transition and experiences following college admission. With the sociological critique of human capital approaches to education, decision-making and educational transitions mounting (e.g., Marginson, 2019; Brown et al., 2020), there is considerable scope for development. Indeed, some research has illustrated the appropriateness of Bourdieusian scholarship to further education contexts (e.g., to vocational transitions in the case of Atkins, 2017), yet there is considerable scope for further studies of school-to-college transitions. The scarcity of Bourdieusian scholarship on social class inequalities in further education trajectories and experiences is notwithstanding the contribution his theoretical tools have offered to the sociology of education in studies of educational inequalities in primary, secondary, and higher education (e.g., Reay, 1996, 2001, 2021; Grenfell & James, 1997; Sullivan, 2003;

Reay et al., 2010, 2011; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Burke, 2016; Thatcher et al., 2016; Atkinson, 2020). Yet, as Thompson (2009) concluded in his study of further education participation, more research is necessary on the relationship between social class and further education participation, with him also suggesting that a Bourdieusian perspective appears highly suited to such a task (p. 41).

In the forthcoming section, a brief outline of this study, which will address these evidence gaps, is provided.

1.2. The Study

To address these evidence gaps and contribute to contemporary policy debates, this mixed-methods study was conducted to understand the relationship between social class, the school-to-college transition, and the further education student experience. Surveys were conducted with 659 students studying a range of academic, mixed, and/or vocational qualifications at nine further education colleges across England. The survey represents an innovative attempt to operationalise social class using the theoretical ideas of Bourdieu, specifically the conceptualisation of social class position as the volume and composition of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Survey respondents were able to indicate during the surveys if they were interested in participating in a semi-structured interview about their school-to-college and college experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 students attending one of three English further education colleges, during which the choice-making during the school-to-college transition and reflections on the experiences of school and college environments were explored.

Data collected during this mixed-methods study was analysed to investigate the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between social class background and further education student participation?
2. How are school-to-college transition decisions/choices made by further education students and what is the role of social class background in this process?
3. What are the envisaged educational trajectories and aspirations of further education students and what is the role of social class in their formation?

4. In what ways does social class background shape the student experience of further education contexts?
5. What is the relationship between social class background and participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) and access to work experience during further education study?

Investigating these five research questions in this study contributes important findings to the previously discussed gaps in research evidence on further education social class inequalities. Furthermore, the study exemplifies how social class can be operationalised in survey research using Bourdieu's ideas, a task rarely attempted despite the popularity of Bourdieu's sociology (see Sullivan, 2003; Savage et al., 2013 for two novel examples). The study also addresses the stated evidence gaps of English policymakers. The Department for Education (2018a, p. 5) has recently called for further research on (a) young people's decision-making when entering and progressing through further education, and (b) on how issues of access or choice affect participation in further and higher education. More recently much has been made of the potential of further education to contribute to the economic and social challenges facing English society in a post-pandemic world (Department for Education, 2020a), including through repairing the damaging impacts the coronavirus pandemic has had on the education of young people (e.g., House of Commons Education Committee, 2020). By investigating how young people come to choose what to study in further education and experiences while studying at a college of further education, this study contributes timely evidence and analysis of policy relevance.

1.3. Layout of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is comprised of nine chapters:

- Chapter 2 delivers a historical account of education in England and traces the inseparable relationship between social class and education policy, participation, and experience to the origins of state education in the nineteenth century. Additionally, a history of English further education to the present day is provided illustrating the genealogy of the sector in the beginnings of organised education for working people in the nineteenth century. In doing so, the chapter contextualises and situates this study and introduces the evidence gaps which this study will address.
- Building on the previous chapter, chapter 3 provides a literature review covering prior research on the relationship between social class education inequality and the further education sector in England. This will summarise existing knowledge relating to the

relationship between social class and further education participation, educational decision-making, and the further education student experience.

- Chapter 4 outlines the epistemological and methodological approach adopted in this study. The chapter begins with an exposition of Bourdieu's theory-as-method which informs the design of this research study. Thereafter, the chapter outlines the research methods chosen to answer the research questions posed, an account of the mixed-methods research design chosen, survey and interview design, the approach to analysis adopted, and ethical considerations relevant to this study.
- Chapter 5 begins the findings section of this thesis by offering an account of student participation in further education using primary survey data collected in this study. Drawing on a Bourdieusian measurement of social class background, this chapter explores the extent to which economic, cultural, and social capital shape further education participation among participating students. This will focus on whether social class is associated with (a) level of study, (b) the choice to study A-Levels and (c) number of facilitating A-Level subjects chosen, and (d) subject area of vocational study chosen in further education.
- Chapter 6 builds upon the findings of the previous chapter in exploring how participating students made decisions and choices during the school-to-college transition. This draws on qualitative student interview data to understand how decisions and choices were made, according to the perspective of participating students themselves. The measurement of social class used in this study enables analysis of interview data by social class background and is used in conjunction with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and disposition to identify mechanisms underlying patterns observed in chapter 5.
- Chapter 7 switches focus to the student experience of further education college. The chapter is driven by an interest in how students perceived their college learning environment and whether such perceptions vary by the social class background of students. To address this, the chapter contains analysis of student interview data and is informed by participating students' reflective and comparative accounts of secondary school and further education college experiences. These accounts enable the chapter to explore whether college learning environments offer distinctive value to young people studying within them, as previous research has suggested.
- Whilst Chapter 7 focuses on the student experience of the specific college learning environment, Chapter 8 investigates aspects of student experience which span both the college and personal lives of participating students. Specifically, the relationship between social class background and extra-curricular activity (ECA) and work experience participation is explored. Firstly, the chapter focuses on the types of ECA

which are engaged in at college by participating students and whether this varies by social class. Thereafter, access to work experience opportunities external to the college among participating students is explored. This will contribute to existing literature in the sociology of education on student experiences in further education, particularly in focusing on engagement in ECAs and work experience opportunities in further education which has received little attention to date.

- Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by summarising how research questions posed have been addressed and, in doing so, the contribution made to existing research in the sociology of education. The significance of these potential contributions to policy are also considered and policy recommendations are provided. This chapter also discusses the limitations of this study which are used to suggest avenues for future research among sociologists of education and educational researchers.

Chapter 2: Historical context

Before considering research literature on the relationship between social class, the school-to-college transition and further education student experience, this chapter will outline the historical context from which the contemporary further education sector has emerged.

Exploring the genealogy of the sector will enable a historical perspective of the issues that have burdened the sector since its origins, some of which were outlined in chapter 1.

Furthermore, accounting for the historical development of further education, from its origins in the nineteenth century, will enable an understanding of the link between the sector's development and the history of social class educational inequality.

The chapter begins by tracing the roots of further education to nineteenth century voluntarist technical education, before which developments during the early twentieth century are outlined. The formation of the further education sector within the 1944 Education Act is then explored. Thereafter, the introduction of market forces into further education from the final decades of the twentieth century to today is discussed. Concluding remarks are then presented, which draw together the perennial characteristics and issues that have defined the sector throughout its history and situate the discussion in the policy debates of recent years.

2.1. Education Development in England in the Nineteenth Century and the Origins of the Further Education Sector

State involvement in technical education in England did not emerge until the late nineteenth century, given the contemporary underdevelopment of education for the majority of the English population. This followed a gradual encroachment of the educational sphere by the state during the second half of the nineteenth century, before which poverty and privilege, geography and religion carried considerable influence over access to basic schooling (O'Day, 1982; Lawson and Silver, 1973; Lowe, 2005; Reay, 2017). Indeed, it is estimated only two-fifths of the working-classes aged between six and ten years of age were listed on government school registers during the nineteenth century, with this figure falling to one-third for those aged 10-12 years (Hansard, 1870). There were also some areas of England where 'attendance was very irregular' or non-existent at elementary and secondary schools (c. 440). Where the working population were able to enter a charity school, predominantly associated with a church, the education received '...at the end of the eighteenth century [was] training poor children for a specific status in society and for specific occupations'

(Lawson and Silver, 1973, p. 238). Thus, the aims of and access to education was closely linked to class position during this period.

Moving through the nineteenth century, a greater momentum gathered behind movements calling for mass education at primary and secondary level, upon which any post-secondary phase of education would need to build. Whilst several factors are of significance (e.g., broadening the enfranchisement, political change in Europe), Britain's increasing recognition of the economic, technological, and industrial advances made in other countries, like Germany and Japan, and the threat this posed to its primacy is important to consider in relation to the origins of the English further education sector (Green, 1990, 1995; Foreman-Peck, 2004). Far from being informed by democratic principles, the increasing recognition of the need for educational development in England was a response to fears of national decline among the elite. Specifically, two international exhibitions – the 1851 Great Exhibition and 1867 Exposition Universelle – were significant. This is because each cultivated an unease amongst the British establishment regarding its competitiveness in industrial output and the ability of current education provision to meet the demands of industry. In response, three separate government commissions were established – the 1858-1861 Newcastle Commission, 1861-64 Clarendon Commission, and 1864-1868 Taunton Commission – each of which was tasked with investigating the quality of education available for each social class.¹ These commissions precipitated the 1870 Education Act and subsequent iterations (e.g., 1876 Royal Commission on the Factory Acts and the 1880 Education Act), heralding the state involvement in elementary education provision for the first time in England during a period of increasing public interest in education (HM Government, 1870). The Act established school boards that were tasked with the building and management of elementary schools using local 'rates' (i.e., taxation) paid by local citizens. Yet, this legislative change was permissive in calling for 'compulsory provision where it is wanted – if and where proved to be wanted, but not otherwise' (Hansard, 1870, c. 451), leaving considerable scope for diversity in implementation.

Considering the infancy of the state education system, technical education and training, which was the preserve of the working-class, remained a matter for private interests to organise and fund. Not only was the undereducation of the working population (except for

¹ The commissions were titled: the Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England (education of the working-class), the Royal Commission on the Public Schools (education for the upper class), and the School Inquiry Commission (education for the middle-class), respectively.

the privileged minority who were able to access a craft apprenticeship (Foreman-Peck, 2004; Colley et al., 2003)) a barrier to the development of post-school technical education, two inter-related cultural dispositions were also significant to its underdevelopment. Firstly, England has historically viewed utilitarian education as “unworthy”, instead favouring a philosophical and religious education via the classics and later pure science (Lowe, 1998). This meant that scientific education, applied science teaching and technical and vocational education was underdeveloped (Green, 1995). Secondly, the suspicion shown by the elite towards educating the working class in England exacerbated this inaction, with fears that improving the educational offering would ‘teach them [the working-class] to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good... it would render them insolent to their superiors’ (Giddies, 1807 in Reay, 2017, p. 31).

Thus, in the chasm left by state inaction, the mechanics’ institutes, which are widely regarded as the origins of the English further education sector (Foreman-Peck, 2004; Peart, 2017; Simmons, 2017; Orr, 2018), emerged as the first organised form of technical education in England during the early nineteenth century. Mechanics’ Institutes were independent from the state, primarily funded by middle- and upper-class sponsors in response to the growing relevance of applied scientific knowledge to labour processes. Whereas craft apprenticeships were highly regulated and far from abundant (Foreman-Peck, 2008; Brockmann et al., 2008), the Mechanics’ Institutes provided opportunity for larger swathes of the working population, especially the higher echelons of the working-class, to acquire a basic understanding of the underpinning principles informing their work practice (Royle, 1971; Walker, 2013). However, much like other initiatives aimed at enhancing education provision for the working-class, mechanics’ institutes soon ceased to be institutions for the working-classes, with less than half of all learners being from the working-class by 1885 (O’Farrell, 2004). Mechanics’ institutes gradually became less concerned with technical education and eventually merged with other organisations, such as philosophical societies, and were primarily attended by the middle-classes. Reasons for this change were myriad, but a significant factor was the difficulties faced in providing scientific content to those with low prior educational experience and/or attainment, who were also likely combining learning with employment (Foreman-Peck, 2004). Thereafter, educational opportunities for the working-class declined and mechanics’ institutes gradually became part of the soon-established vocational education provision in the latter nineteenth century, whilst many others became integrated into the higher education system still present today.

Following the decline of Mechanics' Institutes as educational institutions for the working-class, there was continued experimentation in English education, with the state paying greater attention to mass education. Noteworthy here, with regard to further education, is the formation of England's first technical college in 1883 – Finsbury Technical College – which was based on technical institutions found in other European nations, such as Germany, in its delivery of a dual curriculum (Bailey, 2002; Royal Commissioners on Technical Education, 1882; 1884). However, reflecting the continued prejudice shown towards the education of the working-class, the college was forced to close due to the financial difficulties, as it was not sufficiently supported by the state. Informing the closure of the College and other reforms aimed at improving the technical education offering was the underdeveloped primary and secondary education system. For example, the 1889 Technical Instruction Act gave powers to local authorities to levy a tax – termed the 'Whiskey Money' in light of the role played by alcohol on funds obtained – to develop technical education and training institutions across the country (Bailey, 2002). Yet, as a consequence of the infancy of earlier stages of state education, the newly established institutions catered predominantly for school-aged pupils. Thus, whilst these reforms aimed to empower local authorities to develop technical educational institutions, the absence of a robust education system in England, created insurmountable barriers to the formation of further education provision across the country. Furthermore, the need for local authorities to implement such changes across England, some of which may have lacked basic educational facilities, led to considerable variability in its implementation.

2.2. Early Twentieth Century Educational Developments

It would not be until before the turn of the century that a state elementary and secondary education system would be founded that could support technical education provision for young adults and older learners. Entering the twentieth century, technical education in England was developed as a consequence of individual demand for evening instruction in specific subjects, much of which was of varied occupational relevance (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). Following the uneven implementation of prior reforms and the still inadequate secondary phase of education in England, the 1895 Royal Commission on Secondary Education made several recommendations regarding the need to develop an education system in England, many of which were later implemented in the 1902 Education Act (Royal Commission on Secondary Education, 1895, HM Government, 1902). In response to finding that the middle-class character of schooling had strengthened since earlier reforms (Lawson and Silver, 1973), the commission recommended that the following graded education system should be introduced providing education for 10 in every 1,000 children:

1. Those scholars who were to remain at school until age 18 and a respectable proportion of whom were to enter universities.
2. Those scholars who left school at approximately 16 and intended to enter some professions or higher walks of commercial life.
3. Those scholars who left school at about 14, belonging as a rule to a humbler social stratum and destined to begin forthwith to earn a living in shops or warehouses, or in some industrial occupation.

Of every 10 children selected, eight would be assigned to the third grade and one assigned to each of the remaining grades. Each grade would differ in its coverage of literary, scientific, and technical curricula, with admission recommended to 'correspond roughly... to the gradations of society' (Royal Commission on Secondary Education, 1895, p. 131). However, despite the lowest grade being tied to the working-class and technical education provision, the Commission did also call for the equalisation of academic and non-academic forms of education, asserting that 'technical education must be considered not as the rival of a liberal education but as a specialization of it' (p. 285). Despite this seemingly progressive sentiment, the way each educational grade is classed means that there is differential, and higher, value attached to the academic pathway. This is because each grade was positioned relationally. It was understood that the preponderance of students undertaking a basic technical form of education (i.e., grade one) would be children from a lower social stratum (Lawson and Silver, 1973), with the more beneficial technical education (i.e., grade two) likely undertaken by the higher working-class or lower middle-class. With the absence of privileged groups in these forms of education, the educational participation would come to be a source of distinction between the classes. As the lifestyle of the privileged classes was, and still is, valued in English society (Reay, 2017; Littler, 2018), this would mean that the forms of education inhabited by this group would come to be understood as the most desirable. At the same time, the cultural prejudice held towards technical education in England would be reinforced via it predominantly being the preserve of the working-classes and something which the privileged do not engage with.

Despite the change in state education signalled by the 1902 Education Act, and the significance of this for the prospects of a further education sector, progress in educational participation was limited at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the decade that followed the passing of the 1902 Education Act overall attendance in schooling increased. Most children were taught in elementary schools catering for working-class children of all ages. Children from privileged backgrounds attended a parallel system of fee-paying,

selective elementary and secondary schools or highly selective endowed grammar schools (Verkaik, 2018; Green and Kynaston, 2019; Thompson, 2019). Some working-class children did attend these 'elite' schools via a 'free place scheme' introduced by the incumbent Liberal Government in 1907, which provided free places for students who passed a qualifying examination (McCulloch, 2002). Moreover, in 1906 the Board of Education introduced regulations on payment of central government grants to technical schools and other institutions delivering classes of further education (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). Yet, despite the strides made during this decade, the Board of Education's regulatory guidance did not provide a definitive statement on the aims and purposes on 'technical schools and... providers of further education' (ibid., p. 1), thus considerable variation emerged. Moreover, doubt remained as to the opportunities available to the general working population notably at secondary education level. For example, Reay (2017) explains that, in 1913, only 5.8% of those aged 14-16 years attended secondary school, the number only increasing to 7% for 11 to 15-year-olds attending state schools during the 1920s. Likewise, the development of technical education was limited by funding remaining consistently low (Bolton, 2012) and 'the continued adherence of government and industry to the principles of laissez-faire and voluntarism with regard to technical education' (Bailey, 2002, p. 61). This resulted in student-driven development of the sector, seeing provision based on demand rather than any coherent policy or strategy (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). Further education at this point was therefore largely (a) part-time via evening classes, (b) patchy, and (c) of variable quality, leading to little employer interest (Foreman-Peck, 2004).

Where advance was observed, such as in growing interest in technical education and training from certain areas of the English economy in response to fears of economic decline, this was both geographically variable and driven by employers (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). These difficulties were coupled with a growing tension between 'the furtherance of the common interest and the fostering of an elite' in education (Sadler, 1930, p. 8, 16 in McCulloch, 2002). Though, debate continued during the interwar period over the structure and nature of English education, with particular attention paid to whether secondary education should be defined in narrow academic terms, as it had been previously, or whether there should be a more diverse offering at secondary level (Chitty, 2014). Proposals emerged to add a new 'modern school' to secondary schooling provision (a precursor to the secondary modern school), which would deliver a different curriculum to grammar schools characterised by 'practical work and realistic studies' as opposed to the academic orientation of grammar schools (Board of Education, 1926). In addition, a third school type – technical high schools – was also proposed as an additional way through which technical education

and training in England could be improved. However, reflecting the deeply engrained cultural prejudice towards non-academic forms of education, there was a 'determination to preserve the character of the existing form of secondary provision for those pupils who were able to benefit from it' (McCulloch, 2002, p. 38). Hence, at the outset of the Second World War, limited progress had been made to forming an education system which offered opportunity to all and could support the future further education sector. Indeed, as the Ministry of Education (1950, p. 27 in Bailey and Unwin, 2014) admitted, further education had progressed 'not according to any conscious plan, but in response to demands as they arose spontaneously...'.

However, the publication of *Educational Reconstruction* (Board of Education, 1942) and the public mood this report captured would soon transform English education, with ramification for further education in England.

2.3. The 1944 Education Act: Emergence of the Further Education Sector

The 1944 Education Act was the first element of the post-war welfare settlement implemented and signalled a fundamental change in English education, introducing education for all until the age of 14 (and later extending this to 16 in 1972) (Chitty, 2014). Moreover, it built upon the groundwork of the Mechanics' Institute movement and later reforms in establishing the English further education sector (Richardson, 2007). Although the Act did not stipulate the structure of secondary education, it saw the tripartite system first proposed by the 1895 Royal Commission on Secondary Education and repeated by later government publications (e.g., Committee on Secondary School Examinations, 1943) implemented. This consisted of three types of school:

1. Grammar schools: for the academically minded, interested in learning for its own sake.
2. Technical schools: for the scientifically or technically minded, capable of applied learning.
3. Secondary Modern schools: for those who are neither academically or scientifically minded and who deal better with concrete things.

This schooling triad was underpinned by three 'types' of learners, for which a standardised intelligence test was designed to examine. The 11+ test was based on emerging educational psychology and proponents of social Darwinism, many of which linked social class and intelligence (e.g., Burt, 1961; Dorfman, 1978). If a child performed well in this examination

they would gain entry to a grammar school, which provided a thoroughly academic education and a natural progression into higher education and the service class. On the contrary, if a child did not meet the required standard for entry into a grammar school, they would enter either a secondary modern or one of the very few technical schools, which predominantly led to employment or vocational tertiary education. The academic form of education was positioned as the 'top' form towards which all students strive, and it is only through academic educational 'failure' in the 11+ examination that they enter other school types. In alternative school-types the curriculum was less academic and orientated more toward occupational entry and basic skills for work (i.e., technical and vocational education). Thus, once more the deeply engrained favouritism shown towards academic education is represented in the way the secondary school system was structured. This is further demonstrated by the limited development of technical schools at secondary level (Mandler, 2020), meaning that such opportunities were not available for young people and post-secondary further education participation, or employment, thus may have been the first opportunity to engage in technical education.

The 1944 Education Act established a number of further education institution types (e.g., technical college, municipal college, colleges of further education) and was the first time a definition of the sector was offered. This positioned the sector as for the delivery of:

(a) full time and part-time education for persons over compulsory school age; and (b) leisure-time occupation, in such organized cultural training and recreative activities as are suited to their requirements, for any persons over compulsory school age who are able and willing to profit by the facilities provided for that purpose (HM Government, 1944, p. 33).

This definition invited diversity in further education provision by stipulating the sector as including a range of courses, from post-school and pre-employment provision to leisure and recreational courses. In other words, this new definition of the further education sector incorporated another, different movement, and area of education, that of adult education. Further education was now tasked with citizenship and democratic education, too. Further education institutions were to deliver 'practical and vocational training' that would enable students to perform their 'responsibilities of citizenship' (ibid, p. 34-35). Yet, the Act only secured provision for learners for 'one whole day, or two half-days, in each of forty-four weeks in every year while he remains a young person' (ibid, p. 36). Thus, the Act placed considerable responsibility on further education providers, whilst only normalising part-time study, which had characterised technical education for almost a century. To some extent,

this Act and its early implementation is a factor in the mixed economy of provision in colleges today because there was such diversity in type, level, and duration of provision (HM Government, 1956; Central Advisory Council for Education, 1959), which has not been rectified or sufficiently funded since (Simmons, 2014).

Likewise, it was not until the late 1950s that changes to further education became the focus of policymakers (Bailey, 2002). The scarcity of finances for the development of new facilities meant that existing provision was extended, and increased participation was not initially met with sufficient institutional growth (Cantor and Roberts, 1969). Moreover, where government did attend to further education provision following the Act, this was predominantly technical education in light of the contemporary growing interest in day-release from business (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). This resulted in the immediate increase in further education participation being day-release learners. From the mid-1950s, technical colleges and evening institutes experienced a growth in general and recreational study admissions. In the 1957-1958 academic year, there was a total of over 2.5 million student enrolments in the further education sector, of which 57% were aged 19+, with young students populating the 'major establishments' of further education (i.e., colleges) rather than evening institutes (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1959, p. 318-321). However, the 1959 Crowther Report estimated that 60% of 15–17-year-olds were still not receiving day-time education and training, likely due to many in this group having working responsibilities (HM Government, 1959). Thus, the majority of the attendance increase was still not in full-time participation but alternative modes of study, such as day-release which has been a characteristic of technical education for decades.

Additionally, data show that between 1938 and 1968 the number of day-release students in further education increased from 51,000 to 644,000, and the number of full-time students increased from 45,000 in 1946-1947 to 259,000 in 1969-1970 (Cantor and Roberts, 1969). But in the 1957-1958 academic year there was a total of 58,000 full-time courses completed by students aged 18 and below, of which 13,000 were purely academic GCEs (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1959, p. 321). This suggests that up until the end of the 1950s full-time study was still not a common occurrence in further education but was an emerging feature of the following decade. Indeed, the main increase in participation, especially full-time participation, occurred in the 1960s (see also Cantor and Roberts, 1969; Bailey, 2002). Two important factors for this growth were: (1) the contemporary increase in full-time study of students undertaking academic forms of post-secondary education in

further education, such as GCE 'O' and 'A' levels, where they were unable to enter sixth forms, or they had failed the course previously; and (2) the influx of non-traditional students in further education because of impending economic crises. However, despite the increased participation levels found in the 1960s, there remained a cultural bias towards those institutions where a mainly academic education was taught, with 'the majority of boy and girls who wish to remain in full-time education until they are eighteen preferring to stay at school' (sic) (HM Government, 1956, p. 10). Therefore, simultaneously to the sector growing in both size and prominence, it did not possess equal status in educational terms to the secondary education sector, especially grammar schools which were institutions teaching a highly academic curriculum to a student body disproportionately from middle-class families (Douglas et al, 1971; Halsey et al., 1980; Reay, 2017; SESC, 2018).

With growing participation levels in further education came heightened interest from policymakers, with the sector increasingly viewed as a means to achieve economic ends, particularly to bolster Britain's competitiveness in the face of the growing dominance of the United States and the Soviet Union (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). This is indicative of the vocationalism that had informed the development of the further education sector and earlier technical education. An example of this was the establishment of national colleges of advanced technology (e.g., food technology) during the post-war period, which were later absorbed into higher education institutions still in operation today following the 1963 Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). These were providers of high-quality technical education and training and not controlled by LEAs (Simmons, 2008); viewed as too strategically important to not be under central government control. Simultaneously, reforms of the remaining lower-level further education sector to increase the relevance of qualifications to industry needs took place. This removal of high-level, high-quality provision from the further education sector and into other areas of education provision is another defining feature in the history of further education. It served to reinforce the issues of esteem encountered by vocational forms of learning and the vocational and technical sector in England, implying that certain forms of vocational education, typically high-quality, high-level, and consisting of a mixture of academic and vocational learning, belong elsewhere (i.e., in higher education).

2.4. Market Reforms in Further Education

It was in this context that increasing attacks were launched at the further education sector as being of low-quality and little relevance to the wider economy and where the possibility of

market reforms in further education emanated. Following the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, the neoliberal policy agenda spread across all areas of policy (Hall & Jacques, 1983; Littler, 2018), with the 1988 Education Reform Act marking the expansion of prior comprehensive reforms and the introduction of market reforms in education (Crosland, 1956; Department for Education and Science, 1965; HM Government, 1988). Whilst framed as a means through which to provide opportunity for more children to engage in high-quality education, especially grammar schooling, these reforms are associated with the persistence of social class educational inequality because:

Marketized, differentiated and stratified systems create spaces within which the material and cultural advantages of higher social classes can be realized in strategic and exclusionary behaviours and processes (Thompson, 2019, p. 180; see also Reay, 2017).

The further education sector was also subject to the marketisation of education, in addition to increasing application of vocationalist philosophy, fuelled by economic crises faced during the 1970s (James and Biesta, 2007; Bailey and Unwin, 2014; Ball, 2017). Critics suggested that the cause of rising youth unemployment in this period was the lack of employer engagement with further education and the sector's inefficiency in providing 'the necessary skills, aptitudes and abilities to secure and retain employment' (Simmons, 2017, p. 6). This failure was despite initiatives, such as the Industrial Training Boards (ITBs), which aimed to enhance the vocational and economic relevance of further education provision (HM Government, 1964), and the later Manpower Service Commission (MSC) which incorporated ITBs and were similarly tasked with making 'such arrangement as it considers appropriate for the purpose of assisting persons to select, train for, obtain and retain employment' (HM Government, 1973, p. 3). Initially the MSC was tasked with assisting the unemployed adult population but soon, due to the worsening economic situation, became part of the institutional framework supporting young people after secondary school. The actions of the MSC led to a large increase in the number of non-traditional students entering further education in order to receive additional training to enhance their work experience and basic skills. In this way, further education was deemed as the most suitable sector within which to place those forced into unemployment by the economic crisis (James and Biesta, 2007). Consequently, pre-employment courses would come to increase throughout the 1980s, delivering for students who did not wish to undertake A-Level study, but meanwhile did not wish or were unable to enter the highly precarious youth labour market (Bailey, 2002). An example of such courses included the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) (Williams, 1982; Brockmann et al., 2008). These competency and skills-based qualifications,

introduced simultaneously to the removal of general education requirements from technical education, did not require additional study for certification (Wolf, 2002).

Thus, the issues of status and perception of low-quality were exacerbated by government attempts to enhance the market relevance of further education provision and use the sector as a remedy for the failure of economic policy. Rather than strengthening the sector, the addition of a plethora of pre-employment courses merely contributed to the complexity, variable quality, and low esteem of the sector. Yet, as increasing funding was invested in these narrow vocational qualifications, young people were increasingly opting to pursue the alternative, and more 'prestigious', academic pathway in further education (e.g., A-Level study) (ibid.). Thus, far from bolstering the status of further education provision, and especially non-academic provision, reforms during the 1970s and 1980s were found to worsen the issues of esteem between academic and technical education observed throughout the history of English education.

Consequently, the issue of delivering market relevance still remained among policymakers and critics of the further education sector entering the 1990s. This decade saw the extension of marketising reforms in education to the further education sector via the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (HM Government, 1992), which introduced reforms collectively referred to as 'incorporation'. Incorporation involved removing 'FE colleges from local government control to introduce markets and competition' (Lucas and Crowther, 2015, p. 583). Further education colleges were now treated as private, competing corporations, operated by a governing board and a chief executive, which held responsibility for their staffing, budgets, assets, course planning and marketing and that now had a direct relationship with Central Government (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). Prior to these reforms, funding for colleges was based on expected number of students irrespective of performance and outcomes. As colleges were now treated as "service providers" funding was attached to output "units" (i.e., student enrolments, teaching and learning time, attainment levels), meaning that those colleges who, for a variety of reasons, may have 'poor' attainment outcomes would receive less funding than those that delivered success: a "better service" to learners, who now represented "consumers" (Panchamia, 2012). The underpinning reasoning for introducing performance-based reforms was firstly, to encourage providers to recruit a greater number of students, especially non-traditional students, and secondly, to enhance standards and deliver higher levels of success for students. In exchange for the increased demands further education providers faced, institutions would receive greater

autonomy over their operation. Funding was to be channelled through two funding bodies, which allocated central government spending: the local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) for work-based training programmes established in 1988 and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for the newly incorporated college sector. The aim to increase enrolments was achieved as total participation did increase from 2.5 to 3.5 million between 1993/1994–1999/2000 (Bailey, 2002). However, parallel funding increases were not attached to this increased participation, which exacerbated existing issues of under-funding across the sector.

Subsequent reforms were required to rectify the issues encountered as a consequence of Incorporation, which included ‘gaming’ of the funding system by colleges, the proliferation of low-quality provision to secure additional funding, highly competitive behaviour, and the increasingly selective practices of high-performing colleges (Hillier, 2006; Panchamia, 2012). In response, the government sought to provide greater choice to learners and local autonomy to communities to influence local further education provision. For example, through initiatives such as the Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSC), which informed national planning bodies and Strategic Area Reviews (StARs) that aimed to ensure that local, as well as national, skill needs were considered in the design of provision. Similar to previous reforms, progress towards targets set by the LSC, LLSC and StARs would be rewarded with further funding and the inability to meet specified targets would lead to lower funding and possible state intervention. Further reforms, in response to the Foster and Leitch Reviews of the sector (Foster, 2005; Leitch, 2006), enhanced the involvement of local enterprises and business communities in further education provision. Further education colleges and businesses were encouraged to merge to draw on the expertise of both colleges and businesses in the delivery of higher-quality and more market-relevant courses. However, they soon ceased and prompted further reforms, as some joint ventures ended due to private companies experiencing financial difficulties, leaving students with no education and training or with low-quality outcomes (Panchamia, 2012).

In many ways, much like prior reforms which aimed to remedy the effectiveness of the sector to deliver market relevant provision through marketisation, changes in the early twentieth century were also limited in addressing perennial issues facing the sector. Panchamia argued that the reason why post-incorporation reforms were of limited effectiveness was the mismatch between policy aims and action. When local skill preferences were prioritised an insufficient level of government oversight was present, though when national strategy was

prioritised the voices of local stakeholders was not sufficiently considered. This is attributed to 'the complexity of the sector... [making] it extremely difficult for the government to appropriately balance the degree of regulation and choice in the system' (ibid, p. 5). In many ways, repeated intervention in the sector by policymakers with limited knowledge and experience of further education solidified its image as the 'Cinderella sector' of English education in constant need of rescuing (Bratchell, 1968; Appleyard and Appleyard, 2014).

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided an account of the history of the further education sector in England in order to contextualise today's sector within which the young people participating in this study are participating. This is relevant because the current further education sector and the institutions comprising it emerged from this history, and it is only by reflecting on its development that its current form and contemporary reforms can be understood.

What is clear from the history of further education in England outlined above is the importance of understanding how its evolution has been intimately bound to the development of mainstream state schooling and the class divisions characterising the latter's foundations. Likewise, this review has shown how issues which first emerged in the nineteenth century, and which were exacerbated throughout the twentieth century, particularly the inadequate funding, low status, and complexity of further education, have continued to operate significant influence over the further education sector in the twenty-first century. For example, the unequal esteem between academic and vocational further education study today are a consequence of the sector's development in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Such issues have persisted despite repeated experimentation with the sector because of the predominantly voluntarist nature of education, training, and occupational preparation policy for most areas of the economy in England (Keep, 2006). Bailey and Unwin (2014) argue that these issues continue as a result of successive governments failing to take the sector seriously, with permissiveness in each wave of change undermining the development of a coherent approach to upper-secondary and further education. Thus, further education today remains as a highly diverse sector offering a range of qualifications and courses from secondary-level provision, for those unable to attend secondary school, to higher education study, disproportionately for underrepresented social groups (e.g., working-class students) (Avis and Orr, 2016). Even following the 1944 Education Act which required local authorities to provide further education facilities, there remained considerable emphasis on the voluntarism of young people, their guardians, and employers. This voluntarism has enabled the social inequalities that shaped the origins of

the sector in the nineteenth century to remain closely related to the constitution of further education institutions today (Richardson, 2007; Thompson, 2009) and inform its image as 'being for other people's children' (Hodgson et al., 2015, p. 1). This has meant that further education has increasingly become a mystery to the policymakers responsible for its reform (Coffield et al., 2008).

Nonetheless, the continued difficulties facing the sector has led to constant policymaker scrutiny over further education colleges and reform of the sector has continued to the present day. Of considerable significance for the current state of the further education sector was the financial crisis (Orr, 2018) and the drastic reductions in further education funding ushered in by recent Conservative Governments (Bolton, 2012). Such financial instability, and the implications this has for the sector to meet present and future challenges, has led to both internal and external calls for fundamental reform of further education (Ney, 2019; The Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020). In response, the recent *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth* White Paper aimed to rethink the role of the further education sector in the post-pandemic English society (Department for Education, 2021b). In addition to repeated calls for greater employer involvement in and high-skill provision delivered by the sector, the White Paper departs from reforms introduced following Incorporation by envisaging a less competitive landscape. Despite the mixed reception to such proposals, it remains unclear whether future reforms will be able to realise the further education sector necessary for the future, especially in a post-pandemic context, where the financially austere conditions of the past decade may pale in comparison to what is to come.

Chapter 3: Social Class and Further Education

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, the English further education sector present today is a product of a long policy and social history characterised by a permissive and voluntarist approach to policymaking, an inequity of esteem between academic and vocational forms of education, and perennial underfunding (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). English education, and indeed post-secondary education participation, has been shaped by social class inequalities from the beginnings of state education (Reay, 2006; 2017). This has meant that, despite transformative reforms during the twentieth century which broadened the educational offer to increasing proportions of the population, social class educational inequalities endured, with participation, attainment and experience in the state and independent sector shaped by social class background (Halsey et al., 1980; Gerwitz et al., 1995; Bourne, 2015; Stopforth et al., 2021). Consequently, there are growing calls for a rethinking of English education and the position of further education in the wider education system in order to address issues relating to social inequality, unequal opportunities and low social mobility (House of Commons Select Committee, 2016; Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020; Orr, 2020; Lauder, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2020, 2021). Yet, these calls for a broadening of the remit of the sector are despite perennial accusations of low-quality directed at English further education (James and Biesta, 2007).

In many ways representative of the lack of esteem allotted to further education in England, there has been a historic scarcity of research on further education (James and Biesta, 2007; Bailey and Unwin, 2014). Furthermore, where research has been conducted, this has predominantly focused on other areas of interest, including policy, governance, professionalism, and models of teaching and learning in the sector (e.g., Gleeson, 2005; Gleeson & James, 2007; James & Biesta, 2007; Bailey & Unwin, 2014; Greatbatch & Tate, 2018; Hanley & Orr, 2019; James et al., 2021). This is because most research on social class educational inequalities has predominantly focused on other sectors of education, such as secondary and higher education. The scarcity of research on further education is despite the further education sector attracting over half of all school-leavers each year and the significance it carries for school-to-work transitions (House of Commons Select Committee, 2016).

In this chapter, relevant research literature on social class educational inequalities in English further education is reviewed. This will discuss studies which focus on (a) further education participation, (b) decision-making during the school-to-college transition, and (c) how

experiences of further education contexts are shaped by social class. This will outline important recent developments in this area of study, in addition to the limitations of existing knowledge, in order to demonstrate how this study will contribute to existing knowledge. In concluding this chapter, the research questions generated from this literature review are presented. At points, the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the theoretical framework adopted in this study, is outlined, a fuller explication and justification of my theoretical framework is outlined in chapter 4.

3.1. Further education participation

Participation in further education has historically been associated with social class, given its origins in the education of the working population and purported role as a sector offering opportunities for social mobility to disadvantaged and non-traditional students (Avis & Orr, 2016; Orr, 2020). Yet, few studies have explored the relationship between social class and further education participation. Where research has been conducted this has tended to be historic analyses of secondary data sources, which make use of occupational measurements of social class. These have offered useful insights into the enduring role social class background operates over the further education sector.

Moulton et al. (2018), using Next Steps data, found that subject choice in secondary schooling influenced post-16 transitions into A-Level study, with class, gender and ethnic differences observed. Progression into full-time further education study and A-Level study was less likely for working-class students and those not having previously studied an academic-oriented curriculum (e.g., the EBacc-eligible curriculum).² Furthermore, students from higher-class backgrounds (when compared to the 'routine' class grouping), who had highly educated parents, and whose parents owned their own homes had a higher probability of studying a 'facilitating' subject³ at A-Level. While being from a higher social class was associated with EBacc-eligible curriculum, type of curriculum did not account for the role of social class. Prior attainment offered a stronger account for class differences observed by Moulton et al., with the influence of social class and parental income no longer significant in explaining full-time study or whether studying an A-Level when GCSE

² The EBacc (English Baccalaureate) is a set of subjects – English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history, and a language – taken at GCSE that, according to the Department for Education (2019), aims to keep young people's options open for further study and future careers.

³ In 2011, the Russell Group of research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom published Informed Choices which specified a number of 'facilitating subjects' that can facilitate students' entry into highly selective universities. Facilitating subjects are natural sciences, mathematics, languages, history and geography (Russell Group, 2011). A full list of facilitating subjects is provided in appendix item 10.

attainment was considered. These findings reinforce prior research conducted on participation in further education. Dilnot (2016, p. 1081), in analysing the National Pupil Database (NPD), found 'large differentials in A-Level subject choice exist by social background, particularly for facilitating subjects' that disappear when GCSE attainment and subject choices are taken into account. In addition, Thompson (2009) analysed Youth Cohort Study (YCS) data to explore the relationship between social class and further education participation, with a particular focus on type of further education institution attended. This study observed higher levels of attendance at further education college and other further education institutions (e.g., sixth form college, school sixth forms) among students from higher social classes, with further education college attendance a product of low prior attainment for students from higher occupational groups. This compares to low-achieving students from lower social classes which were observed to typically depart education altogether.⁴ Yet, college attendance among young people from a higher social class was deemed as 'constructed as much from middle-class [educational] failure as from working-class advantage' (p. 31), with the middle-class tending to self-select out of attending further education colleges where prior attainment permits. Whereas, comparable high-achieving⁵ working-class students were twice as likely to attend a further education college and less likely to be in higher levels of study (level three) compared to their middle-class counterparts. Nonetheless, Thompson's study was able to dispel the perception of further education colleges as purely 'working-class institutions', showing that, although middle-class students disproportionately attend school sixth forms and sixth form colleges, they are well represented in further education colleges. However, to some extent, this concealed the concentration of students from higher social class backgrounds in more prestigious forms of further education provision, such as level three courses. All three studies are consistent with Avis and Orr's (2016) study of participation in less prestigious higher education provision delivered in further education institutions that found working-class students were disproportionately represented in such courses.

Collectively, these studies suggest a relationship between social class background and further education participation. However, the use of occupational measurements of social class across each study limits the ability to understand the social class-based mechanisms which underpin these disparities in further education participation, especially for scholars conceptualising social class as multi-dimensional (Savage et al., 2015). In particular, the role of economic, cultural, and social class-based resources, what Bourdieu conceptualises as

⁴ Defined as those attaining fewer than five GCSE passes at grade A*-C.

⁵ Defined as those attaining five or more GCSE passes at grade A*-C.

different species of capital, are unable to be explored. Despite the criticisms facing Bourdieusian sociology (see Jenkins, 1982; King, 2000), Thompson (2009, p. 41) did conclude by calling for further research to expand on existing research on further education participation and argued that 'a Bourdiesian framework would appear natural' for future work in this area. One reason for this is because of the ability, when using a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of social class, to distinguish or isolate the relative influence of the different forms of capital on educational participation. This study will develop this existing research via a mixed-methods study, which draws on the sociology of Bourdieu, to understand the relationship between social class background, further education participation, and decision-making during the school-to-college transition.

3.2. Decision-making during the school-to-college transition

Existing research which has investigated how young people choose what to study when entering further education has foregrounded the role of social class in such decisions, in addition to gender (e.g., Bates, 1991; Colley et al., 2003; Colley, 2006) and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity (see Avis et al., 2017). Much of this research is positioned in opposition to human capital theory (Schutz, 1961; Becker, 1993) and rational choice theory (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1998), both of which depict educational decision-making as a highly individual process wherein young people make instrumentally rational decisions. Fevre et al. (1999), and later authors (Brown et al., 2020), take issue with this perspective for several reasons, yet of relevance to this study is its foregrounding of economic rationality as the basis for young people's decision-making in education, with the perceived economic outcomes of educational pathways and qualifications available to young people claimed as the core principle informing choices made. Fevre et al. (1999) argued that sociological alternatives offer greater utility in understanding decision-making in education, especially in post-compulsory (now post-secondary) education where greater choice is available to young people. This is because such a perspective takes account of all the factors which inform the dispositions of young people which shape their relationship to education and training, including socio-historical, geographical, cultural, and social factors.

Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) sociological theory of careership offers a sociological alternative to theoretical approaches which emphasise the primacy of the individual, whilst ignoring the 'specific socially and economically structured contexts' decisions are made in (Reay, 1996, p. 581). Drawing on the sociology of Bourdieu and the concepts of habitus and disposition, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997; see also Hodkinson, 2008) argue decision-

making in education is simultaneously 'rational', in a pragmatic sense, and subjective. This is because decisions take place within specific horizons for action, by which they refer to 'the [social] arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made' (p. 35). Any single individual's horizons for action – or perceptions of what is and is not possible for them – reflect 'the standpoint of the person concerned' and 'the external education and labour market' (p. 36). This 'standpoint' is what Bourdieu refers to as social position or condition and comes to fundamentally shape the way through which individuals see, make sense of, and experience the world they inhabit (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992). Individuals can therefore make, what Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997, p. 41) refer to as, pragmatically rational decisions in the sense that they make choices 'within their culturally-derived horizons for action' at key turning points in education (e.g., the school-to-college transition). Reay (1996) posits a similar argument, in her study of parental decision-making, when stating that 'individuals act in specific circumstances not in a vacuum' (p. 583) and all choices are framed by 'social location, gender, 'race', class and geography' (p. 590). The extent to which dispositions to education (and other areas of social life) transform overtime is moreover associated with the social, economic, and cultural contexts within which learning takes place (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000).

Both understandings of decision-making come very close to, and indeed draw upon, Bourdieu's concept of habitus and how this frames decisions and choices, which is adopted in this study as an explanatory framework for educational decision-making. Habitus is the way an individual's practical sense and action – their being and seeing in the world – differs by social position. Bourdieu's conceptual framework, especially habitus, is not uncommonly criticised for minimising the role which individual agency operates over individual practice, with critics arguing it foregrounds structural forces (e.g., Jenkins, 1982; see also Sayer, 2005). Indeed, it is for this reason that there have been many recent attempts to combine Bourdieu's sociology with more agentic theories of human behaviour, such as rational choice theory (see Glausser and Cooper, 2014). In spite of these criticisms, Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) drew upon Bourdieu's concepts of schemes of perception, disposition and 'feel for the game' which are central to the concept of habitus. These constitute habitus and come to frame what is deemed possible and appropriate in any particular field and embody the social conditions under which they were formed. Thus, where young people encounter a turning point in education (i.e., the school-to-college transition) the options and opportunities available to them are perceived through a socially-situated scheme of perception, or habitus. Bourdieu's sociology is thus used in this study as an explanatory framework through which to understand young people's decision-making in the school-to-college transition, and

importantly how social class comes to shape this process through the actions and perceptions of students. Whilst criticisms of Bourdieu's conceptual framework are considered, as will be discussed in chapter 4, his epistemological perspective is highly suited to a study of the relationship between social class, decision-making in the school-to-college transition and further education participation and experience.

Ball et al.'s (2000) study of post-secondary transitions in London provided early support for the sociological theory of careership developed by Hodkinson and Sparkes. In this study, the notion of 'horizons for action' was shown to be a valuable concept for explaining how 'the possibilities and probabilities of a "future" are constituted differently within the different social-class contexts' of participants (p. 145). Similar to pragmatic rationality, the concept of horizons for action is underpinned by a contextual understanding of decision-making and an appreciation of the constraints bearing on behaviour which render action possible or appropriate for individuals. This is best demonstrated in the working-class students interviewed who 'do not display a totally reconstructed sense of possibilities and aspirations' in relation to post-secondary education and who make up all students classified as socially-excluded. Middle-class students were also shown to have less straightforward relationships to education than conventionally understood, but in these cases familial resources enabled new possibilities and avenues to ameliorate the negative experiences of this more effectively (e.g., learning fatigue). More recent research has demonstrated the way through which socially differentiated opportunity structures available to the individual can shape the choice, or lack of ability to choose, for young people. In a study of opportunities available for students in secondary school sixth forms, Abrahams (2018, p. 1143) found students from socio-economically disadvantaged areas attended schools which offer more limited opportunities for GCSE and A-Level study. Schools attended by socio-economically disadvantaged pupils tended to have 'blocking systems which restrict subject options', thus constraining the decision-making of students regarding what to study. This had implications for future educational and career trajectories, as the heightened availability of facilitating subjects in schools attended by socio-economically advantaged students can more easily facilitate entry into 'elite' universities associated with stronger labour market outcomes (Belfield et al., 2018; Britton et al., 2020). Atkins (2017) further supported Hodkinson and Sparkes' theory in studying young people's motivations to study vocational qualifications. This research showed that 'social positioning is significant in its relationship to decision making, the way in which young people perceive and construct their [educational] careers, the pathways and trajectories taken by them, and the way in which they exerted their agency through the decision-making process' (p. 642). Thus, there is empirical research which

supports the adoption of a more sociological approach to understanding the educational decision-making, which underpins class-based patterns of participation in further education.

Yet, most work on educational decision-making drawing on the sociology of Bourdieu has focused on higher education (e.g., Thatcher et al., 2018), with work using Hodgkinson and Sparkes's careership theory limited in their selection of students typically studying a single educational pathway (e.g., Atkins, 2017). What this prevents is a comparison between students on different educational trajectories in further education, both within the same institution and across different institutions, to understand how school-to-college transitions are shaped by social class. Moreover, these studies are limited in adopting restrictive indicators of social class, typically only drawing on a measure of occupational background, which limits the capacity of studies to fully explore the role of social class as theorised by scholars like Bourdieu. There is therefore a need for further research to understand the specific mechanisms underlying the social-class based school-to-college transitions. This is an area of importance given the significance of this transition to future study and labour market outcomes, the former of which has received considerable attention within the sociology of education relative to further education. Thus, whilst recognising the critical reception Bourdieu's conceptual framework and its explanatory framework has received regarding determinism (e.g., Jenkins, 1982), it is adopted in this study to inform analysis of student decision-making during the school-to-college transition because of its ability to oscillate between structure and agency when investigating social class educational inequality (Atkinson, 2020). Specifically, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is drawn upon to help understand the way through which social class background comes to mediate, through practice, decision-making in the school-to-college transition.

3.3. Further education experience and social class

There has been a similar lack of exploration of the further education college experience, at the same time as the study of higher education student experience has risen in academic and policymaker interest. In summarising the long-standing literature on social class and educational experience, Reay (2017, p. 74) explains 'if you are poor, you are likely to have less-experienced and less-qualified teachers than more privileged students have, as well as poorer educational facilities'. Moreover, there is much debate of the role educational institutions themselves can have on the student experience and access to opportunities, with much of this drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual tools (see Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001; 2010; Atkinson, 2011; Burke et al., 2016; Abrahams et al., 2018 for further information). Yet, this body of the research draws overwhelming from sectors of education other than further

education. Of the few studies which have explored students' experiences of further education, particularly further education colleges, the majority have not focused on social class.

However, Ball et al. (2000) argue that prior literature neglected the highly experiential nature of post-secondary trajectories, with education and/or work one element of the diverse lives of young people in England, with other arenas (e.g., leisure and social lives) being just as important to many young people as their educational lives. The opportunity to engage in different arenas and execute self-realisation through leisure and social pursuits is shown to be 'unevenly distributed' according to 'personal, professional and familial "coping" resources' (p. 148), thus illustrating classed further education experiences which stretch beyond the colleges' walls. Existing research on higher education participation has demonstrated how access to and participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) is distributed unequally across social class groups (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Wright & Mulvey, 2021). What such research shows is that students from higher occupational class backgrounds are able to draw on extended economic, cultural, and social resources to supplement course-based learning experiences. Research has not, however, investigated participation in ECA in further education, despite the importance such activities can have in the construction of personal statements for university admissions (UCAS, 2021) and, as Ball et al. (2000) assert, the significance of these such experiences to students when undertaking post-secondary education.

Other studies have focused more broadly on the student experience whilst studying at college, with much recent literature exploring the social dimensions of learning via the notion of 'learning cultures' (Avis, 2006; Hodkinson et al., 2007; James and Biesta, 2007; Postlethwaite & Maull, 2007; James & Wahlberg, 2007). Borrowing from Bourdieusian sociology, particularly his concepts of habitus and field, the concept of learning cultures foregrounds the social practices through which individuals learn as fundamental to the learning process. This contrasts with conventional accounts of learning that treat it as an individual and/or cognitive process. Instead, the learning cultures approach appreciates how the set of beliefs and rules of practice characterising learning contexts are also part of what is learnt by the learner during the course of their education (see James, 2014). The learning cultures individuals are situated within 'permit, promote, inhibit or rule out certain kinds of behaviour', whilst also being shaped by the learners occupying them and the wider field within which it is situated (James and Biesta, 2007, p. 28). Beyond the *Transforming*

Learning Cultures (TLC) in Further Education project that gave rise to the literature cited above, most research on further education student experience, as opposed to teaching and learning processes, offers limited understanding of the relationship between social class and experience in further education. For example, whilst Hodkinson & Bloomer (2000, p. 200; see also Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997) illustrated 'the influence of socially and culturally grounded experiences outside formal education, related to family, peer groups, home and employment' on the learning dispositions of learners in their study of college students, other studies have been more descriptive of the general student experience.

Hyland and Merrill (2003) explain that incorporation redefined the relationship between students and college to a customer-client contractual relationship. In describing the student experience, though, there is little explicit discussion of how social class shapes the further education college experience. College students are typically found to speak positively when comparing college to secondary school, spotlighting how the relationship to teachers is more informal and friendly and the added freedom enjoyed (ibid.). Such relationships and the learning environment they nurture are suggested to be beneficial for students' self-esteem, self-development, and enjoyment of learning. Yet, college study was demanding for students, and this was exacerbated by the part-time employment undertaken to deal with the financial hardship of being a college student (e.g., registration fees, course materials). Undertaking such work was felt to change the learning experience and have negative effects on progress in one's studies.

Similar to other prior research, beyond this discussion of financial hardships, there is little discussion by Hyland and Merrill of how college experiences were associated to social class background. Given the extension of free education until 18 years of age today, which took place following many of the aforementioned studies, there is a need to understand the extent to which financial difficulties still resonate as an issue for students, particularly those from lower social classes, and/or whether other class processes and mechanisms come to shape the student experience in further education. As previously noted, abundant research within the sociology of education has drawn on the theoretical tools offered by Bourdieusian sociology to investigate and make sense of the relationship between social class and educational experience (e.g., Reay et al., 2010; Burke et al., 2016; Abrahams et al., 2018). It is for this reason that a Bourdieusian perspective and his conceptual triad of habitus, capital, and field, is adopted to investigate the further education student experience in this study.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed existing research on the relationship between social class and further education participation, decision-making during the school-to-college transition, and the further education student experience. This has shown that, whilst developments in the knowledge base have taken place in recent years, and in some cases decades, there is considerable scope for furthering the study of social class further education inequalities. Specifically, this literature review has shown: (a) the lack of study of social class disparities in transitions into and experience of further education contexts, especially in the past decade; and (b) the value of considering the wider socio-cultural class influences which inform how students experience further education, including teaching and learning within and other experiences external to the college. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to these identified gaps in existing knowledge on further education participation and social class educational inequalities by investigating the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between social class background and further education student participation?
2. How are school-to-college transition decisions/choices made by further education students and what is the role of social class background in this process?
3. What are the envisaged educational trajectories and aspirations of further education students and what is the role of social class in their formation?
4. In what ways does social class background shape the student experience of further education contexts?
5. What is the relationship between social class background and participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) and access to work experience during further education study?

As has been outlined throughout this chapter, the theoretical ideas of Pierre Bourdieu are used in this study to analyse and understand the relationship between social class, the school-to-college transition, and the student college experience. This theoretical position is outlined in the following chapter, which also summarises the methodological approach adopted to answer the research questions stated above.

Chapter 4: Methods

This chapter begins by outlining Bourdieu's epistemological perspective adopted in this study and how it has informed the selection of research design and methods. In addition to a discussion of the research design and methods chosen, the approach to data analysis and sampling is outlined, followed by a consideration of ethical issues.

4.1. Epistemological Perspective

In my research I am interested in how social class impacts on how students *participate in* and *experience* further education contexts. Underlying this interest is an assumption, informed by the theoretical and research literature, that social class 'more or less suffuses everything we do' (James, 2018, p. 233; see also Sayer, 2005). My interest in the framing of experience in further education settings by social class is indicative of a rejection of wholly objectivist approaches to the social world. However, the importance given to social class and the structures which determine how class is 'played out' in the social world also shows the limited support extended to a fully constructivist tradition. Structures are argued to exist in society, and these interact with the actions and subjectivities of individuals, which are themselves structured, to some extent, to inform practice. Furthermore, it is recognised that purely economic conceptualisations of *social* class place limits on the study of social class inequality. Only through combining economic dimensions of social class with its cultural and social aspects can a fuller understanding of the operation of social class inequalities be gained.

It is through recognising the relation between structure and agency, and the multi-dimensional nature of social class, that Bourdieu's 'theory-as-method' is adopted in this study (Grenfell and James, 1998). In *Social Space and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu (1989, p. 14) positions himself as a 'structural constructivist':

By structuralism, or structuralist, I mean that there exist, within the social world itself... objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents [the field], which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations. By constructivism, I mean that there is a twofold social genesis, on the one hand schemes of perception, thought and action which are constitutive of... habitus, and on the other hand of social structures... notably those we ordinarily call social class.

Bourdieu positions this approach as occupying the middle space between objectivist and subjectivist approaches through recognising how:

on the one hand, the objective structures that the sociologist constructs, in the objectivist moment, by setting aside the subjective representations of the agents, form the basis for these representations and constitute the structural constraints that bear upon interactions: but, on the other hand, these representations must also be taken into consideration particularly if one wants to account for the daily struggles, individual and collective, which purport to transform or to preserve these structures (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 15).

It is through his conceptual triad of habitus, field, and capital(s) that an oscillation between objectivism and subjectivism is achieved (Swartz, 1997). Habitus refers to 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. vii). This represents the embodiment of structural conditions of existence and leads to the construction of generative schemes of perception and a grammar for 'being, seeing, acting and thinking' in the social world (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 27). It is habitus which provides the governing practical sense by which individuals participate and act in social life. However, social practice is neither free nor completely determined; it is instead *mediated* via the habitus (Mahar et al., 1990). Thus, whilst it is theoretically possible to speak of group habitus and theoretical classes (Bourdieu, 1998) shared by those from similar conditions of existence, each habitus will have an element of uniqueness based on the conditions of origin and its subsequent trajectory. Although permissible to adaptation and change:

...objective structures tend to produce structured subjective dispositions that produce structured action which, in turn, tend to reproduce objective structure (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997, p. 203).

It is within field(s), and the inclusion or exclusion of the self from fields, that the habitus comes to elaborate its underlying social conditions and manifests as a structure influencing practice and experience. Field refers to 'a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions' which are 'objectively defined' by the possession and composition of 'species of power' or capital(s) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Bourdieu conceived of three forms of capital – economic, social, and cultural – the possession and composition of which defines the social class position an individual occupies. Fields are fundamentally *fields of struggle* between different classes and produce resistance in addition to reproduction. However, the relationality between habitus and field means that the latter are seldom sites for transformation of the former (Swartz, 1997). Instead, the habitus, and the capital(s) it fosters, come to define what is (im)possible within fields. Whilst distinct, the forms of capital are mutually convertible and it is the conversion between capitals, especially the conversion of economic capital into other forms, which enables social advantage to

materialise in fields in a seemingly legitimate way. For example, the use of economic capital (i.e., wealth) to purchase elite, independent schooling (cultural capital) that can facilitate lucrative educational and employment trajectories, which is misrecognised as innate ability. It is the possession of and conversion between capitals which enables those from privileged social classes to dominate legitimate fields, monopolise the resources available within them and reproduce their social position. Whilst fields are relatively autonomous from the external forces mediating participation within them (e.g., habitus, capitals), a structural homology exists between fields, with fields connected via the sharing of the same isomorphic properties. This means that ‘those who find themselves in dominated positions in the struggle for legitimation in one field tend also to find themselves in subordinate positions in other fields’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 130). Likewise, those in dominant positions in one field, reflecting their heightened stocks of economic, cultural and/or social capital, will often find themselves in similar positions in other fields. This homology exists as a product of the ‘field of power’, which operates as an organising principle of differentiation and struggle throughout all fields in society (Atkinson, 2020). Within the field of power, those in possession of differing compositions of dominant economic and cultural capital endlessly struggle for control of the organising principles underpinning positioning in social life and throughout all social fields (either economic or cultural capital). Therefore, it is through the dialectical relationship inherent in habitus, field, and capital(s) that social practice comes to be fundamentally classed and whereby social class ‘suffuses everything we do’ (James, 2019, p. 233).

The epistemological perspective outlined above has informed the methodological development of this research study, including the selection of a mixed-methods design in this study. Bourdieu was not methodologically prescriptive regarding how to study the social world and individual social practice, instead arguing that research methods should be chosen based on its appropriateness to address research questions posed. Consistent with this, Bourdieu’s sentiment towards research design is indicated via the following quote:

[The] scientific enterprise is based on the belief that the deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality... with the objective of constructing it as a “special case of what is possible” (1998, p. 2).

Therefore, while Bourdieu drew on a wide range of research methods and data types (e.g., Bourdieu, 1979), he too identified the importance of studying particular cases of a general pattern of interest. For example, by studying social class further education inequality by

focusing on specific institutional contexts to ascertain a particular case of potentially wider social processes. Moreover, rather than subscribing to a particular methodological preference, Bourdieusian research instead commits to a form of reflexive practice, which emphasises the importance of considering the social conditions of the research process irrespective of the research methods chosen (Robbins, 2019), in addition to the exercising of radical doubt which must be minimised via further study (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu, 1998). As is outlined in the forthcoming sections, there is considerable congruence between the underlying tenets of mixed-methods research and Bourdieu's methodological pragmatism. It is for this reason that a mixed-methods design, comprised of quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interview data collection, was selected in this study to answer research questions posed.

4.2. Research Design

This research adopted a sequential, mixed-methods approach to data collection, drawing upon survey and semi-structured interviewing.⁶ Primary survey data was used to address research question one, while the primary interview data will address all remaining questions. A sequential approach was adopted, meaning that survey data collection was completed before interviews were conducted.⁷ This allowed those students who indicated a willingness to participate in interviews during the survey to be contacted and a sample drawing from different social class backgrounds to be recruited. Consistent with the explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Clark, 2006), data analysis was also planned to be sequential through quantitative data analysis being conducted before the qualitative data analysis in order to allow for the latter to be informed by the data from which it stemmed. However, whilst a sequential approach consistent with explanatory mixed-methods research was planned in this study, this was not possible because of data access issues and research restrictions imposed during the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, this meant that quantitative and qualitative data analysis was conducted simultaneously.

⁶ Secondary analysis of linked Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and Department for Education (DfE) National Pupil Database (NPD) data was planned for this project. An application to access this data was begun in September 2019. However, in light of the coronavirus pandemic and the significant delays in receiving assistance from the UK Data Archive (UKDA) who store this data, the decision was taken to abandon the use of secondary data in this study.

⁷ Yet, there were some exceptions. For example, in some participating further education colleges there was a delay to data collection due to internal institutional disruptions. Furthermore, students who were willing to participate in interviews but who did not complete the survey were asked to complete the survey after their interview.

In adopting a mixed-methods research design, the value of both quantitative and qualitative methods in attending to different ‘problems of interest’ is recognised (Johnson, 2007, p. 113). Whilst survey research is necessary to provide numerical data on the dynamics of participation across different areas of further education provision, its limitations in studying *experience*, as opposed to (numerical) participation levels, are appreciated. Cooke et al. (2007, p. 419) concluded that questions of experience would be more effectively addressed using qualitative methods, such as interviewing (Denzin, 1989). Furthermore, Usher and Bryant (1986, p. 108) add that if experience is treated ‘in a formal way that is dictated by the empirical and procedural requirements’ of the researcher then ‘the complexity, contingency, and self-constituted nature of experience itself’ is neglected. Whilst it is important to ensure areas of prior interest and theoretical relevance are included in any interview schedule designed, semi-structured interviewing enables for ‘meanings and interpretive frames that go beyond the predetermined structure’ to not be ignored (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 19). This bears resemblance to Bourdieu’s assertion that findings *produced* in research are associated with the questions posed and sociological practice is shaped, like social practice more broadly, by the very conditions within which it is formulated (Robbins, 2019).

The selection of different methods to address different research questions posed is consistent with much contemporary usage of mixed-methods research in the social sciences (Johnson et al., 2007). The survey element provides descriptive data on the student’s social class background. Semi-structured interviewing, on the contrary, provides richer accounts of the meaning present in participants’ lived experience of further education contexts (Kvale, 1996). However, speaking of the different forms of data as distinct is fallacious because the survey was used in conjunction with qualitative data to understand how social class is important to further education experience (Denscombe, 2008). Without measuring social class via the former, the ability to explore research questions posed using the latter would be limited.

In addition to the questions posed, the methods chosen are suited to the epistemological perspective adopted. Unlike many who see the philosophical underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative methods as incompatible; as noted above, Bourdieu’s epistemological positioning is not methodologically prescriptive (Grenfell and James, 1998). Importantly, the development of a new measurement of social class in this study is reflective of the epistemological perspective adopted. Available data sources on further education participation (e.g., NPD; MCS) all draw upon economic conceptualisations of social class

(e.g., NS-SEC), which whilst a useful proxy for socio-economic (dis)advantage (Taylor, 2018; Laurison and Friedman, 2019), is limited in its exposition of the different components which make up social class position. Given the incongruity between this study's epistemological perspective and existing measurements of social class, a primary survey was conducted to operationalise social class using Bourdieu's economic, cultural, and social capitals. This was used to classify students into a particular social class grouping, which facilitated a class-based analysis of semi-structured interview data collected.

Both research methods developed in this study are outlined in further detail below.

4.3. Research Method(s)

4.3.1. Survey

A self-completion, mobile and/or computer-assisted survey was conducted in this study (see appendix 2).⁸ The choice to conduct primary survey research was based on the limited application of Bourdieu, or socio-cultural approaches to social class, in contemporary social surveys (Savage et al., 2013). Surveys gather a range of information, from 'factual' to attitudinal (May, 2011, p. 94), with this survey designed to primarily indicate students' social class background (e.g., factual information). Student responses informed the conduct of semi-structured interviews conducted in two ways: firstly, through identifying the level of economic, cultural, and social resources present in each interviewee's family background (e.g., parental education); and secondly by showing attitudes towards certain topics that could be probed further during interviews (e.g., attitudes towards schooling or 'elite' higher education).

For logistical reasons, it was not always possible to attend in person to facilitate the collection of all survey data. However, where this was not possible, clear guidelines for conducting the surveys, in addition to information and consent forms for students (appendix item 3), were provided to college gatekeepers. Survey data collection predominantly occurred during tutorial sessions where institutions allowed students to complete the survey. Some colleges allowed students to complete this survey during other periods at college (e.g., during lessons and breaks).

⁸ A preview of the online/mobile survey is available at the following link:
https://socsi.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_6eR3gqXX0r0VPIW?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current.

Questions asked in the survey to derive social class background are based on Bourdieu's (1996, p. 114) conceptualisation of social class, as defined by the composition of different forms of capital:

The primary differences, those which distinguish the major classes of conditions of existence, derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources and powers – economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital.

This definition was used in conjunction with prior research which has operationalised Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social class (e.g., Sullivan, 2003; Savage et al., 2013) to create indices for economic, cultural, and social capital. The engagement with prior research in formulating the operationalisation of capitals in this study was important to reduce the arbitrariness of the indicators chosen and to provide greater grounding in empirical research, most notably Sullivan (2003). The way each capital was operationalised in this study is outlined below and is subjected to further critical reflection in chapter 9 (see appendix item 4 for summary statistics for each index variable).

The measure of economic capital used in this survey is parental occupation. This was measured via an adapted NS-SEC five-class self-coded method (see **table 1**) (ONS, 2010). Students were asked to state each parent(s) or carer(s) job, which were then manually allocated to a SOC2010 occupational grouping. Conventionally, occupational grouping is derived via combining information on job role, size of employer, and performance of managerial duties. However, only job role was used in this survey given (a) the questionable reliability of students' responses on size of employer and performance of managerial duties, and (b) the need to create a refined survey instrument which was not overly burdensome for students.⁹ Based on the occupational allocation made, students were assigned an economic capital index score based on an average of both parents' occupational data (**table 1**).¹⁰ Ideally, measurements of economic capital would consist of multiple variables, including occupation, family income, and assets. Collecting additional data would have been somewhat unethical and difficult in this study, as such data is sensitive and personal, and

⁹ This is based on feedback collected during the pilot surveys conducted. Students explained that the initial survey was quite long and required shortening to maximise participation.

¹⁰ If one parents' occupation were among those classified as 'Skilled Trade Occupations' and the other parent worked in an 'Elementary Occupations' role, the economic capital index score for that student would total 8 ($12+4=16/2=8$).

young people are unlikely to have a sufficiently accurate grasp of parental income and family assets (Mills, 2014). Whilst it does have limitations as a single measurement of economic capital (Savage et al., 2013), occupational status is more convenient for data collection purposes and has a long tradition in sociological research adopting a Bourdieusian perspective (e.g., Savage, 2015; Laurison and Friedman, 2019). This is because it does not require personal and/or sensitive information and alone represents a more comprehensive measurement than viable alternatives, such as income.

Table 1: Conversion of SOC2010 occupational groupings into economic index score

SOC2010 Group	SOC2010 Occupational Group Title	Economic Index Score
1 2	'Managers, Directors and Senior Officials' 'Professional Occupations'	20
3 4	'Associate Professional and Technical Occupations' 'Administrative and Secretarial Occupations'	16
5	'Skilled Trade Occupations'	12
6 7 8	'Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations' 'Sales and Customer Service Occupations' 'Process, Plant and Machine Operatives'	8
9	'Elementary Occupations'	4
N/A	Unemployed	0

Cultural capital is widely considered the most contentious of the three capitals to measure (Burke, 2016), especially in survey research. This is because of the arbitrariness inherent to any measure designed to operationalise cultural capital; a point of criticism often lodged at Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital which hinders its application in quantitative sociology (Bradley, 2014; Mills, 2014). Reflecting this, as well as the importance of covering the embodied, institutionalised, and objectified elements of cultural capital, an adapted version of Sullivan's operationalisation of cultural capital, comprised of four indicators, was used to create a single cultural capital index score:

- *Parental education*: students were asked to state their parents' highest educational level on a five-point ordinal scale (see appendix item 2). For each categorical ascension in parental education student index scores increased by four points (e.g., PhD; DPhil scored 20). This was chosen as a measure because it represents an indication of institutionalised cultural capital and has a long history in research on social class educational inequalities.
- *Cultural knowledge test score*: students were asked to select the cultural domain (art, novels, politics, science, music) that 20 renowned cultural figures are primarily associated with. Each correct answer attracted a single increase in index score with

a maximum index score of 20 (e.g., 16 correct answers scored an index score of 16) (see appendix item 2). Whilst the list of cultural figures may be argued to be legitimating arbitrary cultural distinctions, the choice of this indicator attempts to approach embodied cultural capital and possession of, what might be deemed, legitimate cultural knowledge.

- *Number of books read outside of school*: students were asked the number of books they had read in their lives outside of college on a five-point ordinal scale (see appendix item 2). Each categorical ascension in number of books read received an index score increase of four (e.g., More than 16 scored 20). This indicator was selected because of its signification of a students' objectified cultural capital.
- *Passive and active vocabulary test scores*: students completed a set of questions examining passive and active vocabulary adapted from previous research conducted by Sullivan (2003). This is because a students' vocabulary can be regarded as suggestive of their embodied cultural capital. The former consisted of four questions asking students to provide up to five synonyms for a chosen word (see appendix item 2). The latter consisted of four questions wherein students were required to select an appropriate word from a list provided to complete a sentence (see appendix item 2). For the passive vocabulary test, each correct synonym for each question attracted an index score of one, with a maximum score of five for each question.¹¹ For the active vocabulary test, students received an index score increase of five for each correct word choice. An average vocabulary score was created using the two test scores.

Each of the individual indicators of cultural capital has a total score of 20, with an average cultural capital index score created for each student by dividing the sum of all four indicators by four (figure 1).

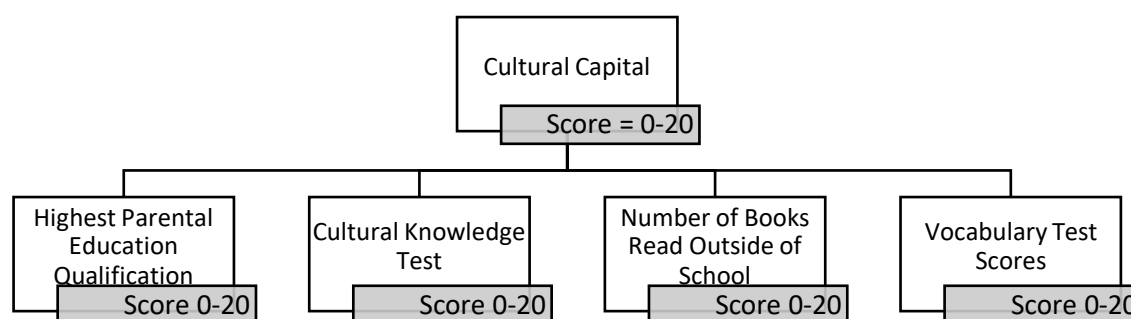


Figure 1: Survey indicators of cultural capital

¹¹ Synonyms provided by students were judged against listed synonyms for each word on <https://www.thesaurus.com/>.

Social capital is defined as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). In this survey, social capital was operationalised via the number of occupations known personally by the student from across the Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification (CAMSIS) scale (Lambert and Prandy, 2018). Students were asked whether they knew anyone working in 20 selected occupations ‘personally’ (**table 2**; see also Q10 appendix item 2). The 20 occupations were selected to represent different types of occupation from across the scale. This was decided to appreciate the relevance of the field within which one is situated to the ‘mobilisability’ of social capital resources (Wallace, 2016) and to avoid an ‘elitist’ view of social resources. Students received an increase of one index score per each occupation selected in the survey.

Whilst using a single measurement of social capital is recognised in chapter 9 as a limitation of the survey instrument, especially in preventing investigation of the mobilisation of social capital, this is difficult to explore in survey research using closed questioning. Indeed, it is for this reason that semi-structured interviewing, which investigated use of social capital, was used in this study.

Table 2: CAMSIS occupations used

Chief Executive Officer
Police Officer
Member of the Armed Forces
Engineer
Scientist
Doctor or Dentist (does not include nurse)
School or College Governor (not a student governor)
University Lecturer or Researcher
Primary or Secondary School Teacher
Barrister, Solicitor, or Judge
Shop Assistant
Pilot
Journalist
Care Worker
Unemployed Individual
Psychologist
University Student
Accountant
Administrator
Electrician or Plumber

A single social class index score was derived for each student by creating an average score derived from each capital index outlined above, with a maximum score of 60. This was used to classify respondents into class groups to aid qualitative data analysis (**table 3**). This approach enables for the plurality and difference within and between social class groups to be observed.

Table 3: Derived index score range for each social class category

Class Group	Derived Index Score
Lower Working Class	0-15
Higher Working Class	16-30
Lower Middle Class	31-45
Higher Middle Class	46-60

A summary of the social class index is provided in Figure 2. As discussed further in chapter 9, whilst the unevenness of the social class index is a limitation of this study, this reflects the difficulty in operationalising the different forms of capital, both in conceptual and practical terms. However, this does limit the surveys scope, both in terms of the dimensions of cultural and social capital it was able and not able to capture, in addition to the possibility that the social class index may reflect cultural distinctions more than social class defined in a multi-dimensional way. This is because of each indicator was allotted the same weight when creating the composite social class index.

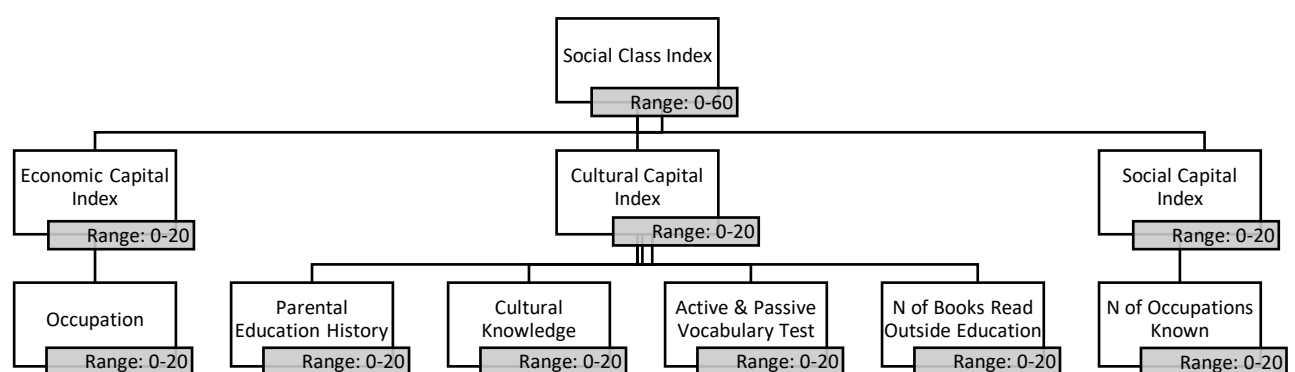


Figure 2: Summary of social class index

4.3.2. Survey Sample

A total of 1,120 students studying in nine further education colleges completed this survey (Table 4).¹² However, only students that provided complete data for each of the questions associated with the social class index were chosen for analysis, some of which were qualitative and required a sufficient level of clarity in responses given for coding to be conducted. For example, many students provided insufficient detail regarding each of their parents' occupations, which was unable to be converted using the NS-SEC occupational categorisation (ONS, 2010). Thus, the final sample totalled 659 after data cleaning. Whilst this represents a significant reduction in total sample, this decision ensured that the validity of data analysed, and subsequent conclusions drawn, could be enhanced.

Non-probability, volunteer sampling was used to recruit students to participate in this survey. A two-stage recruitment process was required to access students in this study: firstly, recruiting colleges to facilitate survey data collection and secondly, recruiting students to complete the survey via institutional gatekeepers sharing the survey link with students. A total of 52 institutions for which contact details were available were initially contacted, with nine committing to assist in conducting this survey. Once colleges agreed to facilitate survey data collection, arrangements were made with gatekeepers to disseminate the survey link, along with the student information sheet (see appendix item 3), to students at each respective institution. Typically, the survey was disseminated using internal communication systems (e.g., virtual learning environments, student email correspondence) and during classroom tutorials, where teaching staff permitted. Students were required to personally consent to participate in the survey data collection, irrespective of whether their institution had agreed, via the first question of the survey (see appendix item 2).

Participating institutions were geographically spread across England (see **table 4**). The English further education sector is comprised of 232 colleges (Association of Colleges, 2022), the majority (70%) of which are general further education colleges like those participating in this study. All of the colleges involved in the survey and interview component of this study were colleges of further education providing a highly diverse offering to its students, with sizeable student populations (**table 4**) and which span the academic-vocational divide.

¹² Appendix item 5 displays sample characteristics according to gender, ethnicity, eFSM, subject area, and level of qualification.

Table 4: Showing primary survey sample by college

College Name	Student Population**	Sample N	Sample %	Region
Upside	13,000	229	35	East Midlands
Eastern	11,000	165*	25	East
Shire	Unavailable	71	11	South East
Municipal	11,000	52	8	East
Norman	18,000	46	7	South East
Market	5,000	34	5	West Midlands
Central	12,000	24	4	South East
Northern	18,000	21	3	North West
Western	14,000	17	3	West
Total		659	100	

Note: Percentages have been rounded and therefore may not total 100%.

*Eastern College was a 'group' of colleges following several colleges merging. Students from three individual institutional sites – a main FE college site, a vocational college, and sixth form college – participated in this study. Of the 165 participating students from this site, 112 were studying at the main FE college, six were studying at the vocational site, and 47 were studying at the sixth form college site.

**Based on most recent and publicly available enrolment data. Enrolment figure has been rounded for purposes of anonymisation.

Of the nine institutions involved in the survey research, four (Eastern, Norman, Shire, and Western) are recent merger college 'groups' with the remaining five multi-campus colleges, with each campus typically focused on a particular area of the curriculum (e.g., sixth form campus delivering A-Level qualifications). Each college caters for a diverse student population, with all but two colleges (Market, Norman) located in cities across several different learning sites. Likewise, each college has a vast array of qualifications for school leavers, young adults, and adult learners spanning the academic-vocational divide, including A-Level, vocational (e.g., T-Levels, BTEC), and apprenticeship qualifications. Only Central College did not provide A-Level qualifications at the time of this study. Provision across all participating colleges is available on a part- and/or full-time basis and ranges from level one to higher education level. Some colleges, like Central College for example, provided secondary school-level provision.

As Table 4 shows, there was variability in the number of respondents from each respective college institution, with Upside and Eastern representing over half (60%) of the total sample. Whilst this potentially presents a sample bias towards those living in the East Midlands and East of England respectively, these two colleges themselves are consistent with the college

description provided above in terms of the curriculum areas and levels of qualification offered. However, the local areas of both colleges do possess some distinct characteristics, which are important to highlight to contextualise the young people participating in this study.

Upside College is located in an area previously known for its industrial production, where the economy is based mainly on tourism, public administration, farming, and commerce. This is reinforced by education and health consisting of over a third and tourism over a fifth of local employment. The local University has origins in the 19th century technical education sector and is a post-1992 institution. Located in the English county bordering that of Upside College, Eastern College is located in a largely rural area, with 40% of the population living in its four urban areas. Key sectors to the local economy are energy (including renewables), advanced engineering and manufacturing, and agriculture and farming. Although there is one main university in the local city centre, Eastern College boasts a higher education centre itself and the East of England is geographically proximate to a number of other higher education institutions. These colleges differ from others included in the sample, including Central, Northern, Shire, Western and to some extent Municipal which are all located in urban centres and cater for non-agricultural economies. Thus, whilst the sample obtained is sizeable and contains students from across England, there is an overrepresentation of students from the East and North East of England.

4.3.3. Survey Analysis

Chapter 5 presents findings from data analysis conducted on primary survey data using IBM SPSS Statistics, including bivariate (Chi-Square, Independent Samples T-Tests, ANOVA) and multivariate (binary logistic regression) statistical analysis. Statistical tests were selected according to level of measurement and variable characteristics (e.g., number of groups, whether equally distributed). All variables used in the analysis are summarised in **table 5** (additional information on the properties of each is available in appendix item 5).

Social class index score, instead of social class group, was used when conducting analysis to explore how single increases in capital possession are associated with outcome variables selected. This is also consistent with the epistemological perspective informing this research, given the emphasis placed on volume and composition of capital rather than group membership (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1997[1992]).

Table 5: Variables used in primary survey quantitative data analysis

Variable Name	Values / Responses
Level of qualification studied	Level One Level Two Level Three Level Four or Above
Level of qualification studied (2-Group)	Level Two or Below Level Three or Above
Whether studying an A-Level or not	Yes No
Area of study (Big N)	Business, Finance & Accounting Construction Creative Arts, Media, Fashion Engineering & Manufacturing Health, Social Care & Childcare A-Levels Other
Social Class Index Score	0-60
Economic Index Score	0-20
Social Capital Index Score	0-20
Cultural Capital Index Score	0-20
eFSM	Yes No
Gender	Female Male Other
Ethnicity (2-Group) ¹³	White British Any Other Ethnic Group (all non-White British groupings)

4.4. Semi-structured Interviewing

One-to-one semi-structured interviews¹⁴ were conducted with 22 students studying at one of three colleges, which engaged in survey data collection and subsequently agreed to facilitate qualitative data collection. These were Central College, Eastern College, and Western College (see appendix item 3 for further information on these institutions). Semi-structured interviewing oscillates between structured and unstructured interviewing, allowing structure and flexibility to characterise the interview encounter (Denzin, 1989). Interviews were conducted in a private space provided by the further education institution attended. While conducting interviews, wherein educational experience is discussed, in an educational

¹³ Due to low cell counts for middle-class ethnic minority students (N=28), further intersectional analysis exploring how social class and ethnic minority group shape whether one is studying A-Levels or not was not conducted. Originally, Millennium Cohort Study data was planned for further intersectional analysis, given its larger, more representative sample. However, difficulties in accessing secondary data, specifically the prevented this.

¹⁴ One interview was conducted with a learning assistant present. This is because the student had learning and communication difficulties and requested this. During this interview there was little involvement from the learning assistant, and they only provided clarification on a small number of occasions.

context might be problematic, this was chosen in order to adhere to ethical guidelines and to ensure students were in a familiar and safe context.

An interview schedule was used (see appendix item 6) to provide flexibility during the interview encounter, while simultaneously providing insights into research-informed pre-defined areas of interest (Bryman, 2011). As previously noted, Usher and Bryant (1986, p. 108) problematise the use of prescriptive data collection methods, whereby the research restricts the ability of the participant to divulge the 'self-constituted nature of experience'. Qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviewing, are more than a method of gathering information, but can be understood as productive processes, wherein meaning is produced and negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee (Denzin, 2001; Kvale, 1996). Furthermore, talk-based methods like interviews can assist in observing/identifying subtle clues in forms of expression, which may reveal underlying social processes, structures and positioning to contribute to a Bourdieusian understanding of the social world. However, it could be also argued that both the researcher and interviewee are socially situated in myriad ways, and this may inform the interview process (Mellor et al., 2013; Mao & Feldman, 2019), such as in discussions reflecting the researcher's preferences and sociological dispositions. Whilst this is an unavoidable feature of sociological practice, the use of an interview schedule which both ensures a level of consistency across interviews, but which also allows flexibility during the interaction and respecting student responses as explorable in their own right, creates an environment wherein more rigorous interviews can take place. Nonetheless, the data obtained is limited to those experiences and reflections which the participating students (a) could recall, (b) fall within the parameters of the discussions held with students, and (c) that can be expressed verbally by students.

The interview schedule consisted of four sections:

1. An introductory section
2. Educational decision-making, choices, and transitions
3. Educational experiences, attitudes, and understandings
4. Finishing section.

In addition to standard questioning, interviewees were invited to engage in reflective inquiries into their educational trajectory and vignettes regarding their future aspirations. The final question of each interview asked each interviewee to summarise their college and

secondary school experience using one word (see appendix item 6), which is displayed in figure 3 & 4 (p. 113). Interview length varied from 34-70 minutes with the average length totalling 46 minutes.

4.4.1. Interview Sample

A total of 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people studying in three further education institutions in England (participant information, including social class index score, is provided in **Table 6**).¹⁵ A volunteer sampling approach was adopted for interviewee selection. Interviewees were drawn from survey respondents who indicated a willingness to take part in a semi-structured interview about their college experiences. Interested students were purposefully selected to select students from a range of social class backgrounds, as indicated in the survey, to enable for potential social class differences in experience to be explored. Moreover, all interviewees were students in the first year of their chosen qualification because (a) reflections of their school-to-college transition would likely be more accurate and (b) comparisons between secondary school and college would not be impacted too heavily by a time lag.

Table 6: Interviewee summary

Pseudonym	College	Course	Social Class Grouping (index score)	Gender	Ethnicity
Jacob	Eastern Main	A-levels in Photography, English Language & Literature, and History	Working-class (29)	Male	Other (SE Asian)
Emma	Eastern Main	A-levels in Drama, English Language & Literature, and Sociology	Middle-class (31)	Female	White British
Hannah	Eastern Main	A-levels in Media Studies, Film, and History	Working-class (29)	Female	White British
Julie	Eastern Main	A-levels in Media Studies, Business, and Psychology	Working-class (26)	Female	White British
Charlotte	Eastern Sixth Form	A-levels in Biology, Chemistry, and Geography	Middle-class (38)	Female	White British
Chloe	Eastern Sixth Form	A-levels in Biology, Chemistry, and Environmental Science	Middle-class (50)	Female	White British
Zoe	Eastern Main	A-levels in Biology, English Language & Literature, and GCSE Mathematics	Middle-class (34)	Female	White British
Martin*	Eastern Main	A-levels in Mathematics, Further	Middle-class (30)	Male	White British

¹⁵ Data collection was planned to commence at a fourth college based in the North West of England in May 2020 (approximately 10 additional student interviewees). However, the COVID-19 public lockdown forced all data collection to cease in March 2020.

		Mathematics, and Geography			
Bella	Eastern Main	A-levels in English Language & Literature, Religious Studies, and Sociology	Working-class (18)	Female	Other White (Irish, Gypsy or Traveller, Other)
Scott	Eastern Vocational	A-levels in Mathematics, Psychology, and Film Studies	N/A**	Male	N/A
Alex	Eastern Vocational	Level 2 in Land-based technology	Working-class (23)	Male	N/A
Claire*	Eastern Vocational	Level 2 in Land-based Technology	Working-class (27)	Female	White British
Benjamin*	Eastern Main	Level 1 Building Crafts Occupations	N/A**	Male	N/A
Katherine*	Central	Level 2 in Art & Design	Working-class (29)	Female	Black African
Marianne	Central	Level 2 in Applied Science	Middle-class (49)	Female	Bangladeshi
Matthew*	Central	Level 3 in IT	Working-class (21.5)	Male	Mixed
Liam	Central	Level 3 in Engineering	Middle-class (35)	Male	Pakistani
Ethan	Central	Level 2 in Art & Design	Working-class (14)	Male	White British
Connor	Central	Level 2 in Engineering	Working-class (16)	Male	Black African
Ryan	Western	Level 2 in Aerospace Engineering	Working-class (29)	Male	White British
Zach	Western	Level 2 in Aerospace Engineering	Working-class (24)	Male	White British
Anthony	Western	Level 2 in Aerospace Engineering	Middle-class (36)	Male	White British

*Identified as having an ALN. **No survey response provided

Interviewees were accessed via institutional gatekeepers who had initially responded to expressions of interest sent to the college. The gatekeepers all worked as managerial staff within participating colleges. Where students had indicated an interest in participating within the survey, the names of these students were passed onto the gatekeeper to liaise with the respective student. This allowed the gatekeeper to first check whether the student remained interested in participating and, if so, arrange a date and time of interview which suited them. Gatekeepers at each participating college also assisted in the facilitation of data collection at their institution, such as by organising appropriate rooms at the college where interviews were conducted. To minimise the potential bias in gatekeeper selection or certain types of student self-selecting to participate, requests were made to interview a range of students, with varying educational and social backgrounds, as well as areas of further education provision, including both across curricula and levels. This meant that interviewees recruited were selected based on (a) consent, (b) indicative social class, and (c) educational profile. However, it is appreciated that delegating an element of sampling to institutional gatekeepers may have created issues of bias in the interview sample.

4.4.2. Interview Analysis

A multi-stage and iterative approach to analysing interview data was adopted drawing upon the principles of thematic analysis, given its theoretical and practical versatility (Braun and Clarke, 2006). NVIVO was used to organise interview data, yet much of the analysis

conducted was performed manually, whereby transcripts were physically read, cross-referenced, and themed. The analysis process drew on both survey and interview data in a sequential manner to investigate research questions posed. This is because the survey, through providing an indication of the students' social class background, enabled for patterns to be identified across interviewees, such as points of contrast and similarity.

Analysis began in this project during data collection, where analysis in the form of immediate reflections on interviews took place. Once all interviews were conducted (March 2020), an ongoing, iterative process of analysis built on initial reflections. This involved (re-)reading and (re-)listening of transcripts. Firstly, during transcription of interview data, an initial 'thinking-through' of data occurred (Oliver et al., 2005), where interesting areas of discussion were noted for future exploration, representing the "emergence" of preliminary insights. Following the transcription of all recordings, a further stage of familiarisation took place, involving focused reading of individual transcripts and noting down of patterns found across different transcripts. This stage supplemented the creation of codes during initial transcription. The 'individual trajectories' of interviewees were also constructed at this point using mind-maps as a visual tool of students' present and envisaged educational careers (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 11) (see appendix item 8 for an illustration). In addition, interesting or typical 'cases' of an emerging theme/pattern were also used as a point of comparison throughout analysis to understand the commonality of a given theme in the data (e.g., middle-class operationalisation of social capital).

Research question(s) and interview sections informed and helped the creation of codes and subsequent themes. Yet a flexible approach was adopted allowing inductive and theoretically informed themes to be constructed during analysis. Bourdieu's theoretical ideas informed the development of what Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 84) coin 'latent' themes. These went beyond students' own representations of their choice-making and experiences to examine 'underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations' (sic) informing their social action. This is consistent with the social constructivist epistemology adopted, which aims to 'theorise the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable individual accounts' (sic) provided by students (p. 85). Themes were based not only on prevalence, but also 'whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (p. 82). For example, access to social capital (discussed in chapter 8) was found predominantly amongst the middle-class students, representing less than half (N=9) of the study sample. Yet, this is significant in relation to research questions posed.

Thesis writing provided an additional stage of analysis, wherein data was engaged with in a way that reflected on the findings presented and arguments being made.

4.5. Ethical Reflections

This research obtained ethical approval from Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee (see appendix item 9). In line with the original aim of this study to use secondary data from the UK Data Archive, ethical clearance was required from both the Department for Education (DfE) and Office for National Statistics (ONS). Ethical training was received from the ONS, during which knowledge of research ethics was tested and certification provided (see ONS, 2016 for further information). Some further education institutions required a separate ethical clearance via an institutional ethics board. Below, the way in which this research complied with ethical principles expected of sociological and educational research is outlined.

4.5.1. Consent, Right-to-Withdraw and Transparency

Informed consent was obtained at multiple points in this study. Firstly, institutions were contacted to explain the intricacies of the study and requested to consent to participation. At this stage, the colleges agreeing to participate enquired into how the rights of student participants would be guaranteed. Before participating in the survey, prospective participants were *invited* to consent based on an information sheet provided to colleges (see appendix item 3). Thereafter, students were directed to provide consent via the first survey question (see appendix item 2). Where students were willing to participate in interviews, consent was confirmed before beginning the interview. This ensured that the participants were given opportunities to withdraw from the research process at multiple points in the data collection process.

4.5.2. Incentives

Incentives were used to aid recruitment of institutions and respondents in this study. Specifically, institutions were able to (a) request additional questions to be inserted into the survey, and (b) request data summaries for their specific institution. However, no such requests were made. Students responding to the survey were entered into a raffle wherein they could win Amazon vouchers. The use of these incentives was chosen as they were deemed 'commensurate with good sense' and did not 'impinge on the free decision to participate' (BERA, 2018, p. 19).

4.5.3. Harm, Confidentiality, Privacy and Data storage

Harm can be physical, psychological, and emotional, and/or reputational (BERA, 2018). To avoid any risk of physical harm to interviewees in this study, data collection was conducted in rooms situated within their respective college. In discussing personal experiences and difficulties students may have experienced during their educational career, this study may have posed risk of psychological and/or emotional harm to interviewees. Therefore, the condition of interviewees was routinely monitored during interviews, and it was made clear that interviewees did not have to answer any question they did not wish to. Reputational harm to participating students and institutions was also avoided in this study by ensuring that 'private data identifying the subjects will not be reported' using pseudonyms and password-protected data storage (Kvale, 1996, p. 114).

4.6. Pilot Research

Pilots were conducted for each primary data collection method. For the survey, two pilots were conducted, one in an English college and another in a Welsh college. The first pilot consisted of trialling the first version of the survey on a class of students. Students were studying level 2-5 qualifications and were invited to give feedback on the survey after completing it. The second pilot was conducted on a group of student representatives within a college who were invited to attend a workshop, wherein they completed the survey and offer feedback. These pilots enabled for the computer and mobile version of the survey to be trialled and for some questions to be revised to enhance the survey's accessibility. Changes made to the survey, included:

- Re-formatting questions to reduce the total number of questions.
- Where appropriate, changing question type to reduce the amount of manual typing required.
- Placing the potential answers for Q8 below the incomplete sentence and underlining the words rather than placing the potential answers bracketed within the sentences.

One pilot interview was conducted, with the first interview conducted also explicitly reserved for reflection. Furthermore, given the use of semi-structured interviewing in this study, new discussion points, probes and topics emerged throughout the data collection period which provided further avenues through which the research questions could be explored in later interviews. The key change made following the pilot interview was removing questions from the interview schedule and replacing these, in most cases, with interviewer probes. This was

to reduce the structured nature of the process and create a more relaxed environment for the interviewer and interviewee.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the sequential mixed-methods research study being conducted drawing upon the theory-as-method of Bourdieu. The study uses surveys and semi-structured interviewing to explore the relationship between social class and student participation in and experience of further education contexts. In the forthcoming chapters, the findings of this research study are presented.

Chapter 5: Student participation at Eastern, Central, and Western College

In this chapter, research question one is investigated – “what is the relationship between student social class background and further education participation in England?” (p. 11, 54). Specifically, this chapter addresses the following sub-questions:

1. What is the relationship between social class background and level of qualification studied among students?
2. What is the relationship between social class background and A-Level study?
3. What is the relationship between social class background and vocational subject choice?
4. What is the relationship between economic, cultural, and social capital and level of qualification studied, whether studying A-Levels and vocational subject area chosen?

As discussed in chapter 4, previous research has suggested that social class background is associated with further education study in terms of level of study, type of institution attended, and choice of academic or vocational study (Thompson, 2009; Dilnot, 2018; Moulton et al., 2018). However, Thompson did also dispel the perception of further education colleges as working-class institutions, instead showing that although middle-class students disproportionately attend school sixth forms and sixth form colleges, they are well represented in further education colleges. Yet these studies have made use of limited measurements of social class (e.g., NS-SEC). In explaining his findings, Thompson drew upon Bourdieu’s conceptual repertoire, yet the quantitative analyses, whilst of use, was based entirely on occupational class differences. As a consequence of these limitations, this chapter draws on primary survey data collected from 659 students studying in nine further education institutions, which makes use of an indicator informed by an understanding of class that includes various forms of capital (see chapter 4 for further information on the social class index). The chapter goes beyond investigating the role of social class background, in purely occupational terms, on participation in further education by examining the role of each form of capital (economic, cultural, and social capital) in shaping further education participation. This will enable a more nuanced understanding of the role of social class on further education student participation. This builds on prior sociological research that has developed capital-based analyses of social class inequalities (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Savage et al., 2013, 2015). Moreover, it builds on the limited application of capital in quantitative educational research, where only Sullivan (2003; 2007) has attempted to develop an innovative scale for cultural capital.

Firstly, this chapter explores the relationship between social class and level of qualification, before investigating whether social class background is significantly associated with whether a student is studying A-Levels and selected vocational areas of study. In all sections, the relative importance of each form of capital is investigated.

5.1. Level of Qualification and Social Class

Table 7 and **8** present findings from an analysis of variance (ANOVA) test exploring whether differences in the mean social class index scores for each level of qualification are statistically different.

Table 7: Mean social class index score by level of qualification studied

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig. (Between Groups)
Level One	70	21.97	8.56	24.806	.000*
Level Two	143	23.64	8.91		
Level Three	392	28.36	8.36		
Level Four or Above	29	33.69	8.34		
Total	634*	26.83	8.97		

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded.

Missing=25.

Average social class index scores are shown to increase as level of qualification increases, with a mean of 21.97 for level one students (SD = 8.56), 23.64 for level two students (SD = 8.91), 28.36 for level three students (SD = 8.36) and 33.69 for students studying a level four qualification or above (SD = 8.34). This shows that mean scores for students studying level one and two qualifications are below the sample mean (26.83, SD = 8.97), whereas those studying qualifications at level three and level four or above are above the sample mean. The differences observed in mean social class index scores are shown to be statistically significant ($F = 24.806$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$) (**table 7**).

Table 8 explores these statistical differences further by investigating which group differences in mean social class index scores are significantly different. This shows that all group differences between level of qualification student groups are statistically significant, excluding differences between (a) level one and two student groups and (b) level three and level four student groups.

Table 8: Scheffe Multiple Comparisons Output for table 6 ANOVA

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Level One	Level Two	-1.67	.615
	Level Three	-6.38	.000*
	Level Four or Above	-11.72	.000*
Level Two	Level Three	-4.72	.000*
	Level Four or Above	-10.05	.000*
Level Three	Level Four or Above	-5.34	0.15*

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean difference values rounded.

These findings suggest that, in the sample studied, there is a statistically significant difference in mean social class index scores between further education students studying different levels of qualification. Differences observed between level one and level two are not significant, yet significant differences are found between level one and level three or above. This suggests that the social class constitution of levels one and two do not vary substantially, whereas significant differences exist between average social class index scores between lower and higher levels of study.¹⁶

Tables 9-14 present findings from analyses exploring the relationship between mean index scores for each respective capital – economic, cultural, and social capital – and level of qualification studied.

Table 9: Mean economic capital index score by level of qualification studied

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig. (Between Groups)
Level One	70	10.09	5.49	2.70	.047*
Level Two	143	9.85	5.30		
Level Three	392	10.83	4.79		
Level Four or Above	29	12.24	4.49		
Total	634	10.59	5.00		

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean, Std. Deviation and F values rounded. Missing=25.

Table 9 shows that the relationship between economic capital index score and level of qualification studied is not completely linear. For example, students studying level one

¹⁶ **Table 42** (appendix item 10) shows that there is a statistically significant difference between mean social class index scores for those studying level two qualification or below and level three qualifications or above.

qualifications report slightly higher mean economic capital scores than those studying level two qualifications. These mean differences are found to be marginally statistically significant ($F = 2.70$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$), with all individual group comparisons (**table 10**) shown to be insignificant.¹⁷ Therefore, the relationship between economic capital and level of qualification studied is marginal and can be deemed spurious.

Table 10: Scheffe multiple comparisons output for table 9 ANOVA

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Level One	Level Two	.24	.991
	Level Three	-.74	.725
	Level Four or Above	-2.16	.279
Level Two	Level Three	-.98	.255
	Level Four or Above	-2.40	.135
Level Three	Level Four or Above	-1.41	.536

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean difference values rounded.

Tables 11 and **12** present similar analyses exploring the relationship between cultural capital index score and level of qualification studied. **Table 11** shows a clearer relationship between cultural capital index score and level of qualification studied in further education, where level of cultural capital increases as level of qualification increases. Mean cultural capital index scores for students studying level one and level two qualifications are below the sample average, whereas those studying level three and level four or above qualifications report average scores above the sample mean. These mean score differences are statistically significant ($F = 26.380$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 11: Mean cultural capital index score by level of qualification studied

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig. (Between Groups)
Level One	70	8.23	3.62	26.38	.000*
Level Two	143	9.16	3.62		
Level Three	392	11.30	3.58		
Level Four	29	12.76	3.47		
Total	634	10.55	3.80		

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded. Missing=25.

¹⁷ An alternative post-hoc group comparisons statistical test, Tamhane's T2, was conducted not assuming equal variance between groups. As shown in **table 43** (appendix item 10) no group comparisons were statistically significant.

Yet, further analysis of group differences in mean cultural capital scores (**table 12**) demonstrate that differences observed between students studying (a) level one and two qualifications and (b) level three and four qualifications are not statistically significant. Thus, this would suggest that as with overall social class index score, there are significant differences observed between lower (level one and two) and higher (level three and four) qualifications, rather than within these two groupings.¹⁸

Table 12: Scheffe multiple comparisons output for table 11 ANOVA

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Level One	Level Two	-.93	.366
	Level Three	-3.08	.000*
	Level Four or Above	-4.53	.000*
Level Two	Level Three	-2.14	.000*
	Level Four or Above	-3.60	.000*
Level Three	Level Four or Above	-1.46	.218

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean difference values rounded.

Table 13 explores mean differences in social capital index score by level of qualification studied. This shows the level of social capital reported increases as level of qualification rises. Students studying level four qualifications or above report markedly higher social capital mean scores (9.41, SD = 4.02) compared to students studying level three (6.75, SD = 3.97), two (5.80, SD = 3.80) and one (5.47, SD = 3.63) qualifications, respectively. These mean differences are found to be statistically significant ($F = 9.079$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 13: Mean social capital index scores by level of qualification studied

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig. (Between Groups)
Level One	70	5.47	3.63	9.08	.000*
Level Two	143	5.80	3.80		
Level Three	392	6.75	3.97		
Level Four	29	9.41	4.02		
Total	634	6.52	3.97		

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded. Missing=25.

¹⁸ Further analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between level of qualification, using two groups (studying a level two qualification or below and studying a level three qualification or above), which observed a statistically significant difference between these groups with respect to their cultural capital index score ($F = 69.099$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). SPSS output for this analysis is provided in **table 42** (appendix item 10).

Yet, where group differences are explored (**table 14**), statistically significant differences in mean social capital index scores are only observed between those studying level four qualifications or above and all other qualification levels. This suggests that students studying level one, two or three qualifications in further education are not significantly different in terms of their levels of social capital, with these groups only found to be significantly different than students studying level four qualifications or above in terms of their social capital resources.

Table 14: Scheffe multiple comparisons output for table 14

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Level One	Level Two	-.33	.952
	Level Three	-1.28	.094
	Level Four or Above	-3.94	.000*
Level Two	Level Three	-.95	.104
	Level Four or Above	-3.60	.000*
Level Three	Level Four or Above	-2.66	.006*

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean difference values rounded.

This section has explored the relationship between social class background and level of qualification, including investigating how each form of capital is associated with level of qualification studied at college. Findings show that social class index scores are positively associated with level of qualification, with mean index scores rising as level of qualification increases. This association relies on the cultural and social capital components, and not on economic capital which is only marginally associated with level of qualification studied. This suggests that Thompson's (2009) findings may conceal important differences in the influence of different elements of social class background on further education participation. These findings suggest that occupation and economic capital do not operate significant influences over level of qualification, whilst cultural capital, and social capital to a lesser extent, do. Although economic and other capitals, especially cultural capital, are closely linked, the latter can operate independently from economic resources in shaping educational processes (Reay, 2004). This study supports this argument by showing that cultural capital operates significant influence, unlike economic capital, on level of qualification studied at college. This may result from the transmission of high stocks of legitimate cultural and educational capital within middle-class families enabling entry into higher level qualification in light of higher levels of attainment. This point will be returned to in the conclusion of this chapter.

5.2. A-Level Study & Social Class

Statistical analysis was also conducted on the relationship between social class, including each respective form of capital, and whether a student was studying an A-Level at their further education institution.¹⁹ **Table 15** shows that students studying A-Levels in this study's sample had a higher mean social class index score and lower level of variance (29.61, SD = 7.45) compared to students studying other qualifications (26.09, SD = 9.18). These differences in mean social class index score are shown to be statistically significant in **table 15** ($t = -4.402$, $df = 192$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that there is a concentration of more advantaged students, in terms of volume of capital(s), in A-Level study within this study's sample.

Table 15: Mean social class index score by whether studying an A-Level

	Independent Samples T-Test					
	F	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Not Studying A-Levels	543	26.09	9.18	7.01*	-4.402	.000*
Studying A-Levels	114	29.61	7.45			

*= Significant at the 0.05% level, meaning equal variances assumed. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded. Missing=2.

To explore the influence of social class index score on whether students were studying an A-Level or not, when also controlling for other socio-demographic variables (e.g., eFSM, ethnicity, gender), a binary logistic regression was conducted (**table 16**).²⁰

Table 16: Binary logistic regression output for whether studying an A-Level or not using social class index

	β	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(β)
Social Class Index Score	.038	.01	8.05	1	.005*	1.04
eFSM (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.458	.30	2.30	1	.129	.63
Ethnicity ²¹	.100	.32	.096	1	.757	1.11

¹⁹ **Table 45**, in appendix item 11, displays institutional variation in A-Level study.

²⁰ See appendix item 12 for a discussion of assumption testing outputs.

²¹ Due to low cell counts for middle-class ethnic minority students (N=28), further intersectional analysis exploring how social class and ethnic minority group shape whether one is studying A-Levels or not was not conducted. Originally, Millennium Cohort was planned for further intersectional analysis, given its larger, more representative sample. However, difficulties in accessing secondary data, specifically the prevented this.

(0=White, 1 = Any other ethnic group)						
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male, 2 = Other)			28.32	2	.000*	
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male, 2 = Other)	-.79	.80	.99	1	.320	.45
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male, 2 = Other)	-2.02	.807	6.29	1	0.12	.13
Constant	-1.214	.878	1.91	1	.17	.30
R Square**	.13					

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. **= Estimation terminated at iteration number 5 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001. Note: All values have been rounded.

Table 16 shows that social class index score is positively associated with studying an A-Level, with a single number increment in social class index score increasing the probability of studying an A-Level by approximately 4% ($\text{Exp}(B) = 1.039$, $p = 0.05$). Statistically significant relationships are not observed between being eFSM at school or ethnic group membership and whether studying an A-Level, respectively. Research demonstrating the impact of both ethnicity (Boliver, 2016; Lessof et al., 2018; Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021) and eFSM (see Lessof et al., 2018; Gorard & Siddiqui, 2019) on educational participation in other areas of the education system is abundant. However, little research has explored ethnic disparities in further education participation (Avis et al., 2017). The current study suggests further education participation, and specifically A-Level study in this case, is somewhat less structured by ethnicity and/or eFSM, with social class operating a more significant influence. The model presented in **table 16** is shown to account for 13% of the variance in studying an A-Level in this study's sample.

A binary logistic regression was also conducted to explore the relationship between each form of capital comprising the social class index (economic, cultural, and social) and whether studying an A-Level, whilst similarly controlling for eFSM, ethnicity and gender (**table 17**).

Table 17: Binary logistic regression output for whether studying an A-level or not, including individual capital indicators

	β	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(β)
Economic Capital Index Score	.003	.02	.02	1	.886	1.00
Cultural Capital Index Score	.24	.039	38.56	1	.000*	1.27
Social Capital Index Score	-.112	.034	10.62	1	.001*	.89
Ethnicity ²² (0=White, 1 = Any other ethnic group)	.26	.34	.63	1	.429	1.30
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male, 3 = Other)			26.007	2	.000*	
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male, 3 = Other)	-.91	.82	1.25	1	.264	.40
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male, 3 = Other)	-2.12	.83	6.54	1	.011*	.12
Constant	-2.32	.93	6.22	1	.013*	.098
R Square**	.213					

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. **= Estimation terminated at iteration number 6 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001. Note: All values have been rounded.

Table 17 shows that cultural capital and social capital index score is significantly associated with studying an A-Level ($p < 0.05$), yet in different directions. Cultural capital index score is shown to be positively associated with studying an A-Level, with each single increase in index score increasing the probability of studying an A-Level by 27%. On the contrary, each single increase in social capital index score is found to reduce the probability of studying an

²² Due to low cell counts for middle-class ethnic minority students ($N=28$), further intersectional analysis exploring how social class and ethnic minority group shape whether one is studying A-Levels or not was not conducted. Originally, Millennium Cohort was planned for further intersectional analysis, given its larger, more representative sample. However, difficulties in accessing secondary data, specifically the prevented this.

A-Level by approximately 11%. A statistically significant relationship is not observed between economic capital index score and whether studying an A-Level or not. Likewise, ethnic group was not observed as a statistically significant factor in explaining whether students were studying an A-Level. The regression model presented in **table 17** accounts for 21.3% of the variance in whether students in this study were studying an A-Level or not.

The relationship between social class background and the number of 'facilitating subjects'²³ studied by students studying A-Levels (N=113) is explored in **table 18**. A total of 63 A-Level students were studying at least one facilitating A-Level subject, with the remaining 50 studying subjects not classified as facilitating entry to elite universities. A binary variable, for whether an A-Level student was studying at least one facilitating subject, was created.²⁴

Table 18 demonstrates that there is not a statistically significant relationship between social class index score and whether students were studying facilitating subjects.

Table 18: T-test output for whether studying at least one facilitating subject and social class index score

	Independent Samples T-Test					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Yes	63	28.98	8.02	.64	-.753	.453
No	50	30.05	7.04			

Note: All values have been rounded.

Table 19 presents the mean economic, cultural, and social capital index scores by students studying facilitating A-Level subjects and those not. This shows that mean economic and social capital index scores are higher among students not studying facilitating A-Level subjects, yet group differences are not statistically significant. By contrast, students studying at least one facilitating A-Level subject had a statistically significant higher mean cultural capital index score than those not (13.38 compared to 11.68, $t = -2.661$, $p. < 0.05$).

²³ In 2011, the Russell Group of research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom published *Informed Choices* which specified a number of 'facilitating subjects' that can facilitate students' entry into highly selective universities. Facilitating subjects are natural sciences, mathematics, languages, history, and geography (Russell Group, 2011). A full list of facilitating subjects is provided in **table 28** (appendix item 1).

²⁴ A binary variable was used instead of a multi-response variable given the small cell counts for each single number of facilitating subjects studied (e.g., 29 students were studying one facilitating subject, 20 were studying two facilitating subjects, 13 were studying three facilitating subjects, and only one student was studying four facilitating subjects).

Table 19: Mean economic, cultural, and social capital index scores by whether studying at least one facilitating A-Level subject

	Whether studying a facilitating subject or not	N***	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Economic Capital	Yes	63	10.67	4.82	1.561	.728	.468
	No	50	11.30	4.30			
Cultural Capital	Yes	63	13.38	2.56	11.340	-2.661*	.006**
	No	50	11.68	3.90			
Social Capital	Yes	63	5.95	3.45	.034	-.658	.855
	No	50	6.38	3.42			

*= Significant at the 0.05% level, meaning equal variances assumed. **= Significant at the 0.05% level. ***Only including participants studying A-Levels.

This section has investigated the relationship between social class background and whether participants were studying an A-Level qualification. Findings demonstrate that A-Level study is positively associated with social class. In a similar fashion to the analyses presented for level of qualification studied, findings evidence that economic capital is not significantly associated with whether studying an A-Level qualification amongst students in this sample, with significant relationships observed for cultural and social capital, respectively. Thompson (2009) previously found ‘a greater concentration in less prestigious institutions... with decreasing class position’ (p. 38). Yet, Thompson’s analysis used an occupational measurement of class background whereas this study builds upon this finding by showing that A-Level study – a prestigious form of further education provision in England – is associated with higher social class positions, when operationalised as capitals. This analysis therefore develops Thompson’s analysis further by exploring the role of different aspects of social class background on further education participation, such as on A-Level study, where occupation forms one part of a broader operationalisation of social class, including cultural and social as well as economic capital. Furthermore, whilst economic capital is shown not to be significantly associated with A-Level study, these findings may suggest that economic capital’s influence on participation in further education is through its conversion into other forms of capital.

5.3. Vocational Subject of Study and Social Class

This section explores the relationship between social class and whether students at Central, Eastern, and Western Colleges were studying within selected vocational subject areas.

Selected subject areas included: (a) Business, Finance & Accounting, (b) Construction, (c) Creative Arts, Media & Fashion; (d) Engineering & Manufacturing; (e) Health, Social Care &

Childcare; and (f) Other. Only those subject areas with a sample above 50 students were selected for this analysis.

Table 20 shows that there is variation in mean social class index score according to vocational subject area of study.

Table 20: Mean social class index score by vocational subject area & A-Level

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Business, Finance & Accounting	70	25.17	9.35	4.44	.000**
Construction	97	23.80	8.70		
Creative Arts, Media & Fashion	71	26.01	10.36		
Engineering & Manufacturing	76	27.86	7.79		
Health, Social Care & Childcare	62	26.68	8.09		
A-Level	114	29.61	7.45		
Other	164	26.92	9.61		
Total	654*	26.73	8.99		

*Missing=5. **Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded.

Amongst vocational areas of study, students studying Construction were observed to have the lowest mean social class index score (23.80, SD: 8.70), with those studying Engineering & Manufacturing reporting the highest mean score (27.86, SD: 7.79). Only the Engineering & Manufacturing and other subject area groups were observed to have a mean social class index score above the sample average. **Table 20** shows that these mean differences are statistically significant ($F = 4.44$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.05$). A higher average social class index score among Engineering & Manufacturing students is consistent with prior research, specifically by Thompson (2009), which has shown higher social class groups are represented in greater proportions in more prestigious areas of further education provision. The prestige of engineering relative to other vocational subject areas arises from it traditionally offering strong labour market outcomes (Bailey, 2021). Moreover, studying engineering can facilitate entry to university study more effectively than other vocational subject areas (e.g., Construction). Thus, the higher level of economic, cultural, and/or social capital among this student group would suggest a similar patterning of further education participation as

reported by Thompson (2009), where advantageous provision attracts the socially advantaged.

Table 21 explores differences between each subject area of study. This shows that with one exception, none of the comparisons are statistically significant. The exception is with mean social class index scores between students studying Construction and A-Levels.

Table 21: Multiple comparisons output from table 19 ANOVA test

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Business, Finance & Accounting	Construction	1.37	.987
	Creative Arts, Media, Fashion	-.84	.999
	Engineering & Manufacturing	-2.68	.763
	Health, Social Care & Childcare	-1.51	.987
	A-Levels	-4.44	.092
	Other	-1.74	.928
Construction	Creative Arts, Media, Fashion	-2.21	.862
	Engineering & Manufacturing	-4.05	.180
	Health, Social Care & Childcare	-2.87	.678
	A-Levels	-5.81	.001*
	Other	-3.11	.276
Creative Arts, Media, Fashion	Engineering & Manufacturing	-1.84	.953
	Health, Social Care & Childcare	-.66	1.000
	A-Levels	-3.60	.301
	Other	-.90	.998
Engineering & Manufacturing	Health, Social Care & Childcare	1.18	.996
	A-Levels	-1.76	.937
	Other	.94	.997
Health, Social Care & Childcare	A-Levels	-2.94	.620
	Other	-.24	1.000
A-Levels	Other	2.70	.396

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean difference values rounded.

Table 22-24 explore the relationships between each form of capital and vocational area of study & A-Levels.

Table 22: Mean economic capital index score by vocational subject area of study & A-Levels

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Business, Finance & Accounting	70	10.84	5.25	.845	0.54
Construction	97	10.29	5.02		
Creative Arts, Media & Fashion	71	10.09	5.60		
Engineering & Manufacturing	76	11.36	4.53		
Health, Social Care & Childcare	62	9.84	4.59		
A-Levels	114	10.96	4.57		
Other	164	10.62	5.20		
Total	654*	10.61	4.99		

*Missing=5. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded.

Table 22 shows that mean economic capital index scores differ according to vocational subject area, but differences are not statistically significant ($F = .845$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.05$). As opposed to economic capital, cultural capital index score differences displayed in **table 23** are shown to be statistically significant ($F = 15.893$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.05$). This shows that students studying Construction (8.09, $SD = 3.48$) and Business, Finance & Accounting (9.39, $SD = 3.67$) have the lowest mean cultural capital scores, respectively. Students studying Creative Arts, Media & Fashion (11.32, $SD = 3.73$) reported the highest mean cultural capital index scores among vocational subject areas. This may be indicative of the cultural capital index developed in this study, a topic that will be returned to in chapter 9.

Table 23: Mean cultural capital index scores by vocational subject area of study & A-Levels

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Business, Finance & Accounting	70	9.39	3.67	15.893	.000*
Construction	97	8.09	3.48		

Creative Arts, Media & Fashion	71	11.32	3.73		
Engineering & Manufacturing	76	10.47	3.58		
Health, Social Care & Childcare	62	10.19	3.35		
A-Levels	114	12.64	3.3		
Other	164	10.67	3.87		
Total	654*	10.50	3.83		

*= Significant at the 0.05% level. Missing=5. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded.

Comparing **tables 22** and **23** moreover shows Engineering & Manufacturing students are more advantaged in terms of volume of economic capital (11.36, SD: 4.53) compared to cultural capital (10.47, SD: 3.58). Indeed, this group has the highest level of economic capital, on average, indicating that this group's relatively high social class index score might be weighted towards economic resources, whereas A-Level students are more culturally resourced.

Table 24 provides further information as to what specific mean cultural capital index score group differences are statistically significant. This shows that all vocational subject areas, except for Creative Arts, Media & Fashion, have statistically significant differences in mean cultural capital index scores compared to A-Level students ($p. < 0.05$). Furthermore, differences observed between Construction students and students studying (a) Creative Arts, Media & Fashion, (b) Engineering & Manufacturing, (c) Health, Social Care & Childcare, (d) A-Levels, and (e) other subject areas are all statistically significant ($p. < 0.05$). This suggests that A-Level students are distinctive in their higher level of cultural capital, relative to most subject groups, and students studying Construction are significantly distinct in their relatively low level of cultural capital.

Table 24: Multiple comparisons output for table 22's ANOVA test

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Business, Finance & Accounting	Construction	1.29	.510
	Creative Arts, Media, Fashion	-1.94	.116
	Engineering & Manufacturing	-1.09	.764
	Health, Social Care & Childcare	-.81	.948
	A-Levels	-3.26	.000*
	Other	-1.28	.400

Construction	Creative Arts, Media, Fashion	-3.23	.000*
	Engineering & Manufacturing	-2.38	.005*
	Health, Social Care & Childcare	-2.10	.045*
	A-Levels	-4.55	.000*
	Other	-2.57	.000*
Creative Arts, Media, Fashion	Engineering & Manufacturing	.85	.914
	Health, Social Care & Childcare	1.13	.773
	A-Levels	-1.32	.438
	Other	.66	.947
Engineering & Manufacturing	Health, Social Care & Childcare	.28	1.000
	A-Levels	-2.17	.012*
	Other	-.47	.993
Health, Social Care & Childcare	A-Levels	-2.45	.005*
	Other	-.47	.993
A-Levels	Other	1.98	.003*

*= Mean significance at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean difference values rounded.

Table 25 presents mean social capital index scores by different vocational subject areas & A-Levels. Although differences are observed, these are shown to be statistically insignificant.

Table 25: Mean social capital index scores by vocational subject area of study & A-Levels

ANOVA					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Business, Finance & Accounting	70	6.44	3.94	.710	.641
Construction	97	6.73	3.97		
Creative Arts, Media & Fashion	71	5.79	4.28		
Engineering & Manufacturing	76	6.91	3.86		
Health, Social Care & Childcare	62	6.61	3.97		
A-Levels	114	6.16	3.41		
Other	164	6.53	4.24		
Total	654*	6.46	3.96		

*Missing=5. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values rounded.

This section has explored the association between social class index score and vocational subject area of study, including differences in mean economic, cultural, and social capital index scores by each subject area. Whilst mean differences in social class index score were observed between selected subject areas, further analyses showed that statistical significance between different vocational subject areas of study was not observed. Instead, the only comparison found to have a statistically significant difference in mean social class index scores was between Construction and A-Levels. This, in conjunction with prior analysis focusing on A-Level study, would suggest that statistically significant differences are found between students studying A-Levels and not, with Construction being the subject area with the lowest statistically significant mean social class index score. This is moreover consistent with prior research evidencing the concentration of students from higher social class backgrounds in prestigious areas of further education (Thompson, 2009).

Several subject areas of study differences were observed for mean cultural capital index scores, with Creative Arts, Media & Fashion and Engineering & Manufacturing groups having statistically significant higher levels of cultural capital than other vocational areas of study. Statistically significant differences in economic and social capital mean index scores were not observed between vocational areas of study. With respect to cultural capital index score, students studying Creative Arts, Media & Fashion courses were found not to be dissimilar to those studying A-Levels, which is a likely finding given the prominence of cultural content in many of the subjects comprising this area. These findings suggest that cultural capital operates a key influence over subject studied, with those certain areas of vocational provision that lead to more lucrative employment opportunities (e.g., engineering) or are better aligned to the legitimate cultural arbitrary (e.g., Creative Arts) attracting a greater proportion of culturally privileged students than other subjects. Thus, not only is qualification of study stratified by social class, but the subject chosen by students not choosing A-Level study is, to some extent, also related to the social class-based resources at one's disposal, with possession of cultural capital particularly associated with more prestigious areas of study.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relationship between social class background and participation in further education drawing on a sample of 659 students. This has examined the role that social class operates on (a) the level of qualification studied, (b) whether students are studying A-Levels and types of A-Level chosen, and (c) the subject area of study among vocational students.

Findings show that students from higher social class backgrounds were more likely to be studying a higher-level qualification, with the strongest differences observed between those studying level two courses or below and level three courses and above. Economic capital was only marginally positively associated with level of qualification, with both cultural and social capital more strongly positively associated with level of qualification studied. Students with higher social class index scores were found to be more likely to be studying A-Levels; each single increase in index score producing a 4% increased likelihood of studying A-Levels. Further analysis revealed that, while cultural and social capital index scores were positively associated with studying A-Levels, no statistically significant relationship was observed for economic capital. Likewise, no relationship was found between social class index score and facilitating subjects studied. Further analyses revealed that cultural capital index score was positively associated with studying at least one facilitating subject, whereas other forms of capital were not associated. Students studying all selected vocational subject areas of study were found to be significantly different in their social class index scores from those studying A-Levels. When examining the role of each form of capital respectively, economic and social capital were not associated with vocational subject area of study, while cultural capital was generally found to be higher among students studying 'Creative Arts, Media & Fashion', 'Engineering & Manufacturing' and 'A-Levels', and lower among students studying 'Construction'.

These findings show that the social class background of participating students at Central, Eastern, and Western Colleges is associated with the type of qualification, level of qualification and, to a lesser extent, the subject area chosen. This is consistent with Thompson's (2009) study, which demonstrates how working-class students come to disproportionately occupy less prestigious education provision in further education. The consistent influence of cultural capital found in this study appears to suggest that, as opposed to economic capital, the stocks of cultural resource available to students come to more directly shape college participation. However, far from suggesting the insignificance of economic capital to choices made when entering further education, this finding may show the importance of capital conversion to the school-to-college transition. Nonetheless, these findings align with prior research indicating the enduring influence of cultural capital on educational participation (Sullivan, 2007).

Whilst this study draws on a limited sample, these findings may suggest further education participation is shaped by influences somewhat different to other areas of education (e.g., higher education), considering its specific class-based nature. For example, whilst familial economic situation and ethnicity is consistently found to shape secondary and higher education participation, this study indicates the influence of economic capital, may not be as significant in patterns of further education participation, except through its conversion to other forms of capital. Although measurements of ethnicity and economic capital are limited in this study, findings presented suggest that previous studies drawing only on an occupational operationalisation of social class may only provide a partial understanding of the relationship between social class and further education participation. This is because they are unable to differentiate between different forms of capital and explore the potential importance of conversion between different class-based capitals. In future research operationalisations of social class, which appreciate its multi-dimensional nature and contain more sophisticated indicators of (a) economic capital, including family wealth and assets, and (b) ethnicity, using a larger sample to enable more detailed analyses, are necessary to develop this study's findings further.

In the next chapter, this statistical analysis is supplemented using semi-structured interview data to understand the school-to-college transition and the ways through which the decision-making process is socially situated, focusing specifically on social class background.

Chapter 6: Socially-situated decision-making during the school-to-college transition

The data presented in the previous chapter showed a relationship between social class, especially cultural and social capital, and modes of participation in further education. This chapter will seek to explore why this relationship exists by drawing on interview data to interrogate student decision-making during the transition from secondary school into further education (referred to hereafter as 'school-to-college transition'). A significant proportion of the student interviews focused on the school-to-college transitions, with discussions concentrating on how choices were made when transitioning into further education, the influences feeding into these decisions, and how such decisions relate to past experiences and future aspirations. In conducting the initial analysis of the interview data collected, it became clear that the students' decision-making could only be understood as situated in the social, cultural, and economic contexts within which students were socialised and currently lived (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1997). In particular, the social class background of students was important to, though not determinative of, the decisions and choices made. In addition, prior school experience and attainment functioned as a constraint on choice for some students.

For most of the students interviewed (see **table 6**), the school-to-college transition represented the first opportunity to shape the education pathways taken. Whilst for many students there is a chance to select 'optional' GCSE subjects at secondary school, this choice was often constrained via the range of subjects offered by the secondary school attended. When choosing to enter post-secondary education and training the majority of young people in England must choose between a range of provision (e.g., academic, vocational, or mixed curricula) available in a number of different types of institution (e.g., college, sixth form, work-based learning, or specialist colleges). Furthermore, students are able to combine modes of study, such as in combining vocational study with selected A-levels or through choosing to retake GCSE qualifications previously studied. All of the students interviewed in this study were currently studying in either Central, Eastern and Western College, with a number of subjects across the crude academic-vocational divide chosen (see **table 6**). Several students were 'mixing' their qualifications, with this predominantly involving GCSE mathematics with their primary course of study. This was typically due to prior failure to meet the requisite grading in secondary school to facilitate progression onto post-secondary qualifications (e.g., a GCSE grade 9 to 4 or A* to C). Only one student of those combining qualifications had chosen to combine a BTEC qualification

with A-levels: Liam, who was studying a BTEC level three IT course alongside A-Level Mathematics and Physics.

In the sections below, the role of social class in decision-making process during the school-to-college transition will be demonstrated in two ways: (1) in the formation of interests and aspirations and (2) in the choosing of the academic further education pathway (A-level study).

6.1. Interest and aspiration as socially situated

In explaining their reasons for choosing their current course of study and/or subject(s), the students in this study typically cited a number of factors. These included: (a) having an interest in and prior enjoyment of the subject(s) studied, (b) a perception that the course is relevant for their future educational and occupational aspirations, and (c) prior school performance in a particular subject area leading to a desire to continue studying it. For example, this is illustrated in responses given by Ethan and Martin when asked why they chose to study their respective courses:

Ethan: ...because I wanted to do a career in tattoo and art design... and then like my family members saying about like how they thought I was really talented in art and that. (L2 BTEC Art & Design, white working-class male)

Martin: Well maths is something I enjoy and I'm quite good at, so I took maths and I took further maths because well as I said I quite enjoy maths and I [would] like to learn more. (A-Levels, white middle-class male)

For the students in this study, choosing a particular course or subject was a result of matching their interests and/or career goals to the available curriculum in their chosen college. In analysing the interview data, it became clear that the matching of interest and aspiration to a course of study can only be understood in relation to the social environment within which these aspirations are formed and decisions are made. In many instances, the interests of the student translated into educational and career aspirations which were found to be mediated by the student's familial social class background. An example of this is provided above as Ethan explains that he was encouraged by his family to study a BTEC level two qualification in Art & Design because he was "talented in Art". Whilst an ability in art can lead to the development of this aspiration, a BTEC qualification in Art & Design is not the only available course for those with an interest in Art & Design. An alternative option, as Ethan referred to himself, is A-level study:

Like what I'm doing now is like, I feel like it's better here because even though they were like good there [at sixth form]... it was still like you had to choose like four subjects you'd like to do, and it was just subjects... I didn't really want to do... [They] weren't important to me. Like, I had to pick, let's say computer science. [I] was like, I'm not really interested.

It is during the decision-making process, where students must choose between alternative opportunities, that the influence of their social background can emerge. This is because decisions are made in relation to existing understandings and perceptions of what is possible for someone such as them. Given Ethan's desire to avoid studying subjects which did not interest him, and his limited knowledge of what A-Levels would consist of, he decided to study a BTEC level two qualification in Art & Design. His choice was informed by his career aspiration to become a tattoo artist, too. When asked how he came to form this occupational aspiration, Ethan explained the serendipity in its formation:

I did this skull drawing in secondary school and then I took it home and showed my mum and she was like "oh wow that's lovely" and then I showed my grandad, and he was like "do you know, I'd have a tattoo of that". And so, I'm like, "oh yeah". And then my mum was like "that's a good idea for what you could do for a career" and then we started going on in that path.

Thus, Ethan and his family judged that an artistic talent should correspond to a career as a tattoo artist. To understand the perceptions held by Ethan and his family of the routes available to him as a consequence of his artistic ability, the limited prior involvement in education beyond secondary schooling in his family background and the lack of social networks in other artistic areas of the labour market are important to consider. This is because the suggestion to become a tattooist was based on the socially and culturally bounded knowledge of his family. Specifically, it was based on the ideas that his grandfather and mother held regarding what artistic talent such as his enables an individual to do in life and simultaneously signifies what it is not seen to enable (e.g., becoming a sculptor, graphic designer, or an art teacher, an architect).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps understand how decisions made can be bounded by the social conditions within which an individual resides. Habitus refers to 'a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 82-83), which function as a 'practical rationality' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). It is through identifying the past experiences in Ethan's family background and the limited exposure to

further and higher education, and to individuals already working in the artistic field, that the judgement made by his grandparent and mother can be socially contextualised. Whilst it is still possible for a student from a different social class background, with greater levels of economic, social, and cultural capital to want to become a tattoo artist, it is likely they will also be able to envisage additional possible career paths. This is because they would likely possess greater levels of cultural and social capital (including knowledge of educational pathways and their relation to artistic careers) which Ethan was unable to draw upon.

Social class background, family habitus, and the resources available to individual students was an important explanatory factor in choices made during the school-to-college transitions of students in this study. Another illustration of the role social class positioning operates in this process is demonstrated by Charlotte, a middle-class student at Eastern College, whose case illustrates how the formation of interests, and the development of aspirations can be shaped by heightened levels of cultural and social capital. Charlotte is currently studying A-Levels in Biology, Chemistry, and Geography in the hope of pursuing a degree in Veterinary Sciences at the Royal College of Veterinary Science (as well as being open to courses at other Russell Group universities). In explaining her aspiration, Charlotte referred to her interest in the subject area and how she 'really likes animals'. Consequently, she would like to enter a career as a veterinary surgeon or in an alternative area of animal welfare and care (e.g., zoology) if she is unsuccessful in gaining entry to a veterinary science course. Whilst her parents do not work in a related field, her grandparents are farm owners and actively involved in national animal charities. In the following excerpt, it becomes clear that the interest in this area of study has been shaped by her upbringing:

Ross: So, where did your enthusiasm for animals come from?

Charlotte: We've got tortoises and dogs and we've got chickens and we had fish and stuff and my nanny has eight tortoises, she's a crazy tortoise lady.

Ross: and the farm... [*Charlotte had previously explained her family own a farm*].

Charlotte: Yeah, and she is involved in a tortoise charity – the BCG British Chelonia Group, and she used to go to the [local county] show and help[ed] out with stalls there, and I used to go with her. So not only would I get to be with tortoises and stuff, because at the [local county] show they have loads of animals, like cows, sheep, horses, all stuff like that. So, I got to see them, and I think that helped a lot.

Ross: ...do you get involved in a lot of stuff your grandparents do in terms of like the farm and shows and things like that?

Charlotte: Yeah... definitely and I help at tortoise days at the Vet's in [local area] and next door to their farm a lady does lambing every year, so I've done that before. That was good. [It] definitely helped.

This excerpt indicates how the interest in animals formed by Charlotte was strongly influenced and enabled by her access to and experience of a range of relevant opportunities tied to her family background. Specifically, the economic (e.g., owning a farm) and social (e.g., connections with other animal welfare workers associated with farm ownership) capital available to Charlotte and her family can be seen as important – which Charlotte herself recognises – making possible the cultivation of an interest in animals and specifically animal welfare. Further, the exposure to those working in this area, such as the local veterinary surgeon, other farm owners and others involved in the animal charity Charlotte referred to, enables this career to be perceived as possible for her. What is important to appreciate here is the relevance of social class to this formation of interest. This is because the opportunities that enable the forming of this interest are examples of the economic and social capital Charlotte, and her family, can mobilise (Bourdieu, 1986). In owning a farm, Charlotte's family enables her to be exposed to a range of learning opportunities and endows them with the potential of using economic capital and social capital to assist her. During her interview, Charlotte referred to the economic capital possessed by her family, explaining that her grandparents plan to use this to assist her in funding her university study:

Charlotte: I'm lucky enough that my grandad will pay for university...

Ross: ...So why does he want to pay?

Charlotte: Because he wants his grandchildren to be able to do whatever they want to do.

Without the possession and mobilisation of this level of economic and social capital, Charlotte might have been less likely to develop an interest in animal welfare and an understanding of how to pursue this interest in education. The quote above is indicative of the utility of, and Charlotte's family's recognition of the utility of, their stocks of capital in benefitting Charlotte's education trajectory. Indeed, as shown earlier in Ethan's school-to-college transition, socially bounded economic, cultural, and social resources can be important in the envisaging of opportunities, both in the present and in the future. This is not to assert that any single student made correct/incorrect or better/worse decisions than any other, but only to show that the decisions made are socially framed by their social class background and forged within their habitus.

This framing of one's interests and aspirations by social class is more clearly evident in Claire's educational trajectory. Claire is a female working-class student studying a BTEC level two qualification in Land-based Engineering. When explaining her decision to study her level two BTEC qualification, she referred directly to the influence of her family background

on her identity and educational trajectory. The passage below followed her alluding to how her elder brother had also studied the same course at Eastern College:

Ross: That's quite interesting (following the same pathway as her brother). So why do you think you both went down the same path?

Claire: I think it's just the way we were brought up, always being in with cars and engineering and being hands-on with doing stuff... The engineering part and we both like the agricultural side because we live in [local county] and we're proud of that so that's why we've, I think, we've both gone down that side [of the education system].

Ross: Ok, so who kind of got you into that sort of stuff?

Claire: It was mainly my Dad because we've got a, he's got a kit car²⁵, so I've always been involved in doing little bits with that, doing jobs with him on that.

Ross: Was there ever a time when you thought "oh I want to do something else"?

Claire: I did use to want, at one point I went through a phase of wanting to be a nurse or a doctor because I love helping people and I thought I could do that, and then it suddenly changed around to actually I want to do a job where I'm getting my hands dirty, I'm getting in a machine and do stuff like that.

Growing up in a working-class family wherein there was a clear enthusiasm for engineering and manual work activity is shown above to have heavily influenced Claire, and her brother's, educational trajectory. This enabled an interest in engineering and a specific place-based interest in agricultural engineering to be cultivated. The significance of place is shown to have influenced her choice to study Agricultural Engineering as a result of living in a region of England with ties to agriculture and farming. Furthermore, the reference made to temporarily considering a career as a nurse or doctor indicates that a 'choice' was made by Claire between two options. As previously argued, it is in instances where individuals must choose between alternative options that the underlying 'dispositions', or 'practical rationality', shaping perceptions of what is possible operate most clearly (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). In justifying her choice, she explicitly referred to her interest in "getting my hands dirty" and "getting in a machine". When considering her social class background in a working-class family, where both of her parents perform manual and/or historically working-class jobs (see appendix item 7), the way she has come to embody the conditions of her upbringing become clearer. Whilst not direct nor determinative, Claire was able to form her ideas on her future only in relation to her past experiences and the dispositions and preferences this had provided to her.

²⁵ A kit car is an automobile available as a set of parts that a manufacturer sells and the buyer then assembles into a functioning car.

An additional factor which reinforced Claire's decision to choose a vocational pathway rather than study A-Levels is her prior school experience. Describing her school experience as "hell", Claire explained how during her secondary schooling she had suffered difficulties related to her dyslexia, which was only diagnosed at the end of her time at secondary school. This caused her not to enjoy her learning experiences in several, mainly academic, subjects and to desire a different learning environment. Indeed, in discussing her choice to avoid sixth form and enter an alternative institution, she explained:

[I] just thought that the environment was too similar to high school... I figured out from that that sixth form wasn't for me... after I'd visited those sixth forms, I knew what I wanted to do.

For Claire, it was therefore a combination of (a) the strong interest in agricultural work and engineering developed during her upbringing and (b) a rejection of the environment of academic schooling that prompted her to choose her current course. Claire's choice does present an interesting case too in that she makes sense of her course choice by referring to a traditionally masculine description: "getting my hands dirty" and "getting in a machine". Of the 10 students self-identifying as female amongst the interviewees in this study, Claire was the only one to be studying such a traditionally masculine vocational course. The two other students, Marianne and Katherine, were studying a level two BTEC qualification in Applied Science and Art & Design, respectively. The manner in which Claire speaks of her desire to study Land-based Engineering challenges traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Traditionally, physical and manual labour has corresponded to being a working-class male and masculine (Willis, 1977). However, in contemporary society traditional gender norms, whilst still significant and enduring, are being challenged (Roberts, 2012). During her interview, Claire also revealed that during her upbringing her mother had encouraged her to attend dance lessons, which is more consistent with stereotypical gender norms of femininity. However, the encouragement she spoke fondly of receiving from her father, and her place-based identity, was important in *enabling* Claire to persist in pursuing a non-typical trajectory for a female and to generate aspirations associated to this. Thus, social class, gender, and prior school experiences intersected to make possible Claire's decision to avoid continuing academic study and to pursue an education more conducive to her own identity.

The subtleties of the way in which social class location and background frames decisions and practices in transition is further illustrated in the case of Zoe, a middle-class female student at Eastern College studying A-Levels in Biology and English literature and language. This is because she aspired to become a pilot in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and felt that

studying A-Level Mathematics and Physics would be beneficial for achieving this. When entering Eastern College, Zoe was unable to operate as much choice as she desired because of grade requirements imposed by the colleges she had applied to.²⁶ This means that she decided to prolong her time in further education in order to choose other subjects in the forthcoming academic year (pending success in retaking GCSE Mathematics). Similar to Charlotte, Zoe's parents do not have prior working experience relevant to her aspiration in the RAF and becoming a pilot. But in explaining how the interest in the RAF and piloting manifested, Zoe reveals the influence of her upbringing:

Ross: So, what made you choose to be a pilot?

Zoe: ...I think I've just always had that interest in aviation. Like I'll go to these like aviation museums... and we'll go up to the RAF bases and watch the planes take off, and I've always had this interest in it. I think it might have been my dad [who] mentioned to me, he was like "oh why don't you be a pilot?" and then from that moment I was like that "would be great! That would be nice" so I've kind of had my mind set on it.

Thus, as shown here again the interest formed by Zoe is seen to have developed in her specific family environment within which she grew up. In elaborating on the above explanation, the role of her father on the aspiration formed became clearer:

Ross: So, who goes with you to watch the planes take off and stuff like that?

Zoe: That would be my parents. We'll sometimes go up to [local RAF base] and just park on the side of the road and watch the F-35s take off, so it's quite nice.

Ross: And do they do it because you want to be a pilot or did they do it before that?

Zoe: Yeah, I think they did it before because sometimes they just like to go up [to the airbase].

Ross: So they have an interest as well?

Zoe: Yeah.

Ross: So, like it kind of passed down to you, their interest?

Zoe: Yeah, I think so because I can always remember my dad saying, he would say to me, "if I was your age and I could do all my education again then I'd love to become a pilot". So, I think in a way he is kind of living his dream through me and he wants me to do well, so it's quite nice.

The choice to reveal this during the interview does indicate the importance of these experiences in the formation of Zoe's interest in aviation and aspiration to become a pilot in the RAF. Coming from a middle-class family background, the social practices of the family and their shaping of aspiration indicates how Zoe's decisions are situated within her

²⁶ Zoe had been entered into the 'Foundation' Mathematics examination at secondary school, which limits the highest grade available to a '4'. When applying for college courses she came to understand that in order to study A-Levels in science subjects a higher grade was required.

particular social position. Her father's prior aspiration to become a pilot and his subsequent enthusiasm in supporting Zoe to pursue this is suggestive of the social positioning of the family. This is because an interest in aviation and planes does not necessarily convert into an aspiration to become a pilot – this may well, like many other participating students, lead to studying Aircraft Maintenance and wishing to become an Engineer, for instance. It is through the 'practical rationality' and ways of seeing and perceiving, which is integral to social class positioning (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 19), that the aspirations formed and decisions made can be understood. Comparing Zoe to Ethan, for example, reveals how the differential social positioning, and the understandings of what is possible for individuals in similar positions, is important in understanding how ideas on future career goals are formed.

The choice of Zoe to retake GCSE Mathematics too is suggestive of her family understandings of education. In many interviews, especially with students studying vocational subjects (who were overwhelmingly from working-class backgrounds), there was a sense of urgency in completing their education so that they could begin their working life. An example of this is provided by Zach, who himself has an interest in aircraft and therefore chose to study BTEC level two Aircraft Maintenance at Western College:

I feel like I'd rather go into a job and start earning money now and get maybe, obviously if you can get with a good company, get a good pension obviously, but if you go [to] university it's another year without being paid and I feel like money is starting to become the main thing.

For Zoe, an alternative opportunity available, and seen as the appropriate option, is to continue her current studies for an extra year and then enter work once these are completed. The choice to extend her education, prolong the start of her career, and thus forego potential earnings, is perceived as entirely sensible. In contrast, for a student such as Zach, who himself comes from a working-class background but also has an interest in aircraft, a more immediate desire to start working is apparent. The role of each student's parents in shaping the different educational career taken is important to consider here. Zoe's parents, particularly her father, is seen as important in encouraging her to pursue her aspiration to become a pilot and, together with her mother, support her during her prolonged education. Likewise, when deciding what to do in college, Zach's mother was instrumental in discouraging him from pursuing a Painting and Decorating apprenticeship, which he wanted to enter to start earning money:

Because my mum, she doesn't want to be working in admin her whole life and she was like "you're just going to end up like me doing something you don't like and then going into like a dead-end job" sort of thing. So at least go to college, get the like certificates and the achievements that you need now, so that when you leave college you have a wider variety of [opportunities].

Both sets of parents are found to have shaped their children's educational and/or occupational careers by encouraging further study, but the manifestation of this is different. Zoe's father encouraged her to pursue an interest he also shared and – as will be discussed in chapter 8 – drew upon his social network to enable her to do so (e.g., acquaintances who had previously worked in the RAF). There was never any sense of urgency in Zoe's account of her school-to-college trajectory, which is demonstrated most clearly in her *choice* to study in college for three years (as compared to the convention of two years). Similarly, Zach's mother influenced his education but drew upon her own experiences of being 'stuck' in a dead-end, working-class job to encourage him to study Aircraft Maintenance at college rather than a Painting and Decorating apprenticeship. This encouragement then prompted him to study Aircraft Maintenance, which was based on his interest in aircraft. He must also retake his Mathematics GCSE after failing to attain the necessary pass grade at secondary school. He explained that passing GCSE Mathematics is a pre-requisite to enter level three Aircraft Maintenance and that he is uncertain whether he would be able to do so. When asked about his envisaged decision if he did not pass his GCSE mathematics this year, he explained:

If I don't pass it maybe I'll look to do this year again but then it's like that's a year wasted you should just crack down a little bit more just to get it, but it'll either be stay here for another year or maybe look to do maybe an apprenticeship somewhere or find a job.

Thus, at present, Zach is uncertain regarding his future plan as this is contingent on attaining a pass grade in GCSE Mathematics and the prospect of retaking a year raises concerns of stagnation and foregone earnings for him. Whilst Zoe views remaining in further education for an additional year as unproblematic, Zach is more ambivalent towards this course of action and is open to considering alternatives. The importance for him to begin his working-life can be understood in relation to both of his parents, who themselves did not have long educational careers and entered full-time employment in working-class roles following schooling (railway service assistant and administrative assistant). Whilst Zoe's parents also entered employment directly after their compulsory education – mainly because "their parents had different views" – they are now part of the lower middle-class (e.g., her mother is an accountant). This is reflected in their encouragement of Zoe to continue her education

and even consider university as a pathway to achieve her goals. This changing attitude or altered 'practical rationality' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 19) across generations reflects the change in social position experienced and the increasing need, today, to convert economic capital into cultural capital (e.g., educational credentials). Although this need is recognised by Zach's parents too, there is a different dynamic taking place illustrated by the immediacy to enter work and start earning as central to his decision-making. However, Zoe's parents' experience of mobility into the lower middle-class from a working-class upbringing is represented in their support for Zoe having decided to enter the RAF as her first choice after college.

Ryan, a classmate of Zach's, provides another and final point of comparison, as well as an illustration, of the general pattern of socially-situated interests and aspirations found across interviews. Ryan had chosen to study Aircraft Maintenance because of his interest in aviation and his desire to pursue a career in aircraft engineering. During his final years of secondary school, he was also considering a further education course in Drama, though decided that Aircraft Maintenance was the course he wanted to enter. In accounting for his choice, he alluded to the role of his family background:

Ross: So, you said you changed from wanting to do drama to now this [Aircraft Maintenance]. What caused you to change?

Ryan: I think it was when I was in year 10. I think it was having the family also do the engineering side. I think that made me switch over rather than do Drama.

More explicitly, he explained how his father, uncle and great uncle had all worked in engineering jobs in the aircraft industry during their careers. His great uncle was cited as a strong influence on his choice to pursue a career in aircraft engineering, as he wished to "follow in my great uncle's footsteps" – Ryan explained how his great uncle was involved in the building of the Concorde²⁷ aircraft. Similar to Zoe, Ryan demonstrates the role his family background had on his school-to-college transition. For the former it was early experiences which enabled an interest in aviation and subsequent enthusiasm and support from her father, which converted into an aspiration to become a pilot. The latter conversely saw a career in aircraft engineering as possible and desirable as a consequence of his family history. Whilst both students shared similar interests in aviation, these transformed into different career aspirations: a pilot in the case of Zoe and an aircraft engineer for Ryan. If the prior attainment of both students was compared, Ryan appears the most suited to pursuing a

²⁷ The Concorde was the first supersonic passenger-carrying airplane which was retired in 2003.

career as a pilot, given his higher attainment in STEM subjects at secondary school. However, to only consider prior attainment would be to ignore the enduring role of a student's social class family background on the transfiguration of interest into aspiration. For instance, his socialisation in a working-class family background wherein prior generations had pursued careers in engineering via apprenticeship and work-based learning, enabled him to envisage the educational career he was following and his career goal as desirable and appropriate for him. This 'practical rationality' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 18) towards certain forms of education and career are shown in a second justification he gave for changing his mind to Aircraft Maintenance from Drama:

I think the thing that made me change was obviously drama takes [up] less time in your life rather than aircraft engineering. I just had that sense that I wanted to do something more hands-on and like something that I could be known for...

Thus, he alludes to his interest in being "hands-on" in his future educational career and escaping the academic route of A-Level study, despite his relatively high attainment. On the contrary, Zoe was making sense of her career aspirations in a middle-class family environment, wherein her father was an enthusiastic supporter of her pursuing a career as a pilot in the RAF. Lastly, while Zoe described herself as a "teacher's pet" in school and was positive about her secondary school experience, Ryan was more ambivalent and enjoyed the practical subjects more (e.g., disliking biology and physics but enjoying chemistry). Moreover, in describing his most important negative experience in education he explained:

Ryan: ...my bad moment was probably in geography when I messed up the countries and forgot what countries went where and I just thought "oh obviously this isn't for me".

Ross: ...how did that make you feel when you couldn't do that?

Ryan: I wouldn't say it made me feel like an idiot, but it made me feel like a little, a little bit stupid.

Although this event may have been a small part of his secondary school experience, this was perceived as significant enough to occupy his most negative experience during his interview. This, and his preference for more practical learning, may have thus functioned to reinforce the 'practical rationality' and dispositions located in his family habitus. In contrast, Zoe did not have such negative experiences and additionally possessed several contacts available to her rooted in her family background who had previously worked in the RAF – one specifically as a pilot, which is discussed further in chapter 8.

So far, the way in which students studying academic and vocational qualifications in further education have made decisions has been explored. This has shown the important role social class family background operates in the formation of interest and the translation of this into educational and career aspirations. It has also introduced the influences of secondary school experience and, to a lesser extent, gender in this process. The significance of social class background shown and the way it makes more possible particular aspirations and decision-making points to the need for a conceptual framework, which allows for the agency intrinsic to choice-making to be socially situated. The concept of 'practical rationality' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18), which is the realisation of a perspective rooted in the *social* origins of the individual, helps understand how many of the young people in this study transitioned onto their particular further education course. This is because these origins instil within an individual a habitus, which holds within it 'durable, transposable' dispositions that works as a grammar for 'being, seeing, acting and thinking' in and of the social world (Bourdieu, 1996[1979], p. vii; 1998, p. 27). These dispositions combine with the differential resources available to students within their upbringing to not only make possible envisaging future aspirations, but also the starting of educational and occupational careers which lead on to achieving such aspirations. This can be found in Charlotte's economic and social capital enabling her to begin to realise her future as a veterinary surgeon, or conversely in Ethan's more constrained options in light of his artistic ability. Yet, this is most clearly demonstrated in the discussion of Zach, Zoe, and Ryan, who all possessed an interest in aviation, though the way this interest transfigured into divergent career aspirations was found to be mediated by the social class background of each individual student.

In the next two sections, the academic pathway, and the reasons for choosing this, is discussed in further detail. This will explore the different understandings embedded in choices to study A-Levels, as opposed to alternative education pathways, that are rooted in students' family social class backgrounds.

6.2. Choosing the academic: social class, ethnicity, and school experience

Among the students interviewed, a total of 10 students were following the academic pathway (GCE A-Levels) whilst the remaining 12 students were studying vocational subjects, a small number of which combined vocational study with academic qualifications (e.g., GCSE or A-Level study). Given that the choice to pursue an academic or vocational pathway is central to the school-to-college transition, all students were therefore asked the reason they chose their course of study and not alternative qualifications offered at local further education

institutions. Analysis of data surrounding choosing academic or vocational routes after secondary schooling revealed interesting, yet nuanced, patterns according to social class, ethnicity, and prior school experiences and attainment.

6.2.1. The academic as the 'natural' choice for middle-class students

The sample obtained in this study included students from the working- and middle-class who were studying academic and/or vocational subjects. This allowed subtle social class differences in perceptions of further education pathways as options before and during the school-to-college transition to be explored. Considering students who were studying A-Levels at their respective further education institution, there was a pattern amongst the middle-class students whereby A-Level study was understood as, if not the only option considered, the first choice in further education:

Ross: So why [did you not consider alternatives]?

Charlotte: I don't know. I just, A-Levels just seemed like the option for me.

Ross: So, did you never consider doing like a BTEC or an alternative?

Chloe: No not really. I think because I had the capability to do A-Levels it was like I might as well just do A-Levels.

Ross: So, why did you not consider like an alternative qualification?

Martin: I can't remember. I remember just wanting to do A-Levels... I guess I wasn't really interested in BTECs. Just didn't seem like something I would want to do because... I knew 100% that I was going to do A-Levels. I wasn't going to do BTECs.

It is important to note that all three students above come from middle-class family backgrounds. Implicit in the excerpts above are judgements of value, which position the A-Level as the only option to consider if secondary school attainment is to the required standard to gain admission. Such judgements of value are rooted in habitus, through habitus operating as a logic of practice causing individuals, such as Charlotte, Chloe, and Martin to 'gravitate towards those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions' [e.g., A-Level study in the further education field] (Maton, 2008, p. 58-59). Chloe demonstrates this through asserting that if she has the "capability" to do A-Levels, by which she means attainment and 'intelligence', this is the obvious choice to take. The greater value and status given to the academic pathway is further illustrated through Martin's use of the word "worth" when explaining that he did not believe "alternatives [to the A-Level] were going to be worth it" and "didn't seem like something I would want to do". Here, Martin suggests the relationship between one's identity ("I would want to do") and course choice. By explaining that all his family members have progressed from A-Level study to university, and there is a level of educational cultural capital and a history of academic education in his

family background, it is understandable that he perceives vocational qualifications as not suitable for himself. This is because his familial social conditions have produced dispositions towards education which render A-Level study as the *natural* further education pathway to pursue. These attitudes towards the inevitability of academic study extended to university study, too and were fundamentally linked to it for these students, as shown in the following examples:

Ross: When did you first want to go to university?

Martin: So, I think I've always wanted to go to university. I never thought I would stop after A-Levels because I've always wanted to go and get a degree... I feel like a degree is quite standard.

Ross: Ok, so when you were thinking about what to do after school, like when you were trying to decide, what were you thinking about?

Chloe: Well, I know I want to go to uni. That was like the biggest thing... I've wanted to go to university from a young age.

For these middle-class students, university study was perceived as a natural educational trajectory to follow. Moreover, in expanding on these discussions the students, particularly Charlotte & Chloe, revealed the knowledge they held of the higher education landscape and the planning they had already engaged in to pursue university study. For instance, Charlotte knew of the “best” universities for veterinary sciences, zoology, and other related courses and Chloe had decided she wanted to attend a university with a campus (which was based on her prior experience of a university where she has completed a short course). These perceptions of university as the natural and, in some ways, only option to be considered were coupled with opinions on the premium a degree would offer them and the types of professional jobs they want to enter:

Chloe: ...these days you can't get very far if you don't go to university. There are other things you can do but the best way is to go through university.

Martin: ...if you'd like to get a good job, you're going to need a degree...

Charlotte: ...I decided that I'd rather do A-Levels because... then I can go to university and do something there and then maybe a more highly paid job...

These attitudes and the types of job that these students wish to enter can be considered as congruent with their social class backgrounds (e.g., veterinary surgeon). Furthermore, whilst these students are correct in believing that higher education can enable entry into lucrative careers which some forms of alternative study may not, graduate labour market congestion has led to the university degree ‘premium’ becoming problematised in recent years (see Brown & James, 2020). The premium which the students are aiming to receive may not necessarily relate to high levels of income, though. Indeed, in their interviews and across

most of the interviews conducted, students stressed the importance of entering a job/career they “enjoy”, but which also pays well. For Charlotte, Chloe, and Martin it was instead the types of careers they want to enter, which A-Level study and subsequent university would facilitate. These careers, in the case of Charlotte for instance, can be understood as a product of cultivated interest during her upbringing. For others, the desired careers are more a reflection of the social class background they have been socialised in and the cultural capital in their family background, which position academic education and professional jobs as both possible and desirable.

Whilst the pursuit of A-Levels can appear self-evidently ‘natural’, this cannot be said to summarise all middle-class interviewees’ transitions into A-Level study. This is because other middle-class students had also considered alternative provision to A-Levels during their school-to-college transition because of their prior secondary school experience and expected poor attainment. This, in addition to the role parents have in negotiating the uncertainty of the school-to-college transition, is illustrated in the following excerpt from interviews with Emma:

Ross: So, when you decided to come here to college and do this course were you considering any other courses?

Emma: So, I applied for Hair and Beauty to do costume make-up for shows but when I got my grades back, I thought it was probably best for me to do A-Levels.

Ross: So why do you think that?

Emma: Just. Well, my parents... They weren’t particularly fond of me doing hair and beauty which is because it’s, I don’t want to sound rude but not the most well-paying job in the future. Especially when I got my grades back, they didn’t want me to throw away academic ability over something like that... I think it was just they had seen how hard I’d worked for my GCSEs, and they didn’t want me to throw it away for something that wasn’t academic, which is what they kept telling me.

Whilst it is the case that Emma actively considered alternative BTEC provision in Hair and Beauty, this was understood as a consequence of her experience of secondary schooling and the impact this might have on their grades achieved: consideration of non-academic study only as a secondary option. For Emma, her secondary school experience and its declining standards warranted her parents to utilise their economic capital to invest in private tutoring for subjects she was struggling in “once or twice-a-week”, costing approximately £25 per 45-minute session. What is made clear in Emma’s education career, and other middle-class interviewees like her, is that although they might have come to experienced troublesome secondary schooling experiences, her parents had the capacity to draw upon economic resources to ameliorate the consequence of this. As a result of her higher-than-

expected attainment at secondary school Emma eventually chose to enter A-Level study and was actively encouraged to do so by her parents.

Prior school experience and attainment also functioned as qualifiers for two of the three middle-class students who did decide to study vocational qualifications. This is exemplified in how Anthony described his time at school generally in negative terms because of poor management and a lack of teaching support and resources available to him. He described his school as “an absolute mess” and cited as an example his GCSE computing classes, wherein his teacher left their role early in his studies and henceforth he “only had supply teachers”. Although he only failed GCSE music at secondary school and therefore could have entered A-Level study at a sixth form or further education college, his school experience left him disengaged with many of the (mainly academic) subjects studied:

Ross: So, do you feel like you had many options after [secondary] school?

Anthony: Not really no... Because I didn't do very well in all my subjects. I passed them but I didn't feel a passion for them. So, I didn't really feel like following them.

It was because of his enjoyment of BTEC Engineering, and specifically his learning about aircraft, at his secondary school that he chose to apply for a BTEC in Aircraft Maintenance:

Ross: When did [Aircraft Maintenance] come into your head as something you wanted to do?

Anthony: When I was doing engineering, we were learning something about aircraft and stuff they're made out of and how they're made, and I just thought this is pretty cool. Yeah, I just really enjoyed learning about it, and I got my head around it and it was understandable. It was one of the few things I could understand [at school]. So, that's why I picked it because I couldn't get my head around many of the subjects at school. So, it kind of refined down my options after school.

In the interview sample, the only middle-class student who had been unable to pursue their chosen course of study was Marianne who had been forced to choose a vocational alternative to A-Level study because of her prior school experience and low GCSE attainment. Initially, she explained that her secondary school experience was positive and that she had attended a “top” school, which had a local reputation for helping its students achieve top grades. However, a combination of factors in her personal life and negative in-school experiences combined to create a negative secondary school experience and low attainment. Marianne herself referred to her GCSE attainment as her most important educational experience due to the disruptive impact it had on her plans and being the reason she “ended up in college”:

Marianne: My most important experience. It probably would have been GCSEs.

Ross: So, why was that important?

Marianne: Because I failed. *I ended up in college* but if I had passed, I would have gone to sixth form and A-Levels. If I had done good at A-Levels I would have been able to go to uni. Right now, University is not one of the places I'd like to be.

Ross: Ok, so you said that because you failed at school, you didn't do as well at school, you came to college. Why would you have gone to sixth form if you could?

Marianne: Because I wanted to do A-Levels in science because my parents wanted me to become a doctor. But obviously I didn't want to do that at the same time but that was like my main goal because everyone in my family has become a doctor. I'm like the stupid one in my family.

Coming from a Bangladeshi family background, Marianne explained at length the pressure placed on her, and many other children from her background, to follow an academic educational career, specifically to study Medicine at King's College London "because my parents wanted me to become a doctor". During her secondary schooling, she explained how she had experienced the loss of her older sister which had a severely detrimental effect on her family life, schooling, and the pressure placed on her to succeed. Before this traumatic event Marianne has been achieving high grades across all her GCSE subjects. However, the loss of her older sister caused her grades to suffer and her secondary education to deteriorate. Marianne revealed that she was bullied at school too, which she felt was an additional reason for her grades to decline:

One thing I didn't mention to you was in secondary school, due to some events with certain people like how, I was, for example, with this group of friends and a few of them they didn't like me, so they decided to do some horrible things. For example, they would push me down the stairs, so at one point I broke my arm and my leg. Then because I wanted to avoid those people, I would run away from school during year seven, eight and nine, the most crucial parts [of secondary school]. The lessons they were in I would run away. I'd write fake doctors notes and things and eventually I got caught obviously, running away from school. But the teachers were always asking me where I was... and I would go on buses... I would ride to every single hospital there was saying "one day I'm going to be here, one day I'm going [to] be here" [as a doctor]. And it never happened. It wasn't necessarily school, just people I was surrounded by.

The traumatic secondary school experience, infused with racism and bullying, therefore contributed to low GCSE attainment and her inability to enter A-Level study at a sixth form or further education college. In a decision that was somewhat congruent with her prior aspirations, she thereafter chose to first study a BTEC qualification in Health and Social Care and then changed to a BTEC in Applied Science due to the perceived poor quality of the former.²⁸ Choosing these courses was understood to enable her to pursue a new career

²⁸ Alongside her main course, Marianne was also retaking GCSE English due to prior failure at secondary school.

goal in a related area of the health and care professions, such as nursing and/or pharmacy. As with Anthony but more severe, Marianne had a negative secondary school experience, yet due to additional traumatic experiences linked to her personal life and in-school bullying she subsequently failed most of her GCSEs. Whilst Marianne represents a unique case in the student sample, her experience and school-to-college transition is to some extent consistent with the observed pattern amongst middle-class students interviewed. Entry into vocational areas of further education among middle-class students was found in cases of negative experiences of (mainly academic) secondary schooling and/or low attainment at GCSE. The only middle-class student who had chosen to enter a BTEC qualification and did not have a negative school experience or low GCSE attainment was Matthew. He was from a Pakistani background and had chosen to study a BTEC level three Engineering course, after previously studying level two Public Services at a different institution. Unlike Anthony and Marianne, Matthew did still have an aspiration to enter university, like both his parents had done, but aspired to be an engineer in the RAF.

For those middle-class students who had entered A-Level study but did consider a BTEC alternative, the latter was very much a second option contemplated as a result of expected low attainment caused by negative school experiences. Though most of these students were able to pursue their first choice, as outlined above Marianne was not able to. She exemplifies the high levels of stress and pressure placed on students from specific social backgrounds to succeed in education and, in the following excerpts, the consequences of failure to achieve expectations placed upon students such as Marianne are shown:

Ross: So, what were your grades and how did they make you feel?

Marianne: I went from being predicted a seven and an eight to getting threes and fours and twos... I remember on GCSE day I was crying my eyes out and I was really disappointed because other things [death of her sister and the experience of bullying] got in my way and I let that get in my way... It makes me feel bad because it makes me feel I have disappointed my parents because that's what they wanted me to do [studying Medicine at King's College London] but I wasn't able to do that.

This example of middle-class failure and its impact on decision-making, self-identity, and wellbeing is in keeping with prior research which challenges the myth of an unproblematic middle-class in education (Power et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2011). Furthermore, it demonstrates the conditions under which the general pattern of the middle-class seeing A-Level study as 'natural' and the only option can be deviated from. Without a negative secondary school experience and/or low attainment, and in some cases despite this, seeing

A-Level study as the unproblematic educational route to take was part of the 'practical rationality' inculcated via a middle-class upbringing (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18).

6.2.2. Working-class students and choosing the academic: an option among many

As previously mentioned, amongst the students participating in this study were working- and middle-class students undertaking A-Level qualifications. In total, five of the 13 working-class students interviewed were studying A-Levels. In analysing the interviews involving these students and comparing them to the themes identified for the middle-class A-Level students previously discussed, it became clear that four of the five working-class A-Level students held different orientations to the academic and their decisions appeared less 'straightforward' than their middle-class counterparts (the remaining, fifth working-class student will be discussed in the final section of this chapter).

Whilst most of the middle-class students studying A-Levels had a somewhat clear understanding of their intended educational and/or employment career aspiration and saw the academic as the only option considered, there was less certainty shown towards choosing A-Level study amongst working-class students. Jacob, for example, had chosen to study A-Levels as a result of failing to achieve a pass grade in GCSE Mathematics, preventing entry into a specialist engineering college to study a BTEC qualification. Even though he has now passed Mathematics after retaking this at Eastern College during his first term of college, he explains that he intends to continue studying A-Levels and use them as a "fail safe" in case he fails to enter the RAF:

Ross: ...What were the choices you were considering [after secondary school]?

Jacob: I was considering going to either here [further education college] or the [specialist] engineering college near here.

Ross: So, why did you choose this rather than that?

Jacob: Because like for the engineering college I needed to pass math and since I failed, I couldn't go there.

Ross: Ok. So, if you passed maths do you think you would have done the engineering rather than A-Levels?

Jacob: Yeah, I feel like I would of.

Ross: So, why would you have rather done that [engineering] than this [A-Levels]?

Jacob: Because I feel like what I really wanted to do was be a fighter pilot and engineering, since you're working with a bunch of machines, would have helped with that.

Ross: So, how do you feel that like you've basically done [your] second choice?

Jacob: Well, I don't really mind because... I feel like here, I'll still be able to get what I want. It's just *this was the second choice* because... the engineering college... would've provided me more education for that specific job. But here it doesn't matter... because since I'm studying A-Levels and the job requirements is like just

get good grades.

Jacob had therefore changed his ideas on his school-to-college transition in response to his failure to meet the entry requirements for his desired BTEC Engineering course. It was only because of this that he then entered Eastern College and chose A-Levels alongside re-taking GCSE Mathematics. Similar to Jacob, two other working-class A-Level students explained that they had personally preferred to study a BTEC qualification after secondary school at first, but their parents had influenced their decision-making and recommended A-Level study:

Ross: Ok, so when you were leaving school did you have many choices? What were you thinking about doing when you left school?

Hannah: I was going to either do my A-Levels or I was going to do travel and tourism and I did my interview for travel and tourism and the lady that interviewed [me] told me that my target grades were really good and that I should try and do my A-Levels. So, I did them. I chose to do my A-Levels instead.

Ross: Ok and what did your parents think about like the different options?

Hannah: They would have been happy with but they're definitely more happy than I chose to do my A-Levels because obviously they will lead to better things [that I] can do when I'm older.

Ross: Were your parents important when deciding what to do at college?

Julie: Yeah.

Ross: How?

Julie: I wasn't sure whether to go down the media make-up route [BTEC Media Make up Artistry] or do A-Levels and my mum said well you can always, she did sort of tell me, not tell me, but advised me to do A-Levels just because I wasn't sure what I wanted, if I wanted to do that, and she didn't want me to waste time on that [BTEC Media Make-up Artistry].

Ross: But if you could choose yourself... what would you have done?

Julie: Probably make-up but I'm glad I did A-Levels.

Present in the excerpts above are references to how Hannah and Julie were both pushed towards studying A-Levels rather than their favoured BTEC qualifications. There is a sense too that both students' mothers felt that the A-Level pathway was better than studying a vocational alternative. Indeed, in a similar fashion to other students in this study, Julie explained that her mother did not want her to "waste" her opportunity to pursue A-Levels if she could meet the entry requirements to do so. Thus, whilst both said their parents would have been happy with whatever choice they made (this was asserted during interviews), there was a sense that the academic was the first choice for their parents:

Ross: Did they [parents] help you decide on what courses to do?

Hannah: No. Well, they kind of just said whatever you feel most comfortable with then you can do. Then obviously mum was like your A-Levels would be really good, so I took that into account and decided that A-Levels were the best option.

To understand why their parents had a disposition towards supporting their child in entering the academic further education pathway, it is helpful to identify the educational history of the parents, in addition to the wider institutional inequities in esteem between the academic and vocational further education pathways which were introduced in chapter 3. Neither Hannah's nor Julie's male parents (father or stepfather) had completed A-Levels (or equivalent) when they left school, choosing instead to enter employment or a vocational course (e.g., apprenticeship). However, both of their mothers had studied A-Levels and/or been to university (e.g., as mature students), thus indicating that while they are working-class, both are able to draw upon cultural resources and dispositions towards education located in their family background that are different to other working-class interviewees in this study. This division in educational history in the family was found to shape the dispositions each parent had towards their child's education:

Ross: ...would you say that they are 'pushy' parents in making you do education?

Hannah: I wouldn't say pushy, but... they wanted me to do my A-Levels.

Ross: ...Why do you think that they wanted you to do that?

Hannah: Mum said. Well Dad's not really, he doesn't mind as much as long as I'm happy doing what I'm doing, but he obviously still cares about what I'm doing. Mum, because obviously she did her A-Levels and she's now a community nurse, she thinks it's a good opportunity to lead to university and lead to what you want to do.

Hannah also explained that many members of her family had attended university; some of which as mature students, including her mother who studied nursing. In contrast to Hannah who wanted to pursue a career in TV Production, Julie did not have a clear idea of her future career aspiration and chose A-Levels as a consequence of this uncertainty:

Ross: So, why did you not choose that [BTEC qualification] when you first came to college?

Julie: Because I'm not really sure what I wanted to do when I'm older, so I thought if I do A-Levels then I have three different branches just to go off from.

Likewise, Bella was also unclear on what she would do after leaving her previous Hair and Beauty course, which caused her to change course to A-Level study:

Yeah, so I left school two years ago and I realised that beauty was kind of not for me [the year after choosing it] and because I'm not sure what I want to do specifically [I decided] I'll go for A-Levels because I know you can get into anything really... it looks quite good.

A-Level study was understood by Julie and Bella as safer options to pursue in further education and as opportunities to delay decision-making on narrowing their education. Bella

demonstrates the flexibility that A-Levels are believed to provide students with, and the trust parents and students place in them. However, while these students demonstrated a knowledge of the heightened status of A-Level study in England, this did not mean, like the middle-class students discussed previously, they would not consider alternatives. Indeed, Julie explained that “if I knew definitely what I wanted to do in the future then I would have started that straight away”. Likewise, Bella’s mother initially showed a level of opposition to her wanting to transfer from Hair and Beauty to A-Levels but allowed her to choose what would make her happy. This anxiety to changing course was likely because of Bella’s ambivalent secondary school experience and the postponement of labour market entry it would cause. Bella’s elder sister had previously studied A-Levels at Eastern too but had chosen to enter employment directly after completing her studies at college because she did not feel a passion for any particular subject. The experience of her elder sister, together with the limited cultural and educational capital possessed, may have therefore prompted Bella’s mother to question her choice to transfer onto a different course after studying hair and beauty for a year.

Furthermore, Bella explained how she believed having a strong enthusiasm for a particular subject(s) was important when choosing to study at university (similar to her sister). This was a reason for her wanting to take a gap year after her A-Levels, so she could evaluate the options available to her. Underpinning this was an uncertainty whether university was “right” for her and although she was keen to attend university for the non-academic life and social experiences it was felt to provide, Bella was unclear whether she should do so without an enthusiasm for a particular subject:

I’m going to have a gap, I think after A-Levels and then just decide from there because I don’t want to jump into university then not know what I want, regret it and you know.

The ambivalence shown towards university study by Bella echoes similar sentiments across interviews with students from working-class backgrounds in this study. For the working-class students who were studying A-Levels and BTEC qualifications, university study was not necessarily seen as a natural trajectory to follow, despite some of their parents having completed university qualifications. For Julie, university was encouraged by her parents and her preferred route after further education. This was because university study would further prolong her decision-making and a degree in Psychology was seen as providing more “open” career opportunities for her. Jacob and Bella were more ambivalent regarding university study, instead locating future opportunities elsewhere; in the RAF for Jacob and in

gap-year service sector employment for Bella until she forms more concrete goals. Amongst the working-class students completing vocational qualifications, only Katherine, a BTEC level two Art & Design student, had explained that higher education was a possibility considered, but only vague understandings of pursuing a higher apprenticeship were discussed during the interview. The fact that her single-mother and her two elder sisters were currently or had studied at universities in England is an important differentiating factor to many of her other working-class counterparts. However, her choice of a higher apprenticeship rather than a 'conventional' degree qualification may be the result of her relatively unenjoyable secondary school experience, which was exacerbated by medical issues and her additional learning need (ALN).²⁹

Far from being a route exclusively for the middle-class, A-Level study in English further education is a route often chosen by students from working-class backgrounds. However, the working-class A-Level students in this study showed different orientations towards academic study in further education compared to their middle-class counterparts. Working-class students exhibited a greater openness to alternatives. This is represented in the consideration of BTEC qualifications by most of the A-Level students who were from working-class backgrounds. However, it was in working-class families where higher levels of cultural capital were present that parents, where possible, encouraged their child to pursue A-Level study. Whereas BTEC qualifications were not seen as possible for all but one middle-class A-Level student, they were openly considered by all but one of the working-class students. Moreover, working-class students expressed a preference for BTEC qualifications in some cases, particularly if they were aware of their desired future career path. Where students were not able to pursue their preference, such as in Ethan's case or where Bella ceased aspiring to pursue a career in Hair and Beauty, A-Levels were seen as a more reliable pathway to take. This is because it was seen as bestowing a greater labour market and higher educational premium as opposed to, in Ethan's words, a more "restrictive" BTEC qualification.

6.3. Social class, ethnicity, and the school-to-college transition

The only working-class interviewee who had much in common with his middle-class counterparts regarding his unquestioned orientation to the academic was Scott, who was a student from a minority ethnic background studying A-Level Psychology, Mathematics, and

²⁹ This was referred to as relating to issues with communication. This was not probed further to respect the privacy of the interviewee.

Film Studies. During the interview, Scott explained that he had previously undertaken A-Level study at his secondary school's sixth form but had failed. This meant that he was forced to come to Eastern College as a "last option" to achieve his aspiration of pursuing a university education:

Ross: Why did you choose to study at this college?

Scott: Because it was my last option. So, I done A-levels last year, but it didn't work out.

Ross: So, why didn't it work out?

Scott: I was just distracted. Yeah. So, I'm retaking my A-Levels this year.

Ross: So, what sort of things did you do [in school], which you think you shouldn't have done?

Scott: I was just living life, you know quotes. I was going to parties, not concentrating, yeah... It wasn't that great because obviously I was regretting last year, so yeah. But I'm back now and hopefully going to be better.

Scott's aspiration after completing A-Level study is to pursue an Architecture degree to then become an architect. This aspiration was developed as a consequence of his uncle's friend who had a strong impact on his career aspirations:

Ross: Ok. So, thinking back to when you were leaving school and you chose to do this, what made you choose to do A-levels?

Scott: Because I want to be an architect and to be an architect you, you can do apprenticeship, but you need A-Levels. After A-Levels, I think, you're secured you can just go to university or go to an apprenticeship for Architecture.

Ross: Ok, so who told you about what you need to do?

Scott: No. I got motivated by my uncle's friend, yeah. He came over one day, and he was just, he was just driving a flashy car and like he just came in and was working his computer and I was quite motivated by him... Yeah, that was when I was like yeah, I really want to do that, yeah.

Although, during the interview Scott had explained he would like to consider an apprenticeship in Architecture after his A-Levels, his ethnic background was said to place pressure on him to pursue an academic, university education. It is for this reason that his father has made clear to him and his siblings that he wants them to become a doctor, owing to the social prestige this bestows upon the family in Nigeria (where his two biological parents live and work). While on the surface Scott can choose from a number of options (e.g., apprenticeship, enter employment, university study), the social, specifically ethnic family background, he has been brought up within constrains his choice-making in a similar way to Marianne discussed above. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Scott: I think I'm likely to go to university because where I'm from if you don't go to university, I don't know, everyone just degrades you.

Ross: You're seen as like you've failed?

Scott: Yeah. So, university's like, university's, university's the finish line.

Interviewer: Yeah, ok and you feel that if you don't do that-
 Scott: Everyone's going to look down on me. Yeah.
 Ross: Yeah ok, so you wouldn't consider doing like a vocational-
 Scott: No, I would. If I got the chance for an apprenticeship I would definitely-
 Ross: You would do it instead?
 Scott: Yeah, I would. You're still going into depth, yeah.
 Ross: But you don't think you'll have the opportunity to do an apprenticeship?
 Scott: No. I'll apply but I'm more likely to go to university...
 Ross: Ok. Why?
 Scott: Because I have to. Because of people. I don't know.
 Ross: Because of the pressure of having to go and succeed?
 Scott: Yeah, yeah. Succeed yeah.

Thus, in a similar way to Marianne, who was from a middle-class minority ethnic family background, Scott personally felt a high level of pressure to pursue A-Level and university study because of his family background. This persistence was despite a level of personal regret, and sense of lack of control, disclosed at the end of the interview:

Scott: ...A-levels is quite a lot, it's stressful sometimes.
 Ross: So, do you kind of regret picking A-Levels?
 Scott: Yeah sometimes, but you know I've got to do what I've got to do. Have to learn.

This data does suggest the relationship between social class and the transition to college can be mediated by ethnicity. However, not all students from a minority family background in this study had chosen to study A-Levels. Three other students – Katherine (working-class), Matthew (middle-class), and Connor (working-class) – were all studying BTEC qualifications in level two Art & Design, level three Engineering, and level two Engineering, respectively. Despite these students choosing not to study A-Levels, they all held aspirations to pursue a higher education of some kind and only Connor had no family history of university study. Thus, of the seven further education students from minority ethnic family backgrounds in this study's sample, only two had not previously or did not currently aspire to enter higher education. Of these two, Jacob, who was from a south-east Asian family background, did explain that he sometimes received 'mixed messages' from his parents about applying to university and has previously pondered taking a Creative Writing degree at the local university. However, his prior GCSE and predicted A-Level attainment forced him to abandon this idea. Liam, a working-class student who was studying a level three BTEC qualification in IT, also did not want to enter university and repeatedly expressed an interest in gaining practical experience of working in cyber security or software development, which his course was said to lack. He had previously left secondary school, where he had a relatively negative experience, with only two GCSE qualifications and entered his secondary school's sixth form to undertake a vocational qualification to attain the requisite four

additional GCSE-level qualifications to enable entry into a higher-level further education course (he finished school with two GCSEs in total). Thereafter he had temporarily begun a Business apprenticeship with a local employer, though chose to leave this within a few of months of starting because:

I felt like, sure I'm happy with this sort of money I'm earning but I'm not happy with myself, the choice I made. And I felt like right, I mean I've done it for five months and then I dropped out and came here.

To some extent, Liam's prior education experiences created a sense of opposition to purely academic study and an interest in more practical learning. Like Marianne, he had also experienced family difficulties regarding his education. This saw family members (his mother and brother) question his choice to enter his current IT course, as they felt he lacked the ability to do so:

Liam: I mean I said it [the course] to them but they were quite negative because they thought I wouldn't be the sort of person to do it and I don't know...

Ross: What do you mean by "not the sort of person to do it"?

Liam: They don't really believe in the fact I would do something like this, do something IT or I don't know.

Rather than succumbing to the impressions his mother and elder brother had of him, Liam expressed that he had, from experience, felt emboldened to pursue his interests in IT despite disapproval from his family. Thus, although Liam deviates from the pattern observed regarding a preference for the academic, which is similar to the middle-class students in this study, his ethnic family background is still important in his negotiation of the school-to-college transition, as was his school experience and attainment. He later disclosed that his choice to ignore the advice of his family had created issues within the family and had impacted his sense of self, too.

The notion of 'ethnic capital' introduced by Modood (2004) and elaborated by Shah et al. (2010) can help understand the preference for academic study and/or university education by most of the students in this study from ethnic minority family backgrounds. Ethnic capital refers to the 'familial adult-child relationships, transmission of aspirations, and attitudes and norms of enforcement [which] facilitate educational achievement and social mobility among those with limited economic capital' from an ethnic minority background (ibid, p. 1112). Although ethnic capital is used to refer to the combined cultural and social capital acquired through belonging to an ethnic minority family and community, the specific feature of

transmission of aspirations and attitudes towards education and employment is relevant to this discussion. Unlike the white British working-class students in this study, academic study was not seen as an option amongst others in contrast to their middle-class counterparts who predominantly saw academic education as the only plausible option. Ethnic minority students in this study seemed in some ways closer to their middle-class counterparts in terms of their orientations towards education, particularly the importance of higher education and their preference towards A-Level study. Where ethnic minority students did choose to study vocational courses, these were, with the exception of Katherine (Art & Design), in Engineering, IT, and Applied Science. A core part of the decision-making for some of these students was made by their parents, directly or indirectly:

Ross: When you choose this course were you considering any other choices?
Connor: Yeah.
Ross: So, what else were you thinking about?
Connor: Music. I like music.
Ross: So, what made you choose this? What made you not choose music?
Connor: My mum. She didn't like the idea.
Ross: Why?
Connor: She says it's not a career to follow music. Yeah.
Ross: So, why does she think that?
Connor: I don't know. You know, old people have a different perspective in education. Because she didn't finish it, so she wants me to finish it. Yeah.
Ross: Did you want to do both courses? Or were you leaning towards one course?
Connor: I was leaning towards music more than engineering.
Ross: Ok and what made you sway?
Connor: My mum.

Whilst attitudes and norms 'may vary across groups' (Modood, 2004, p. 100), in this study a patterning was found, whereby students from ethnic minority backgrounds, studying both academic and vocational subjects, had an orientation towards certain, traditional subjects. It is thus in the social background, encompassing the social class and ethnic conditions from which students live and wherein they make decisions, that the decisions made during the school-to-college transition can be contextualised.

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the decision-making of students as they transitioned from secondary schooling into post-school education within the further education sector. What has been clear throughout is how decision-making during the school-to-college transition are fundamentally shaped by the social class family background. Mechanisms discussed which underpin this include the transfiguration of class-based interests into educational and

occupational aspirations, in addition to how class origin shape the extent to which particular further education pathways (e.g., A-Levels) are perceived as 'natural'. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital(s) were drawn upon in order to understand how these young people (a) developed interests in certain subject areas and (b) how these interests converted into specific aspirations for future study and/or employment. Moreover, the concept of 'practical rationality' was adopted to understand how social class positioning and family background come to convert interests and aspirations into specific course and qualification choices in further education. This helps us comprehend that while individuals from different social class positions might share similar interests, the way these transfigure into specific aspirations and choices can be quite different. Thereafter, the way in which perceptions of and entry into the A-Level academic pathway in further education is shaped by social class background was considered. This illustrated how for most of the middle-class students in this study, A-Level study was the natural and only option considered for post-school study. In contrast, the working-class students typically engaged in choosing between different options and, unlike their middle-class peers, were found to choose both academic and vocational courses. Furthermore, the interview data suggests that these processes can be mediated by secondary school experiences and ethnic background.

These findings lend support to the utility of habitus and horizons for action as conceptual devices in understanding school-to-college transitions (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Specifically, this chapter has demonstrated how class-based dispositions rooted in habitus make possible certain horizons for action for young people in further education, be that the qualification and/or subject chosen. Thus, in common with the history of the sector outlined in chapter 3, transitions into further education are shaped by the social position of and the resources available to young people. This augments existing statistical research on further education participation (e.g., Thompson, 2009) by exploring patterns through the understandings of school-to-college transitions grounded in the perceptions of young people themselves, especially regarding class-based disparities in selecting the academic further education pathway. However, this research also supplements and challenges prior research which argues that secondary school attainment accounts for class-based variation in further education study (e.g., Dilnot, 2018; Moulton et al., 2018). This is because this study indicates that class-based perceptions are also important to educational transitions and the patterns of participation observed in chapter 5. Therefore, in addressing research question two, this chapter has shown that social class background shapes the school-to-college transition through transfiguration of interest into aspiration and subsequently into qualification and course choice in further education.

In the following chapter, research question four will be explored, so to understand the student experience within the further education colleges studied and whether social class background influences the student experience.

Chapter 7: Student experiences of college: journeys of rediscovery

In this chapter, research question four – in what ways does social class background shape the student experience of further education contexts? – will be addressed. During interviews with students, questions were asked about their college experiences and in what ways this contrasted to their secondary schooling. The discussion involved a mixture of open and focused questions, allowing for students to reveal their own ideas on their experience of entering and learning in further education, in addition to discussing a number of areas that characterise educational contexts (e.g., student-teacher relations).

This chapter begins by exploring the contrasts drawn between secondary schooling and college, focusing particularly on the relationship of secondary school experiences to interviewed students' sense of educational confidence and efficacy in learning. By focusing on educational confidence and learner efficacy, the chapter considers how school and college had differing effects for many students on their self-esteem related to and self-perceptions of how they had performed in education and whether they can learn effectively. Social class background is found to be related to the existence of ambivalent and/or negative attitudes towards secondary schooling. Possible explanations are offered for this, including: (a) the higher preponderance of interests leading to vocational study among working-class students, (b) levels of cultural capital rooted in working-class families, and (c) classed patterns of secondary school selection and participation. After considering students' reflections on secondary schooling, the students' experiences of being in a further education college are explored. This will focus on how, for many students, their college experience has had a positive contributing effect on their self-esteem, educational confidence, and learner efficacy. Here it will be argued how, for these students, their further education experience is an opportunity for the *rediscovery* of positive learner experiences and educational confidence, particularly for students who have non-academic learner identities. Two elements of further education learning cultures, emergent from student interview data, which aid this rediscovery are discussed: (1) the college environment, freedom, and independence, and (2) student-teacher relationships.

7.1. Contrasting secondary school and college: academic learning, educational confidence, and familial educational histories

When asked to describe their secondary school experience there was a general ambivalence in the responses provided by students. This is indicated in figures 3 and 4,

which visualise the single-word descriptors of secondary school and college experiences given by students. Most students did fondly recall their social lives in secondary schooling, yet learning experiences, limited support, and the management of the school was a commonly cited reason for negative attitudes towards the educational aspects of secondary schooling.

A large proportion of the words used to describe secondary schooling by the students indicate an ambivalence or negative attitude. For instance, only two students provided clearly positive responses (e.g., “fun”), and these were related more to the social aspects of schooling (revealed in follow-up questioning). Other students used a range of terms to describe schooling in less positive terms, ranging from “boring” to “hell”. This contrasted with almost unanimous positive responses regarding the college experience and how it compared to secondary school. As figures 3 and 4 illustrate, the number of positive responses is greater among college descriptors. Conversely, there is only one clearly negative descriptor amongst the remaining descriptor words used, many of which indicate a positive sentiment (e.g., “encouraging”, “relieving”, “enjoyable”). As will be discussed later in this chapter, words such as “free” and “relaxed” were common features of the college context that made it a positive learning culture for many of the students.

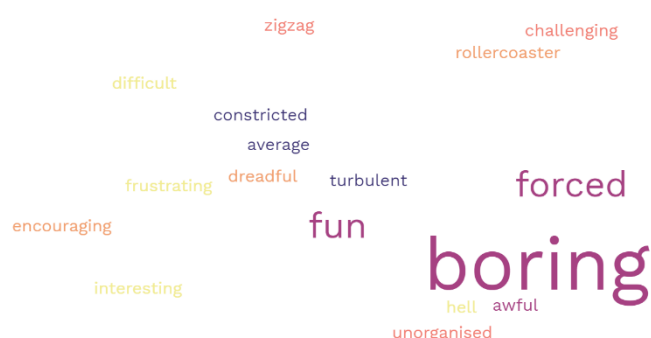


Figure 3: Students’ single-word descriptors for interviewees’ secondary school experiences



Figure 4: Students' single-world descriptors for interviewees' college experiences

For many students, secondary schooling was spoken of as a “chore” (Anthony) whereas college was somewhere students enjoyed learning something they wanted to study – or school was something many students *had* to do, yet college was something they wanted to do. When Jacob was asked why A-Levels was not “boring” like his schooling, he explained that:

...I feel because... I'm studying what I want to study and like I had my own hand in choosing what I wanted to study as well.

While there is not a direct relationship between social class background and reporting more ambivalent and negative school experiences, positive and/or non-problematic recollections of secondary school were more common among the middle-class students in this study. One reason for this may have been the greater likelihood of non-academic learning dispositions among the working-class students in this study. This was commonly expressed through a lack of enthusiasm for secondary schooling, its curriculum, and its focus on academic learning. Teachers in some cases reinforced this sense of unbelonging in academic learning contexts by suggesting that students should pursue vocational studies. For instance, in citing teachers at school as an important source of guidance on post-secondary choices, Benjamin explained how he was told he was “more hands-on than sitting doing writing” by a teacher. He explained how this helped inform his decision to pursue a Level 1 Construction qualification at Eastern College. More commonly, though, students spoke of their sense of ambivalence towards secondary schooling and the rigid academic curriculum it provides.

Hannah, Benjamin, and Claire, all working-class students, demonstrate acutely how the academic focus of secondary schooling was detrimental for many of the students in this study:

Ross: ...how would you describe school?

Hannah: Some of it was hard because I'm not really academic. Like I struggle a bit with learning and stuff.

Benjamin: [describing secondary school] A bit frustrating.

Ross: Frustrating, why?

Benjamin: I don't know, it's just maths and English, like you know all the poetry and all that.

The quotes above demonstrate a sense that the academic forms of learning characterising secondary schooling (e.g., "books and poems") were not enjoyable experiences for these students. The ambivalence shown towards academic secondary schooling by students was a consequence of unenjoyable experiences, which often caused them to reject progressing into the academic sixth form at school or A-Levels altogether. Alex provides an example of this. When asked why he did not wish to enter his secondary school's sixth form, he first cited his GCSE attainment as a barrier. However, after agreeing that his grades would have still enabled him to progress into A-Level study at his sixth form or another institution, he explained how his unenjoyable experience of secondary schooling played a role in his decision:

Ross: ...and what other options were presented to you at school? Did you feel like you could do lots of things [after leaving school] or did you feel like there were certain things you were going to do?

Alex: I knew that I was going to come to college. I knew that I wouldn't get into sixth form or anything.

Ross: Ok, why?

Alex: I don't know. Just because of my grades. [I] don't think I would. I don't think I would of, no.

Ross: Because you passed all your GCSEs, so you could have gone to sixth form. So why did you feel you couldn't?

Alex: I don't know. I just feel like I wouldn't have enjoyed it. It would have been the same as school.

This justification of a negative choice made by Alex – in the sense of choosing a vocational qualification as a result of perceived academic failure or inability and thus not wishing to continue beyond school – is also evident in the higher status he attributed to academic sixth-form study:

Alex: I don't think they [other students] would think it [his course] was as good as what they're doing. Like you're not getting as good a qualification.

Ross: Do you think that is fair? Do you think that doing an A-Level is better than doing a vocational course like yours?

Alex: For me no, but I presume that probably doing an A-Level is setting you up better I suppose.

Ross: If you could do an A-Level... do you think you would do it?

Alex: I think I'd rather do this course [Agricultural Engineering].

Ross: So why is that if you think A-Levels are better for your future?

Alex: Just because of the reasoning that I want to do something that I want to do and not have to be forced to do, not forced, but like have to [do] something at sixth form that doesn't relate to what I want to do in my future. Well, it does but it doesn't relate directly.

In the two quotes above, Alex is found to draw a distinction between secondary schooling and his current college qualification and experience, which is underpinned by the differential emphasis on academic and vocational learning in each. Underpinned by his preference for a less academic curriculum and more choice in his further education studies, he committed to a course he admits to being less advantageous because it is aligned more strongly with his non-academic preferences and interests. As a result of the interaction between Alex's social and learning dispositions and the secondary schooling environment, a loss of his educational confidence was experienced during secondary school. This created, or reinforced, a sense of what is and what is not suitable for him – or using Alex's vernacular, what he would and would not enjoy.

Another working-class student, Claire, also demonstrates this pattern of the academic nature of secondary schooling having an impact on her learner identity and sense of educational confidence. Like Alex, Claire's parents did not pursue academic education after schooling and opted for employment shortly after post-school training. Also, she too passed all her GCSE qualifications, achieving high grades in many – such as a six in maths and six in triple science – but still personally felt a dislike of and lack of 'fit' with the academic environment of secondary schooling:

Claire: I think education is important but for different people, like every person is different, so if you have a bog-standard curriculum, it doesn't benefit every person. Like for me, I struggled at English and none of my teachers like picked that out, so I really struggled and fell behind in that subject. But that was because I couldn't deal with the curriculum...

Ross: So, in what ways might school change?

Claire: I'd just change the curriculum so it's not as heavily based on books and poems, like there can be a couple of things, but it's different so you go through it slower.

What Claire and Alex signify is that students from working-class backgrounds can achieve 'good' GCSE attainment, yet still develop a sense of unbelonging in the academic learning

environment of secondary schooling. The differential cultural resources and educational histories rooted in their family background³⁰ thus do not hinder educational success within the academic educational field, but in experiencing the secondary school educational sub-field Alex perceives a lack of 'fit' in his personal subjectivity. These do not necessarily generate anti-school forms of behaviour (e.g., Willis, 1978) or educational failure (Reay, 2017), but instead generated strategic compliance to the learning environment occupied (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1997) where students, like Alex, continued to meet prescribed aims of schooling, despite not being personally invested in them and preferring alternative forms of education. Whilst this absence of participation in academic post-school education was common among the working-class students in this study, it was less so for middle-class students. The greater history of extended academic education in the families of the middle-class interviewees would have the effect of cultivating a disposition or norm towards certain forms of education. Indeed, this was seen in chapter 5 where many middle-class students saw A-Level study as the 'natural' thing to do after secondary school, but also in the less negative experiences they had of their schooling.

However, less positive secondary school experiences were found amongst some middle-class students too. For instance, Anthony's view was that his negative experience could be attributed to the frequent changing of management at his secondary school and a lack of teaching staff in his GCSE subjects. This caused him to not feel that he had a range of options when entering further education, despite his high attainment (Anthony passed all his GCSEs, excluding Music), because he was unable to develop an enthusiasm for any subject:

Ross: So, do you feel like you had many options after school?

Anthony: Not really no... Because I didn't do very well in all my subjects. I passed them but I didn't feel a passion for them. So, I didn't really feel like following them.

When asked why he did not wish to enter his secondary school's sixth form, Anthony, like Claire, Benjamin, and Alex above, offered a critical reflection on the generalist academic curriculum offered in English secondary education, especially its focus on a set of prescribed core subjects with little room for the exploration of non-academic interests:

³⁰ Both Alex and Claire's parents had not attended higher education, except for Alex's mother who had recently (one year before data collection) completed a higher education nursing qualification as a mature student. Upon leaving school Alex's father completed a plumbing apprenticeship and his mother entered full-time employment in social care. Now, his father owns a stationary business, and his mother is a nurse (social care). Claire's father completed an apprenticeship before entering employment and her mother did not continue education after secondary schooling, owing to health problems. Her mother is now a school cook while her father is an engineer in a local factory.

Ross: So, the alternative [to college] was to go to sixth form?

Anthony: Yeah, it was either come here (college) or go to sixth form – here being the better choice.

Ross: Ok and why wouldn't you want to go to sixth form?

Anthony: Because it would be at the same school run by the same people and it's just boring.

Ross: And you just wanted to get away from school?

Anthony: And I wanted to focus on just one topic, not like four.

Alex, Claire, and Anthony all entered vocational subjects in college: BTEC Land-based Engineering for the Alex and Claire and Aircraft Maintenance for Anthony. Whereas for Alex and Claire the nature of (academic) learning was the core issue with their secondary schooling, Anthony had specific issues with the management and organisation of his secondary school which produced a dislike for similar environments and a desire to leave that environment, in addition to preventing the development of interests in subjects studied. While Anthony did show a preference towards studying a more vocational qualification in college, this seems to have been a response to his specific secondary school experience, and his BTEC Engineering class in school being his only enjoyable class: where he felt like an effective learner.

Whereas Alex emphasised the general features of academic learning as important in not choosing sixth form and academic study. The account given by Anthony is arguably indicative of the cultural capital and relationship to education within his family background (e.g., both parents pursued university study and work in professional jobs). Anthony's reference to the mismanagement of the school may be suggestive of the conversations about his schooling in the home and the confidence felt in engaging with educational structures. According to his account of secondary school it was not the academic nature of schooling but the ineffectiveness of the management and supply of teachers that discouraged him from academic education and made school "boring". There appeared to be less certainty in his learning dispositions whilst at school given that, unlike Alex and Claire, he did not form his desire to enter non-academic provision until later in his secondary education. Arguably, Anthony showed a greater engagement in active choice-making, where throughout his secondary schooling, his trajectory was more open and his choice to leave academic education was due to a lack of opportunity in his secondary school context. By contrast, for Alex and Claire the choice to leave had a more inevitable feel, rooted very much in the familial and social context of their upbringing. For example, from an early point in his schooling Alex explained that he was interested in pursuing an engineering course or a course with a vocational focus. Furthermore, Alex explained how he had an impression that

his father had wanted him to pursue an alternative vocational course and was disappointed when he had chosen his current vocational course:

My Dad didn't like; I don't think he liked [my choice]. He didn't say but [I] don't think he liked the idea, he wanted me to be a plumber or electrician, but he put me off that really... Because he did it and he didn't bother doing a career in it, so I thought it couldn't have been that good if he did that course and didn't want to go into a career.

Therefore, in the same way as Claire had developed her enthusiasm for Land-based Engineering from her familial background and the opportunities this provided for meaningful non-academic learning experiences from an early age, Alex's family environment also provided an important context from which his choices were made. In contrast, Anthony did not mention his parents as being impactful on his choice in such a strong way. For Anthony too, it was the secondary school experience itself which prompted his choice-making, as opposed to Alex and Claire who seemed to have been set on a non-academic trajectory much earlier in their educational career.

Similar to these three students, Emma, whose background was bridging the upper-working and lower-middle class classifications, explained that her time at secondary school had caused her personal difficulties. For her, this related to mental health:

Ross: ...So how would you like describe your school experience?

Emma: Awful. I hated it. The school that I went to went into special measures when I was in year eight and it just never improved since I left, and the school knew that. I think our whole year group just, we basically just had to teach ourselves...

Ross: ...So why weren't you feeling great [after finishing secondary school]?

Emma: [I was] just pretty depressed the whole of school and very anxious like all the time, and when I came to college, I just didn't want to speak to anyone. But with [college personal tutor] helping it's just changed; I just wish we had people like [college personal tutor] at school.

Emma thus expressed a very negative experience of secondary schooling that had profound ramifications for her mental health. It was as a consequence of this impact on her mental health and sense of confidence in learning, that she opted to study A-Levels in a further education college rather than in her secondary school's sixth form. Emma did also consider studying a BTEC qualification after thinking she would be unable to progress onto A-Level study because of her expected low GCSE attainment and traumatising effects of her schooling. Her experience caused her to question both her academic ability and damaged her educational confidence. However, after unexpectedly achieving high grades (e.g., "sevens and eights") in most of her subjects, she "realised that [I] should probably do my A-Levels". What was apparent in comparing the interviews conducted with Emma and the other students who chose to enter non-academic qualifications after ambivalent and/or

negative secondary school experiences, was that, although parental involvement was present to some extent in all students' decision-making and transitions, there was a clear encouragement from Emma's parents to progress onto A-Levels despite her prior negative experiences:

Ross: ...so when you decided to come here to college and do this course were you considering any other courses?

Emma: So, I applied for Hair and Beauty to do costume make-up for shows but when I got my grades back, I thought it was probably best for me to do A-Levels.

Ross: So why do you think that?

Emma: My parents... They weren't particularly fond of me doing Hair and Beauty which is because its, don't want to sound rude but not the most well-paying job in the future. Especially when I got my grades back they didn't want me to throw away academic ability over something like that.

Ross: Ok, so what were like the main factors in deciding what to do now?

Emma: I'm not really too sure to be honest because I don't particularly like [academic] learning, but I think it's the fact that because I'm quite academic I sort of just have to because I have parents that make me.

Here again, the role of socially-situated perceptions of the suitable and appropriate educational pathway is evident. This is because Emma experienced a dislodging of her academic learning identity and confidence at school yet was able to benefit from a different set of cultural resources that offered her support in her school-to-college transition. This is illustrated in the valorisation of A-Level study by her parents and indeed herself by identifying that as her first choice, to only be departed from in the case of academic failure, as well as in the demeaning of non-academic options (e.g., "...throw away academic ability *over something like that*"). Thus, despite the damaging influence of secondary school on Emma's sense of confidence and efficacy in education, in addition to how this caused self-doubt (e.g., "I don't particularly like learning"), the support and encouragement to persist in academic education led her to pursue the academic further education pathway. This is a very different dynamic than that observed among the working-class students previously discussed who had a negative experience of secondary school.

7.2. Social class and school-college contrasts

For many of the working-class students A-Levels were perceived as the back-up to vocational study. As outlined in chapter 5, Jacob explained that he would have chosen BTEC Engineering if he had not failed GCSE Mathematics in secondary school:

Jacob: I was considering going to either here or the engineering college near here [but] because for the engineering college I needed to pass Math and since I failed, I couldn't go there.

Conversely, among middle-class students the simultaneous valorisation of the academic and demeaning the vocational was more subtle and implicit, such as seeing A-Levels and the as inevitable or natural. The role of familial cultural capital is illustrated by contrasting Emma's earlier account of her school-to-college transition with Bella's. Bella explained how her time at secondary school had prompted her to doubt whether she "belonged" in academic areas of study. Consequently, she chose to study a BTEC qualification in Hair and Beauty, which she later decided to leave and study A-Levels the following year (and at the time of interview):

Ross: ...so the reason why you did Hair and Beauty, did you want to do a vocational course rather than an academic course? Did you feel that you wanted a change from school?

Bella: Yeah, I didn't feel like I was that academic to be doing it and then I realised clearly that's not what's making me happy, so I went for the more academic course.

Ross: So, now how do you feel about the type of person you are?

Bella: Yeah, I'm happy, I do enjoy it and I'm glad I did make, did go for it, because I've clearly enjoyed my courses, so it did turn out for the best. Yeah.

Compared to Emma, Bella indicates a less negative experience of secondary schooling that still produced a sense of unbelonging in academic learning environments. However, whereas Bella's experience led to her choosing a BTEC qualification in college, Emma's more negative experience did not do so. In identifying the differential cultural capital and educational histories in the familial backgrounds of each of these students, this can be more clearly understood. This is because Emma discussed how her mother's own experience of A-Level study and subsequent entry into higher education powerfully shaped her enthusiasm for Emma to also study her A-Levels. Compared to this, Bella's parents³¹ did not continue beyond post-school training and now work as a carer and delivery driver in England. In contrast to Emma, Bella explained that her parents were not as forceful in her school-to-college transition, allowing her to choose her course based on her own interest in Hair and Beauty (which she also studied in school as a BTEC qualification). Furthermore, when Bella decided to leave her Hair and Beauty qualification and switch to A-Levels, she explained that her mother expressed unease at the prospect of prolonging her education. Therefore, this is suggestive of how differential cultural capital in Emma and Bella's backgrounds leads to the differential valorisation of educational routes, the performance of more active choice-making by Emma and her parents, and the ability for damaging or ambivalent secondary school experiences to be repaired via parental engagement and familiarity with educational contexts. Moreover, for Emma the choice to study A-Levels had primacy and was only

³¹ Educated in a northern European country (previously part of the USSR).

temporarily deviated from because of suspected academic underachievement. Conversely, Bella treated A-Levels as the second option only chosen because of her loss of enthusiasm in her vocational studies. Thus, this passage has demonstrated that familial social class background is a prominent frame for understanding how school experience contrasts with college experience.

Given most of the middle-class students had parents who had extended educational histories and now occupied middle-class social positions, it is unsurprising to note that these students expressed a lower level of ambivalence to their secondary education. The higher level of economic and cultural capital possessed by middle-class families has been shown to contribute to segregation in school attendance in England, with students from middle-class backgrounds more likely to experience more resourceful and fertile educational environments (Reay & Lucey, 2004; Abrahams, 2016; Van den Brande et al., 2019; Burgess et al., 2020). Conversely, working-class students in this study were less likely to be able to mobilise their parents' prior educational experiences and often constructed learning dispositions consistent with more vocational aspirations.

A characteristic of many student's educational career discussed in this section (e.g., Emma, Anthony, Bella) was how the choice to enter college was a response to the undesirability of remaining in their secondary school's sixth form. Popular understandings of further education, and colleges in particular, foreground arguments pertaining to social justice when making the case for the sector and institutions (Orr, 2018). This is because they are often seen to be 'second chance institutions' for students, typically from non-traditional and socially disadvantaged educational backgrounds, to pursue an education and ultimately achieve positive labour market outcomes. Although this might be the case, many of the students in this study (e.g., Emma, Anthony) show how further education colleges perform this function for middle-class students, too. In the case of Emma, her further education college enables her, with her parental support, to continue her academic studies with the hope of entering higher education in the future. In reflecting on her school-to-college transition, Emma illustrates the opportunity for rediscovery college enables for the middle-class:

It [school] just made me depressed really. I don't think anyone at 15 should be depressed but school somehow made me depressed. But college changed it, so I'm happy that I stayed in education and actually stuck it out.

On the other hand, Anthony is able to pursue non-academic qualifications where his secondary schooling experiences seemed to disable him from developing strong academic learning identities. Thompson (2009) previously showed how further education institutions were in fact populated by both working- and middle-class students and explained how further education colleges provided second chances for low attaining middle-class students as well as for working-class students. However, the cases of Emma and Anthony in this study seem to suggest that low attainment is not the only condition for middle-class college participation in further education college. Instead, being in college might be an active choice made by students from backgrounds endowed with middle-class economic and cultural resources because of negative school experiences. In contrast to students in Ball et al.'s (2000) study who left education after secondary schooling due to learning fatigue, students in this study found an opportunity to rediscover their educational passions (both academic and vocational) in a college of further education.³² The ways in which colleges of further education in this study facilitated the rediscovery of more positive learner identities is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

7.3. Being in college after secondary school: enabling rediscovery of educational confidence

In contrast to the mainly ambivalent and negative experiences of secondary schooling found across the interview sample, the interviewees' sentiments towards college were mostly positive. This is consistent with previous research exploring students' attitudes towards secondary schooling and college learning (e.g., Hyland and Merrill, 2003). Even where students had a broadly positive attitude towards their secondary schooling, as was the case among most of the middle-class students, they still preferred being in their college environment. For example, despite going to a high-performing catholic girls' school where she enjoyed her time, particularly her opportunity to study Classics, Chloe explained that "I much prefer college". More commonly, students expressed a more enthusiastic endorsement of their time at college compared to their schooling. This is exemplified by Zoe, who spoke of herself as a "good student" in school, when saying how "college... is definitely better than high school".

One possible reason for this may be the greater confidence many students now felt in their college environment. This heightened sense of confidence related both to learning and their

³² Also, important here is the legal requirement to remain in education or training until 18, which forces students to choose an educational pathway after secondary school.

personal lives. For many students, their GCSE experience at secondary school had prompted a damaging of educational confidence due to lower-than-expected grades, the reinforcement of a non-academic learner identity, or GCSE 'failure' (not attaining a '4' grade in a GCSE indicating a 'good' GCSE pass grade). Upon entering college and beginning their studies, including in some cases retaking their failed GCSE English and/or Mathematics, students explained that they began to regain or rediscover their sense of efficacy in learning. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from an interview with Zach, a working-class BTEC level 2 Aircraft Engineering student:

Ross: ...Can you tell me about a positive experience you've had at college?

Zach: Passing Maths and Physics was a big one. Obviously not passing Maths in year 11 was a bit of a downfall sort of thing.

Ross: So why was that positive?

Zach: Because I sort of just felt this was the turnaround that I needed.... passing the Maths and Physics was kind of like maybe now you're getting to grips with the whole maths side of things.

In offering, what Zach termed, the "turnaround" he needed we can see how the damaging effects of secondary schooling on their sense of self-efficacy in learning had come to be recognised as temporary and, in some ways, bound to the secondary school context. The way Zach speaks of his college experience appears to demonstrate the rediscovery of educational confidence that was found within many of the students' early experiences of college. Many students often explained that the opportunity to now study a single subject (in the case of BTEC course) or a number of subjects (in the case of A-Level students) that match their own interests and perceived abilities was a reason for entering a further education institution, made the experience of college more positive, and increased their sense of confidence in learning:

Ross: So why do you feel more confident now at college?

Alex: I don't know I suppose because it's something that I've chosen to do and it's not something I'm being forced to do, and I can enjoy what I'm doing instead of being forced to do all these different subjects.

Liam's comparison of college to school regarding the increased availability of more personalised learning at college relates to the prior discussion of students being dissatisfied with the academic focus of the secondary school curriculum. Instead of creating prescribed opportunities for students that have limited non-academic learning opportunities, the college environment enabled students to pursue their own interests and direct their learning, whether in an academic or vocational learning context. This contributed also to a sense of independence that was a distinguishing feature of college life. As shown previously by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), feelings of greater confidence felt by students was found to

be related to the increased control that students had over their studies in further education; sometimes spoken of as more 'relaxed' compared to secondary schooling. This independence is evident in students having greater responsibility over their timetable and self-study, choice of studying at home and/or at college, having to use public transport to travel out of their community to attend college, and was also articulated by one student as being able to choose what to wear at college. The relationship between independence, informality, and confidence was clear in the data across different areas of the further education curriculum, with Liam and Claire showing typical examples of this sentiment expressed below:

Liam: In college it's more like they say what unit you're doing, and they go through the main bits and they're like over to you now... it's like independent, it's over to you now. If you need help maybe you can come talk to us but it's all about research... like you're fully independent.

Claire: It's the freedom, its less work not in the aspect that we don't get given work, we do, but it's just for one subject. It's not like your five or six that you do at school. So, you're just focused on this one pathway.

This is consistent with prior research where students entering further education colleges are shown to be aware of the different dynamics characterising school and college. Hyland and Merrill (2003, p. 91) explain how students saw college as 'a place that treated them as adults with fewer imposed rules and regulations, giving more freedom'. However, the freedom and independence studying at college provides to students can also present some challenges for students. For example, this is shown by the experience of Scott who was retaking his A-Levels after previously failing at his first attempt in his secondary school sixth form. He attributed part of this underachievement to how the increased freedom after secondary schooling in his sixth form allowed him to go partying and lose concentration in his studies. However, Scott did initially progress into his secondary school's sixth form, which appeared to be the source of his more negative post-secondary experiences.³³ Furthermore, the independence now experienced at college provided students with greater control and input into their learning, which was viewed positively:

Bella: I think because I have so much freedom and like ways to express myself that really like impact my learning and I feel that has made me so much better at college than I would have been in secondary school.

Jacob: Education-wise I feel more comfortable here [college] because like I'm free to like learn at my own pace, like study... how I want to study.

Ross: Why doesn't school allow you to do that?

³³ He did also note that there was more freedom and independence in his current further education college compared to the sixth form.

Jacob: Because like everything [is] fully timetabled like sometimes you don't get free days to yourself, so you can't study in what you feel like you need to.

This was also the case for Charlotte who, having a special education need (SEN), felt that the increased demand to organise her learning and pastoral support at college, though different from school and more challenging, was a positive change:

Ross: How does the support differ from school, do you think?

Charlotte: It's not as like hands-on because at school, not only me but if other people had a problem and they couldn't get into their lesson then support staff would come and sit with them in the lesson. Whereas in college you have to go and find the help and then you have to kind of get the support and then put it in place yourself mostly.

Ross: So, do you prefer that, or do you prefer how it was at school?

Charlotte: I liked it at high school because it was easier, but I think it's probably better the way it is at college because you need to be more independent anyway once you finish college so.

In this way, the greater independence expected of students in further education was a more challenging, yet appreciated, change from secondary school. Similar to being able to choose one's subject in college, the college environment is understood as allowing for a more personal, student-led learning experience, as Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1997) also found in their study on school-to-college transitions. Students, in this study, were found to juxtapose this characteristic of college with school which was more rigid in its learning approaches and more teacher-led.

The freedom and independence differentiating college from school was also evident in an underlying current in several recollections of schooling as akin to a prison. Hyland and Merrill (2003, p. 91) have previously discussed how for many students 'school was viewed as a place where freedom was taken away from the self [and] almost equated to a prison'. Similar undertones were implicit in Zoe's description of being locked inside school:

College personally for me is definitely better [than] high school. Again, for the independence and freedom that you have. Whereas high school it was you go in and you lock the gates till three o'clock and you're not allowed out... obviously [here] there's still set times when you have lessons at college and everything but it's a bit more relaxed rather than you go in this building [school], they lock the gates and like hide the key pretty much and then you're not allowed to go out until um three.

As summarised well in this excerpt from a middle-class student studying A-Levels, secondary schooling and the learning culture characterising it was understood in very different terms to college. Notions of freedom, independence, and control are implicit and have been explicit in many of the excerpts presented above. This is suggestive of college

being a learning culture representing a break with the approaches to learning found in secondary school. Throughout this section the way college experiences are understood in relation to prior secondary school experiences, where students spend at least five years, have been discussed. Whereas secondary schooling was viewed with ambivalence and some level of negativity by many of the students interviewed, college was viewed in a relatively positive way. Being in college meant being more independent and being given more freedom in their learning and lives, as opposed to secondary school which was seen to disable students' ability to act freely. For many students, transitioning into college created fruitful learning environments and provided an opportunity to rediscover their educational confidence in the pursuit of interests consistent with their non-academic identities that had been reinforced by their secondary schooling. Drawing upon the notion of 'learning career' (Hodkinson, 2008), this rediscovery is not immediate but evolves over the students' time in further education. This journey of rediscovery can manifest in students, such as Emma, who choose to persist into A-Level study at college, despite traumatic prior experiences of secondary education. It was also evident in students, such as Alex or Claire, who decided to enter vocational studies in pursuit of their own interests. Learning dispositions can therefore be reinforced (e.g., ambivalence towards academic study) or repaired (e.g., returning enjoyment of academic study) during the school-to-college transition. The extent to which either reinforcement or repair occurs is also suggested to be influenced by the class-based cultural resources available to students during troubling educational experiences. While it is indeed true that the independence experienced was cited by both working- and middle-class students, the benefits of it were more profound for working-class students that had more commonly formed non-academic aspirations and were thus forced to experience an education during secondary schooling, which seemed to them irrelevant to their future trajectory.

An important factor in students' further education experience and the process of rediscovery, is student-teacher relations in the college environments studied. This is explored in the next and final section of this chapter.

7.4. Student-teacher relations in college: respect, conviviality, and independence

Among the planned topics of discussion during the interviews was student-teacher relations in further education and whether secondary schooling differed to the college teaching and learning environment. This was informed by prior research that has suggested student-teacher relations are an important difference between secondary school and college (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). Furthermore, previous research emphasises how 'particular learning

cultures create particular learning opportunities' and that social interactions are integral to these cultures (James and Biesta, 2007, p. 21). Conversations regarding the teaching and learning relationship and process in college touched upon a number of topics, including (a) the nature of teaching and the teacher-learner relationship, (b) feelings of independence and differential treatment relative to secondary school, and (c) feelings of greater respect of and from college teachers. Although the learning process was not observed directly, students did speak of the different nature of learning in college, which will be returned to in this chapter's conclusion.

Typically, students explained how teachers acted more like facilitators of learning in college classes, in providing a basic level of knowledge and understanding from which students can develop further in their independent study. While this was common across most students, it was particularly pronounced among vocational students and was a welcomed change to learning in secondary school. Whereas college offered more diverse learning opportunities and formats, school was perceived as a more monotonous learning environment and, for some, not inclusive of different learning paces:

Ryan: ...whereas at college they urge you to get the answer out, so rather than give you the answer they give you the ideas to get the answer... they also make sure you understand the work before moving on, whereas at school they just move on whether you are still writing and stuff, so you couldn't take notes.

The greater independence in learning was coupled with a sense among students that their current teachers treated them more like adults than their secondary school teachers. This was often a reason why students wanted to leave their secondary school institution and enter a further education college:

Ross: Did they do A-Levels at your sixth form?

Bella: ...I think I got fed up with the whole sixth form in general and I was just like this is not kind of the learning environment I wanted to be in really... It was quite like still a little bit like school. Like I don't know... this [college] is more like an adult like environment than it was at sixth form... it's hard to explain. Like you still get treated more as a child there and I didn't really like that.

While treating young secondary school students like children may be appropriate for younger cohorts, it is important to note that the ages of students in the latter years of secondary school are not too dissimilar to the students in this study (most students interviewed were currently in their first year of study in further education). Moreover, students referred to a tension in secondary school where they were expected to act like mature young adults but

treated in a way inconsistent with this – like children. This was especially evident during conversations with Scott and Bella, who had both previously moved from their secondary school sixth form to their current further education college. For example, Scott explained that, upon entering his current college, the relationship he felt with teachers in sixth form was different:

Ross: ...and how do you compare the sixth form environment to this [college] environment?

Scott: It's a little bit free here. At sixth form we weren't really allowed to like... how would I put it – the teachers were more like high school teachers.

Ross: Like strict?

Scott: Yeah, because there's a high school, it's like a high school and a sixth form and teachers teach high school and sixth form as well so it was a bit strict.

Ross: How are they not strict here?

Scott: They just let you do what you like. If you want to focus you focus... and that's how to teach people to get on with life.

A key part of being treated more like an adult in college was the greater sense of independence, freedom, and control students were given by their teachers over their learning. Students typically referred to how they were now responsible for managing their own learning time and that teachers had a different role than at school:

Martin: I feel like in high school the teachers are more responsible for their student. So, they kind of like making sure that they're getting good results. However, in college I don't think they're more responsible, I feel the students [are more] responsible. The teachers are less [responsible], like more care-free.

This added responsibility was felt to be underpinned by a greater respect and trust which teachers in further education gave to students. For some students this greater respect was articulated by explaining how secondary school teachers acted in a different way to their college teachers. For example:

Marianne: ...You're treated more like adults [in college]. You're not looked down on by the teachers but [are] the same level sort of thing here.

Emma: You don't really feel like they're your teacher to be honest, you just feel like you're in a class with them. Whereas at school I couldn't stand a single one [of the teachers] ... personally I just think high school teachers think that they're too big for their boots and they think that they're almighty and it isn't until you leave school that you realise that they are not.

Important to note here is that Marianne had attended a high-achieving secondary school that prepared students for entry to independent school (for later years of secondary schooling and further education) and eventual entry to prestigious Russell Group universities. During

her interview she spoke vividly of the sense of shame she felt during her secondary schooling as a consequence of failing to meet the high expectation set of her during her earlier years. However, most students in the sample had not previously attended such a school (only one other middle-class students had indicated they had attended such a school) and had less severely detrimental relations with schoolteachers.

As a consequence of the greater trust and respect shown by teachers in college, many of the students explained that they reciprocated such behaviour. Claire explained that the use of first names, rather than titles in secondary schooling (e.g., Mrs/Sir), was an example of the less hierarchical and more informal relations characterising the college environment and student-teacher relationship. In this environment she felt that “we have [a] more like friend-based relationship with them [college teachers]” which creates a more relaxing and comfortable learning environment. This is very consistent with Hyland and Merrill’s (2003, p. 91) conclusion that students valued relationships with their teachers as being ‘more informal and friendly’ at college. An additional reason for this found in this study was because students felt they could talk with their college teachers, lecturers, and tutors about a range of issues, including about their personal life, as well as having casual banter with them. Anthony articulates well these views regarding the different dynamics found in college and secondary school:

Ross: So, thinking about teaching staff in college, do you think you can relate to them more in college than in school?

Anthony: Well, I can get to know the teaching staff here much better than at school because, well in school I didn’t really have an urge to talk to the teachers. They didn’t really interest me because I had no encouragement to talk to any of them. I was just in the classes and out constantly. With the pressure of exams that were going to be in a few months, I didn’t really want to be at school. Didn’t like being at school, I didn’t enjoy it, so I didn’t want to be in there any longer than I had to be.

Anthony implies that the college environment provides both formal and effective organisation of learning, yet can also be characterised as more informal via the way teachers and students interact. He also touches upon a theme present across many of the vocational students’ interviews, where students respected their college teachers more because of their expertise and hands-on work experience in their chosen area of study. A distinctive feature of the teaching workforce in the further education sector is the varied routes taken into the sector, with routes from industry into teaching being common (James and Biesta, 2007). This, as Anthony refers to, provokes more of an interest and a sense of relevance for students, but as the following excerpt from Alex suggests it is also perceived to improve the

learning experience:

Alex: I think the teachers here they're more, they're very knowledgeable in that because they've been working in engineering, [and have a] engineering background... I think they know what they're talking about.

Ross: Do you think that's an advantage over school?

Alex: Yeah... I don't know how it works [how schoolteachers become teachers] but they learn how to be able to teach but they don't actually have to use it in a job like as in teach people how to that like outside of school. Whereas here, they've been doing that. Like one tutor was in the RAF and the other owned his own company and then they come here and they're teaching us, but they've had their hands-on experience.

Thus, from the data presented in this section it is evident that across the college institutions in this study, there was a sense that student-teacher relations were quite different to those found in secondary schooling and this difference was spoken of positively. In contrast, in secondary schooling relations were more distant and hierarchical, both because of the way teachers acted towards students but also other factors linked to the organisation of secondary school, like class sizes. Students across the sample, and in both academic and vocational areas of further education study, spoke also of informality, the teacher being like a friend, and the way students were treated like an adult and with more respect than in secondary school. Many of the students referred to the detrimental effects of secondary school student-teacher relations on the learning environment created and felt that their interactions with teachers in college were more comfortable and beneficial for their learning. As we have already seen in the case of Emma, the rediscovery of learner confidence and learning efficacy is enabled in further education by their interactions with teaching staff. In this way, this study is agreeable with James and Biesta's (2007, p. 145) conclusion regarding 'the central significance of the tutor in a wide range of different forms and practices of learning' including across the further education college curriculum.

Social class background was not directly related to student-teacher relations, with many of the themes discussed above present across most, if not all, of the students interviewed in this study. In comparing this chapter, and particularly this section, to others it is clear that social class was less profoundly evident in the data collected. This presents an interesting finding in that the further education college contexts in this study appear to be positive learning environments for working- and middle-class students. Obviously, the sample size and possible self-selection/exclusion effects may be a possible influence on this finding. Furthermore, this does not mean that social class differences do not still exist in experiences of further education. For example, the methods used in this study might have been limited in

studying the more concealed classed experiences of further education learning environments. However, by viewing this chapter in its entirety, the prominence of more positive school experiences amongst middle-class students in this study reflected fewer clear disparities in their discussion of school and college experiences. This meant that for students, often from working-class backgrounds, that did not enjoy learning in school and showed an ambivalence towards these experiences, college and their relationships with college teachers were much more positive. Research does suggest that middle-class students are less likely to encounter secondary school environments with more problematic conditions for learning (e.g., high staff turnover) (Reay and Lucey, 2004; Reay, 2017; Van de Brande et al., 2019) and this could likely reduce the distance between secondary school and further education experiences.

7.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, the way in which interviewees in this study discussed their college experiences and how this compared to their time in secondary school has been explored. This introduced common themes regarding secondary schooling across the sample to foreground the subsequent themes relating to students' further education experiences. A consistent thread throughout this chapter has been the heightened sense of confidence and positivity regarding students' college experiences. These findings supplement existing research on experiences of further education that reference similar themes of freedom, independence, and improved student-teacher relations (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1997; Hyland and Merrill, 2003). Drawing on the notion of 'learning cultures' (James and Biesta, 2007), it might be argued that the specific educational sites studied in this research study were characterised by a number of features, including teacher-student social interactions and allowance of student agency, which enable the development of positive learning experiences and, ultimately, local learning cultures. It is because of this that, for many of the students interviewed, the school-to-college transition was the beginning of a journey of rediscovery; specifically of positive learning experiences, efficacy, and educational confidence. This rediscovery is available for students from across the working- and middle-class which suggests that further education colleges are sometimes institutions actively chosen by the middle-class, in some cases as a 'second chance' institution yet also as an alternative to school sixth forms which are viewed as an unattractive proposition for some. In addition, this rediscovery is available for students who had been made to feel non-academic by their secondary schooling, only to then rediscover something about themselves in their further education college, with Bella an exemplification of this pattern. Instances of rediscovery were more commonly identified in working-class students' educational careers

due to the higher preponderance of ambivalent and negative secondary school experiences. The cultural capital and prior educational history in the family might be suggested to be a contributing factor to this variation found across students from different social class backgrounds. Where students did not have access to higher levels of cultural capital, there was a greater sense of inevitability in their transition into non-academic study. Thus, secondary schooling experiences were shown to be a powerful shaper of dispositions to learning and transitions into further education, but the form this takes is framed by other factors, especially social class background and class-based expectations of education and learning. Significant in understanding this are familial educational histories and the way these create parameters from which the educational career begins, progresses, and is experienced.

In the next and final findings chapter, the way in which extracurricular activities (ECA) and work experiences opportunities contributed to the positive impacts of student college experiences is explored, in addition to the relevance of social class to the availability and acquisition of these opportunities.

Chapter 8: Extra-curricular activities (ECA), work experience opportunities, and social class

This chapter explores research question five: what is the relationship between social class background and participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) and access to work experience during further education study? Similar to prior research (e.g., Stuart et al., 2011), a broad definition of ECA is adopted in this study, including activities provided within the college institution, in addition to paid employment, volunteering and work experience, sports and other pursuits. Given the amount of time spent by students outside formal lessons and the increasing importance of ECA and work experience in today's credentialed educational and labour market (Tomlinson, 2008; Stuart et al., 2011), this chapter explores whether participation in such activities vary by social class among students interviewed in this study.

Most research on ECAs and work experience participation has focused on higher education (e.g., Bathmaker et al., 2013; Tchibozo, 2007; Stuart et al., 2009), with Hoskins & Janmaat (2019) also focusing on school-based political engagement. Generally, this concludes that class differences exist in access to and participation in these opportunities, stratifying the ability to market an 'employable self' and reproducing historic class inequalities in the degree generation (Bathmaker et al., 2013, 2016; Brown et al., 2011). University students in Dickinson et al.'s (2020, p. 5) study explained that the importance of ECA participation was "drilled" into them during college'. However, whether the economic, social, and cultural capital possessed by students shape the availability of and participation in such activities in further education has not been explored.

This chapter firstly explores participation in ECA across the student sample. This will illustrate the middle-class tendency to engage in (1) student politics and (2) the Duke of Edinburgh (DoE) Award. It will also compare two students, each from different social class backgrounds, who demonstrate differential understandings of the importance of different forms of capital in pursuing the same aspiration (e.g., becoming a pilot). Also, consistent with the variability characterising college provision across the sector's history discussed in chapter 2, the institutional variability of ECA availability will be explored. Thereafter, participation in and access to work experience opportunities are discussed. This will show the relevance of unequally distributed social capital to engagement in work experience among students studying academic and non-academic further education courses. Whilst

some working-class students are found to possess forms of social capital relevant to their future aspirations, this is shown to be less common than among the middle-class students.

8.1. Participation in College ECAs

During their college studies students spend a significant amount of time outside college and away from their main qualification. This time is spent completing coursework and studying, socialising with friends and family, playing sports, and working in part-time employment, to name but a few of the wide range of activities that were referred to by interviewees. College institutions also provide several opportunities for students to engage in developmental ECAs. Two ECAs that students in this study participated in whilst at college were: (a) student politics and (b) the Duke of Edinburgh (DoE) Award. As discussed below, only middle-class students in this study engaged in, or even spoke of, these ECAs.

8.1.1. Student Politics

Student representative structures are available in all further education institutions in England, allowing students to represent their fellow students in a number of ways, including by becoming course representatives, student union officers, and governors. In addition to other benefits accrued, these opportunities enable students to gain skills and experience that can support applications for further study and enhance their general employability by signifying 'soft' skills to universities and employers. In the previous chapter much of the student testimony of their college experiences cited their enhanced feelings of confidence, both personally and educationally, which they felt had been enabled by their college experience. The concentration of more advantageous ECA participation among middle-class students in this study suggests that this positive impact of further education participation might not be equally accessible to all students.

In this study, two students (Marianne and Liam) were participating in student politics, and both came from middle-class backgrounds. Marianne, was currently studying BTEC Applied Science and explained how, following a traumatic secondary school experience that induced self-confidence issues in education, it was her role as student governor that had renewed her sense of confidence at college:

Ross: So, what has increased your confidence [since coming to college]?

Marianne: Being part of the student union and being a governor because... sitting in like big meetings with CEOs...

In her role as the only student governor at Central College, Marianne described a range of developmental opportunities she was able to participate in, with meeting the local member of parliament (MP) to discuss further education funding cuts a notable example. Being able to experience these opportunities not only provides enhanced confidence, but it also moreover functions as an experience to be mobilised when progressing into higher education or into the labour market. For example, following meeting with her local MP, Marianne explained how she received much attention and publicity in the local news. Therefore, this activity could become a tangible and marketable resource when progressing through education or the labour market. These activities can also foster additional opportunities beneficial for the students engaging in them, seeing participation in one activity snowball into further opportunities. Liam, another middle-class student from a minority ethnic background, studying BTEC Engineering at Central College, illustrates this in explaining how he secured additional opportunities by being a student union officer:

Liam: I am going to do like a shadowing week with the estate's director here, so the person who runs the whole college. I am going to do a whole week of shadowing with him.

Ross: Is that just you?

Liam: Just me because I complained about some issues in the college. He is like "oh ok do you want to come over for a week with us and then you can see what we do and everything". It does not count as work experience because you have to go outside of college but yeah because, you know, my student union [manager]... she was like "oh you should go to the person in estates because he runs the whole college like he manages the whole college". So, I was like because I am a campus officer, as a students' union officer I need to look after the whole campus if there are any problems... It really helps with your experiences and everything. And they give you a lot of [opportunity], with school it is more like you will have those after-school clubs and everything, they could either be art or anything. Where[as] here [at college] it is more like they give you a lot of job opportunities...

Thus, his engagement in student politics had a snowballing effect, whereby Liam was able to gain further experience and opportunities to develop himself, which would help him to demonstrate his skills and experience to universities and employers in the future. Above, Liam illustrates his confidence in confronting the college on issues, which is indicative of the educational capital vested in his family background. Existing research shows that participation in ECAs is associated with social class background (Bathmaker et al., 2013), with dispositions towards these opportunities more prevalent among middle-class students. Coming from a middle-class background that places considerable significance on educational participation may have therefore enabled Liam to identify and participate in student politics more readily, defining the scope of his participation and how he approached

the role. For example, complaining to the institution was deemed an appropriate behaviour, as was taking up the offer of shadowing the estate's director.

Habitus helps understand how choices and actions can be understood as both a response to socially-situated dispositions towards education and generative of ongoing experiences (Bourdieu, 1998). In the case of Liam and Marianne, this means that their social location came to orient them towards engaging in student politics whilst at college, which snowballed into the acquisition of further opportunities and marketable capital (Tomlinson, 2010). At most colleges, there are two student governor positions, yet elected representative positions at Central College are more limited, meaning that only a small number of students can occupy them (e.g., there is currently only one student governor position which was occupied by Marianne). Research has shown that the concentration of middle-class students in these types of activity is a product of the heightened familial cultural capital possessed (Bathmaker et al., 2013). This serves to orient students towards certain activities and position certain activities as possible for students. This study's data supports this, in the case of Liam for example, whose father had attended an Oxbridge institution and spoke of his family's cultural disposition to educational participation:

...where my dad's from if you don't have an education, I would say you're basically a no one... you have no status for yourself.

His cultural capital thus equips Liam with a confidence in seeking out opportunities (e.g., running in student elections) and questioning authority in educational contexts. His confidence is thus a translation of dispositions towards a certain activity – participation in ECAs and education – into thought and practice; it is something seen as *possible* and *appropriate* for students like himself (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Not having access to a similar familial educational history, and the dispositions produced as a result, may discourage many students from applying for these roles or identifying them altogether. Likewise, Marianne's upbringing was strongly oriented towards prestigious academic study at an elite university and, despite a traumatic secondary schooling experience, she still valued academic education. Thus, her participation in student politics may have been a strategy adopted to ameliorate choosing vocational study (BTEC Applied Science) as a product of her academic underperformance during secondary schooling.

This indicates how students who were participating in student politics in this study were from middle-class backgrounds rich in cultural capital and had a certain relationship to education: both reported having short- or long-term hopes of higher education study. As will be explored later, participation in ECAs, like student politics, by middle-class students in this study might be a way through which *distinction* is achieved (Bourdieu, 1996[1979], or through which the self is actively forged and positioned by middle-class students (Giddens, 1991), in a crowded post-secondary educational market. Another way this can be achieved is through participating in the Duke of Edinburgh (DoE) Award.

8.1.2. Duke of Edinburgh (DoE) Award

A second ECA which, unlike the prior discussion of student politics participation, was found across students at different further education institutions was the DoE Award. The DoE Award is an accredited opportunity for young people, aged 14-24 years, to develop skills and experiences which are ‘respected by employers’ (Duke of Edinburgh, 2019a) by regularly volunteering in their local community, participating in a sport or equivalent activity, developing a chosen skill, and completing an unaccompanied, team-based expedition (Duke of Edinburgh, 2019b). Although hosted by a charitable organisation the:

[Y]oung people (or their parents/carers) *pay* for a Participation Place and are supported by Leaders who support them through their programmes, helping them to choose their activities, set their objectives and achieve their Award (Duke of Edinburgh, 2019a, *emphasis added*).

Therefore, not only is a particular disposition towards such opportunities a prerequisite for participation, but a certain level of economic capital is also necessary to “pay” to participate, representing an opportunity for middle-class capital conversion. Among the students interviewed in this study, three students were currently participating in the DoE Award, Charlotte and Chloe from Eastern College and Anthony from Western College. All three of which were from middle-class family backgrounds. The former two were both studying A-Levels at Eastern College and both aspired to university study, whereas Anthony was completing a BTEC qualification and preferred to return to degree-level study after a period of employment. As the excerpt below indicates, the DoE Award is typically started by young people during secondary school (however, only Anthony had the opportunity to do so among students in this study):

Ross: So, what’s the reasons why people do the DoE?

Charlotte: Some people are carrying on from high school, so because their high school offered it and in high school a lot more people do it. But my high school did not offer it... I think the people that are starting at college... what attracted them to it

[is] because you get to do all the cool stuff, like expedition, camping and stuff like that, but also... it is really good for CVs [which] is quite pushed onto people.

During her interview Charlotte also revealed how she often travels to the Lake District with her family on holidays, where similar activities to that participated in during the DoE are often enjoyed (e.g., trekking) and how she regularly volunteers at a range of community events. The activities are thus identified as appropriate and familiar for the students, being something that one does and can do. Therefore, Charlotte not only reveals here how her family's lifestyle and interests align with this ECA (e.g., "to get to do all the cool stuff..."), but also the way in which colleges market the instrumental uses of the Award to students – it is something that can strengthen one's CV. Anthony and Chloe demonstrated their understanding of the Award's signifying effect not only to universities, but also employers:

Anthony: I know that DofE will look good on my CV which will help me get jobs in the future and its quite enjoyable.

Chloe: ...it's something I've always really wanted to do... I just know they [universities] regard it quite highly. It shows your hard work and dedication.

What the excerpts above indicate is how all three students recognised the symbolic value of the DoE Award for their university admission, in the case of Chloe and Charlotte, and for their employment prospects for Anthony. However, as only middle-class students in this study chose to participate in this Award, this would suggest that there may be class-based dispositional influences informing decisions to enrol onto the Award, as well as the potential marketing of the Award by institutions. One such reason, as alluded to previously, is an alignment between the lifestyle and interests of the student and the DoE Award activities. This is because each student made implicit reference to an alignment between their socially-situated familial background and the activities involved in the DoE Award. As Charlotte explained: "...you get to do all the cool stuff, like expedition, camping and stuff...". Likewise, Chloe stated: "it's something I've always really wanted to do". In stating this both students reveal a consistency between their home life and lifestyle and the DoE Award, such as participating in volunteering and walking expeditions. The activities are thus identified as appropriate and familiar for the students, being something that one does and can do. This would suggest that not only are the instrumental and symbolic implications of participation important for these middle-class students, but the congruence with students' personal lives is important in choosing to participate. Furthermore, participation in the Award is a significant investment of time and, in some cases, money. Possessing sufficient economic means to engage in this activity, all three students are able to engage in the conversion of economic capital into a form of cultural capital beneficial for future progression. Relatedly, not having

permanent or ongoing employment responsibilities alongside their studies, unlike many of the working-class students in this study, means they are able to devote sufficient time to participating in the Award. This congruence gives rise to a more taken-for-granted participation in these activities, what is referred to by Bathmaker et al. (2013) as an 'internalised' disposition towards certain ECAs.

As **table 26** shows, working-class students appeared to participate in different forms of ECA compared to their middle-class counterparts. Among working-class students, engaging in sports or paid employment outside their studies was more common. For example, Scott, a working-class student from a minority ethnic background, spoke of his passion playing for his local football team and his recent job interview to work for a multinational retail clothing brand, following an unenjoyable stint working regularly at a local fast-food chain (which he said he undertakes to support his living expenses). Although of personal significance to the students, these activities do not necessarily translate into recognised capital or signifiers of employability for students in the same way that participation in student politics and the DoE Award does. This is particularly the case for Scott who aspires to pursue an Architecture degree at university. The types of activity that are pitched at the development of the self and recognised as such in education and the labour market (e.g., the DoE Award), are shown in **table 26** to be less commonly participated in by working-class students.

Table 26: Students' ECA and outside-of-college activities

Name	Social Class Grouping	ECA & Activities Outside of College Course*
Benjamin	Lower-working Class	Part-time kitchen work Socialising with friends
Ethan	Lower-working Class	Looking after sibling Socialising with friends
Connor	Lower-working Class	Personal interest in music
Bella	Upper Working-class	Looking after sibling Driving lessons Currently looking for paid employment
Matthew	Upper Working-class	Army Reservist
Alex	Upper Working-class	Works at McDonalds
Zach	Upper Working-class	Watches local football team Summer retail part-time work
Julie	Upper Working-class	Rugby coaching Part-time waitress work
Claire	Upper Working-class	Ballet dancing Scouts Employed in a care home for the elderly
Scott	Upper Working-class	Works at McDonalds Passion for music Plays football for local club
Jacob	Upper Working-class	Creative writing Plane modelling
Katherine	Upper Working-class	Walking in local parks Bowling with friends/family Visiting local leisure centre
Ryan	Upper Working-class	Employed by Dad's employer Plays rugby for local club
Hannah	Upper Working-class	Exercising Spending time with family & dog
Martin	Lower Middle-class	Summer work at family business
Emma	Lower Middle-class	Musical Theatre Musical Theatre Performer
Zoe	Lower Middle-class	Flying Lessons Air Cadets Roller Skating Casual work at family business
Liam	Lower Middle-class	Employed by Dominoes Students' Union Campus Officer
Anthony	Lower Middle-class	Duke of Edinburgh Award Explorers and Cubs Ten Tours Challenge
Charlotte	Lower Middle-class	Duke of Edinburgh Works on Grandparents Farm Volunteer for Hedgehog Rescue Organisation Extended Project Qualification Paper Round
Marianne	Lower Middle-class	Student governor Students' Union representative Working part-time at a care home Working part-time as an administrator
Chloe	Upper Middle-class	Duke of Edinburgh Rock Climbing Horse Riding Music Club Yoga & Meditation

Note: Based on student responses provided during interviews.

Indeed, while many of the working-class students in this study were found to regularly work in part-time employment, few middle-class students were doing so. Where middle-class students did participate in part-time employment, they were able to rely on favourable familial networks to obtain this:

Martin: ...this summer I did a part-time job at my dad's family restaurant but that was not during school time, so I did not have to worry about college, and I have not done any like paid work.

Ross: And is that like a choice to focus on your studies?

Martin: Yes.

This ability to work for one's parents, what represents combined familial economic and social capital supportive of educational investments, enabled Martin to work flexibly around his studies. This allows for the structural impediments forcing students from lower-income backgrounds to engage in part-time employment throughout their studies to be avoided by middle-class students, like Martin. Thus, when coupled with the financial requirements of the DoE Award, this example demonstrates the way in which middle-class parents are able to convert their economic capital – be it paying for participation in the DoE Award or providing a home life where the young person does not need to work around their studies – into educational capital for their children. Structural impediments prevent working-class students from having similar opportunities, with many in this study expressing a need to combine paid employment and college study.

8.2. Becoming a pilot: classed access to & operationalisations of capital(s)

Alongside structural impediments shaping differential ECA participation among working- and middle-class students, different understandings regarding the importance of such activities for future education and employment trajectories are also relevant. Bathmaker et al. (2013) illustrated how working-class university students tended to place stronger emphasis on educational attainment, whereas middle-class students recognised the importance of forms of capital other than educational attainment. This study supports this finding in the further education context, with students from middle-class backgrounds showing a more apt awareness of the importance of ECAs to their future trajectory. Two A-Level students, Zoe (middle-class) and Jacob (working-class) exemplify this point found across this study's sample. During interviews, both students discussed how they had begun participating in Air

Cadets³⁴ because of their aspiration to enter the RAF and become a pilot. In explaining how she came to enrol in Air Cadets, Zoe indicated that a family friend had emphasised the importance of participation for her future career goal:

My parents were the first people who suggested [enrolling] because they knew somebody who ran one of the squadrons and they were like “you should do this; it will help your career”. Then I emailed and signed up and then joined.

She additionally explained:

...my parents do know somebody who was an ex-RAF pilot, I've just remembered. He gave me information on like what you would go and do and things like that.

Zoe indicates here how she been able to benefit from her parents' relationship to those with a background in the RAF who provided guidance beyond that which is publicly available. For example, her parents' friend had advised her on her future career and the types of activity she could engage in to enhance her opportunity to become a pilot. Alongside studying her A-Levels and participating in Air Cadets, Zoe takes private flying lessons to obtain her private flying license which, in her words, “obviously helps get into the RAF kind of career”. Thus, Zoe displays an awareness of how to operationalise her social and economic capital to support her planned trajectory, understanding the non-educational activities that can advantage her. Jacob, on the other hand, revealed his more limited resources that could benefit his future career aspiration. Alongside not having connections that can provide more personal guidance to him related to his career aspiration, he also indicated that he lacked comparable economic capital to Zoe, as he was unable to afford to attend a college residential trip to New York. Therefore, while Zoe could capitalise on her occupationally relevant knowledge using her parents' economic capital, Jacob is unable to do so in light of his limited economic and social capital. Zoe's knowledge has likely been acquired from her family's connections, organisers at Air Cadets, and/or her prior work experience during school where she spent time working in her local RAF base. Yet, participation relies not only on a willingness, but moreover a knowledge of how to access them, all of which is available from Zoe's familial background.

However, the differential importance allotted to Air Cadet participation evident during both Zoe's and Jacob's interviews demonstrates the classed-based understandings of capital

³⁴ Air Cadets is an opportunity operated by the RAF enabling young people with an interest in pursuing a career in the RAF to experience activities related to a career in the RAF, including flying, shooting, and adventure training (Royal Air Force, 2021b).

operationalisation. Where Zoe has continued to participate in Air Cadets alongside her studies and private flying lessons, Jacob explained that he chose to stop participating. This is because of the disruption this caused to his “schedule of studying”. Yet, Jacob also revealed how he continued spending his personal time building model planes and writing pieces of creative writing. Thus, it would appear that he chose to prioritise other personal hobbies and endeavours over participation in Air Cadets, rather than it being purely a product of disruption to his education. This suggests that Jacob and/or his parents did not perceive Air Cadets to be a worthwhile opportunity to continue to participate in alongside his studies, choosing instead to focus on attaining the necessary A-Level grades to enter the RAF.³⁵ This could be deemed a sensible decision given the importance of educational attainment in progressing into either tertiary education or the labour market and based on the public guidance provided by the RAF. As opposed to Jacob’s belief in the importance of educational attainment for success, Zoe is aware of the value of knowledge and resources that can be gained via Air Cadet participation and exposure to staff “who are either ex RAF or are still working in the RAF”. Thus, like Bathmaker et al.’s (2013) working-class university students (and observed more generally across this study’s working-class sample), Jacob shows an attachment to the meritocratic ethos, where working hard to attain educational success is perceived as the best formula for future success. Although educational attainment is significantly important in education-to-work transitions, Jacob’s choice to cease participation in Air Cadets and focus purely on education may place him at a relative disadvantage to other students, like Zoe, who recognise the importance of other forms of capital to becoming a pilot. As a result, Jacob disqualifies himself from cultivating the signs of ‘potential’ and ‘enthusiasm’ which Zoe and other young people with similar resources are able to do.

This awareness did not imbue Zoe with complete confidence, however. Even though Zoe has relatively advantageous social capital, she felt concerned regarding her relative lack of important familial resources in assisting her to become a pilot:

I think that... not having anybody in the family who is related to you, that makes it a bit more difficult. Because I know there are some people in air cadets whose parents are commercial pilots and that just makes it easier for them because their parents can be like “oh we’ll get you in here, because I am your dad, I can get you in here, I can do this for you”. But I don’t have that it’s a bit more difficult.

³⁵ Entry requirements to become a pilot stipulate that applicants must, among other nationality and health and fitness requirements, possess GCSEs (or Scottish equivalents) at grade C/4 in English and mathematics and an additional three subjects. Applicants must also have at least 2 A2 Levels at grade C or above totalling a minimum of 64 UCAS points (Royal Air Force, 2021a).

This quote is indicative of Zoe's unease that is informed by her awareness of the importance of other forms of capital in becoming a pilot. It moreover exposes her understanding of how social capital is operationalised to get ahead. This is consistent with research on the university student experience showing how middle-class students are keenly aware of the importance of social contacts in capital accumulation and CV building (Bathmaker et al., 2016), in addition to studies questioning the middle-class's unproblematic relationship to education and occupational success (e.g., Power et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2011; Abrahams, 2017).

What the comparison of Zoe and Jacob's engagement in Air Cadets and other ECAs relevant to piloting (e.g., private flying lessons) suggests is how individuals from two different social class positions can come to approach progression through education and entry into their chosen occupation differently. These different approaches are informed by Zoe's access to 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) regarding the importance of certain opportunities for her future and her ability to draw on sufficient levels of economic capital to operationalise this social capital. By not having access to family friends and acquaintances, Jacob focuses primarily on his educational performance as this is what he believes is most important to become a pilot in the RAF. Whilst this may be deemed 'correct' according to recruitment information provided by the RAF, in a crowded labour market where becoming a pilot is a highly sought after occupation, being able to draw on a host of other experiences is increasingly important to project an appropriate self. Ultimately, her heightened capital places Zoe in a distinctive position in relation to other candidates, such as Jacob.

8.3. College influences on ECA and work experience availability

In this study, the institution was an additional influence on the types of opportunities available to student interviewees when studying at college. Although most colleges can be found to provide a number of opportunities for its student population, such as links to local employers and opportunities to put oneself forward for student representative roles, some activities were found to be based on the local college institution and its specific geographical location. In this section, Eastern Sixth Form and Central College are focused on to demonstrate institutional influences on ECA and work experience participation.

Eastern Sixth Form, previously a standalone sixth form college, is an institution situated in a market town in the East of England³⁶ and forms part of the wider Eastern College Group (see appendix item 3). It has a history spanning four centuries and was originally formed as an all-boys boarding grammar school that sent most of its students to a specific University of Cambridge 'college'. Twentieth century education reforms saw it convert into a voluntary-aided grammar school (previously operating as a fee-paying grammar school), before which it became a further education sixth form college in the late twentieth century. It also has several prominent alumni in the United Kingdom and abroad working in television, politics, and the arts. It secures consistently high A-Level results, with over half of all students achieving A*-B in 2019 and almost 80% achieving A*-C grades in 2019. The college also boasts how a quarter of its students applying to Oxbridge per year institutions are successful. Higher education study, notably at 'elite' institutions, is foregrounded by the college for prospective and current students.

In comparison, Central College became a further education college in the previous decade and specialises in digital technology, construction, creative industries, business, and pharmacy (see appendix item 3). As part of this specialisation the College is one of a small number of tertiary education institutions to have secured government funding to open an 'Institute of Technology'.³⁷ The College did not provide opportunities to study A-Levels at the time of this study yet did provide a range of access to higher education and degree-level qualifications, in addition to a suite of vocational programmes. In marketing itself to students, unlike Eastern Sixth Form, it emphasises how it can support effective career progression, illustrating this through an alumnus working in industries such as the creative arts and sport. Central College thus foregrounds preparation for employment and its relevance to the world of work to prospective and current students.

8.3.1. Eastern Sixth Form College

The variability of opportunities by college attended is firstly demonstrated in the case of Eastern Sixth Form College, which is distinctive compared to the other larger colleges in this study in several ways (see appendix item 3). Of the three students currently participating in the DoE Award in this study, the two who began participating at college were both attending

³⁶ 2011 Census data reveals that the town within which Eastern Sixth Form College is situated is in a local district that has 0% of its population living in the 10% most deprived nationally.

³⁷ Institutes of Technology are UK government-funded "collaborations between further education providers, universities and employers" specialising in the delivery of higher technical education (levels four and five) in STEM disciplines (Department for Education, 2020b).

Eastern Sixth Form College. Also, Charlotte explained that not all students attending this institution participated in the Award, with those participating typically studying the natural sciences and other ‘facilitating’ A-Level subjects. Despite being part of the same college ‘group’ as Eastern College Sixth Form, no students studying at the Eastern College Main Site were currently participating in the DoE and, along with Western College and Central College, there was no visible information on opportunities to undertake this ECA at the college. It would thus appear as if the ECAs available can differ by and within a single institution, with beneficial opportunities for future university applications, like the DoE Award, being unavailable for many students unless they had previously started participating at secondary school. Given the emphasis placed on university admission by Eastern College Sixth Form, and the concentration of DoE Award participation in this study among middle-class students, this is suggestive of an alignment between institutional and class-based motives for ECA participation. Middle-class students, such as Chloe and Charlotte, identify this activity as conducive to their sense of self – their authenticity (Giddens, 1991). Consequently, they choose to participate, with their college aware of how, in doing so, their participation contributes to its institutional status.

At Eastern Sixth Form College there were also internal college structures that appeared to enable participation in beneficial ECA opportunities for specific ‘types’ of student. A ‘high-achiever’ group (defined via high prior GCSE and continued high A-level attainment), which provided advice, guidance and opportunities for students planning to apply to ‘top’ universities existed at the college. As Charlotte explained:

The A+ group is for people who got a certain amount of GCSEs at grade seven³⁸ or higher at high school and then they go to the A+ group which is a weekly thing, and they give advice for like CVs and applying for university and eventually they help you write CVs and they do mock interviews and stuff like that.

In many ways this group functions in a similar fashion to the ‘Gifted & Talented’ scheme previously operated in secondary schools, where students deemed capable of ‘excelling’ were given the opportunity to access additional activities that would benefit their academic development (Koshy & Pinheiro-Torres, 2012). Likewise, it is reminiscent of the categorisation of learners first observed in nineteenth century policy discussed in chapter 2.

³⁸ Since 2018, GCSE grading changed to a numerical grading system ranging from 1 (lowest) to 9 (highest). A grade seven is equivalent to an A grade in the previous alphabetic system (see Jadhav, 2018 for further information).

In explaining what opportunities, she had previously had access to through membership of the 'high achiever' group, Charlotte said:

It has given me the opportunity to do EPQ, which is an Extended Project Qualification, because you cannot do it unless you are in the A+ thing which is enjoyable... and yeah, they have basically been giving us advice on like what is the best way for going about things. They were the ones that gave the advice on following the careers you like the look of on Twitter, so you can find out about opportunities, which is how I came across the art competition (discussed further below). And they have helped us sign up to things like... the Unique Summer School which is for Oxford, but I didn't sign up to that because there's no courses that I wanted [at Oxford]. But the Sutton Trust summer school, which is the Vet [Veterinary Science] one that I have signed up for... Yeah, they help find opportunities like that and various [others]. We went on a trip to the [local city] Research Park and I know they have been on [other] trips to like engineering and stuff like that.

Access to this group provides an additional resource for an already educationally-advantaged group to acquire further opportunities and better negotiate the education system (e.g., "they've been giving us advice on like what's the best way *for going about things*"). Given the enduring association between GCSE attainment and social class in England (Bourne, 2015; Stopforth et al., 2020), it is highly probable that access to this group is classed.

Furthermore, Charlotte refers to an "art competition" she came across online, in light of the group facilitators recommending that she follow relevant organisations to her future plans on Twitter. In describing this competition, wherein she achieved first place, Charlotte said:

...they gave you lots of pictures from the research park of like the plants that they have been [growing], because they grow like artificially enhanced crops and stuff like that, animals, things to do with all the research they have been doing and then you have to make a piece of art about it. So, I entered that and then I won and then the art was exhibited in the [location] at the [local university].

In a similar way to the snowballing-effect produced by engagement in ECAs, Charlotte's participation in the high-achiever group at her college had also enabled her to come across further opportunities, one of which had enabled her to obtain material success, mobilisable during future university applications. This further demonstrates the enduring role that access to resources in the acquisition of further opportunities – or as Bourdieu (1988, p. 85) put it, 'capital breeding capital'. In this case, institutional resources available to an already advantage group of students in the form of educational advice and guidance enables further advantageous experiences and opportunities. In providing Charlotte with the opportunity to engage in this group, Eastern Sixth Form was setting, and reinforcing her own, expectations

of an appropriate future trajectory wherein 'elite' university attendance is constructed as appropriate and possible for her (e.g., "...they have helped us sign up to things like... the Unique Summer School which is for Oxford"). Charlotte's choice to pursue the opportunities made available to her, specifically the university art competition, is indicative of her educational positioning and familial cultural capital. This is because it reveals how she positions herself in relation to higher education institutions, and her comfort in engaging with this, as a student from a middle-class family background. Thus, as other research has suggested (Bathmaker et al., 2016), the middle-class habitus instils expectations that align with institutional expectations of middle-class students regarding appropriate education trajectories.

8.3.2. Central College

The geographical location of the further education college was also important for the types of ECA available for students, with Central college illustrating this well. This is evidenced in the case of Matthew who spoke very positively about the opportunities he has received to work on projects with two multi-national telecommunications companies. Through his college being located geographically proximate to many companies working in his aspired area of work (e.g., computing), he had benefitted from the links forged with these companies. Liam, a working-class student, explained such benefits using two projects he has undertaken:

...the [company name] project pretty much means that you sort of, you sit an exam, that's related to [computer] networking and routing and you get a sort of certificate from that, and it shows you that you're sort of qualified to do sort of networking sort of roles as an associate network engineer. And then if you keep passing each level it gives you opportunities to go to London, I mean central London, go to the [company name] HQ, meet new people, make new contacts, and if you do all the phases you can go to [company country of origin] for a week I believe. And another opportunity, the [company name] opportunity which I'm currently doing, I passed the first phase, and I went to [location], the [company] HQ and we have been briefed on what to do for our next project.

These types of opportunities are less likely or non-existent in other colleges across England and indeed across the city within which Central College is located. Central College situates this opportunity as a key marketing resource for recruiting students on related programmes of study. In being able to draw upon these types of opportunity at his college, Matthew can utilise them as resources through which he can develop his skills, both disciplinary (IT project work) and general employability skills, in addition to accumulating relevant experience for his future career. Although he still sought improvement in the occupational relevance of his IT course, he explained that coming to Central College and experiencing

these work opportunities “sort of opened me up slightly”. This compared to his prior secondary school sixth form³⁹ that provided few ECA and other opportunities for a student with vocational interests, such as himself:

...I am sure there were opportunities but there were not many... it is just the typical sort of academic route of just doing you're A-Levels, sit an exam and just going to university, but there was no sort of vision of ok I don't want to do A-Levels I want to do something else. I mean there was a BTEC in that sixth form, which is not quite common for sixth forms to do but there were not sort of any opportunities.

In Matthew's sentiment towards his college experience, we see how it is spoken of as an enabler of progression, opportunity, and the development of his self-confidence (e.g., “opened me up slightly”). At the sixth form at which he has previously studied, similar opportunities to those provided by his specific college were not available and he was not aware of beneficial opportunities for him as a student with interests beyond A-Level study and university progression.

Thus, ECA and work experience opportunities are suggested in this section as institutionally and geographically situated, with certain colleges in this study providing more expansive opportunities for students to engage in national and international work opportunities than others. As will be discussed further in chapter 9, the contrast drawn here between Eastern and Central College points to how colleges can have very different histories, missions and sets of expectations (i.e., learning cultures) that are immersive of different facilities and affordances for class-related trajectories. Yet, although institutions did operate influence on the opportunities available to students, as is discussed in the next section, across all institutions in this study social capital shaped access to and participation in work experience whilst at college.

8.4. Work experience opportunities and social capital

As introduced previously, there is an increasing importance to distinguish oneself in the educational and occupational labour market (Tomlinson, 2008; Brown et al., 2011). An additional way to do this is to engage in work experience opportunities similarly to the experience Matthew described above. The importance of work experience opportunities is especially pressing for those students completing vocational courses, many of which are required to complete a minimum number of hours of work experience before they are

³⁹ Matthew received two GCSEs during secondary schooling and thus attended his school's sixth form to increase his total GCSE attainment.

awarded their qualification. Many of the students in the sample had been unable to participate in work experience opportunities at their school, owing to school structures which impeded participation in such activities. Alex, a vocational student, reflected on this with regret:

Ross: ...in school did you do work experience?

Alex: No. The year before did but then they stopped it.

Ross: Oh ok, why, why did they stop it?

Alex: I don't know, I kind of wish they didn't but they... I don't know why they stopped it.

Likewise, while in some further education institutions several opportunities with external organisations may be provided, Matthew explained that he felt quite anxious about securing advantageous opportunities (despite already being one of the few to have gained valuable work experience via his college's links to industry):

We're looking for work experience now and its quite hard to look for [opportunities] because we're not even actual, you know undergraduate students yet. We are just level three students and I think like big companies like [company name] and other sorts of companies will take on undergraduate people because they're more serious about their academic routes.

Thus, across the interview sample, but especially among interviewees undertaking vocational study, work experience was viewed as a significant part of their learning and development in further education. However, as is shown below, access to work experience opportunities is shaped by class-based resources.

8.4.1. Middle-class access to advantageous social capital

A strong influence on access to work experience participation found across the interviewee sample was familial social capital, which was more prevalent among middle-class students. Students in possession of social capital were able to ensure participation in work experience opportunities, irrespective of college attended, a finding observed among academic and vocational students and regardless of future aspiration (higher education or labour market entry). Some students had already shown their ability to operationalise their social capital to obtain work experience opportunities. Charlotte is one example of this trend among middle-class students. As previously discussed, through her grandmother's involvement in a national tortoise charity and her family's ownership of a farm, Charlotte has drawn upon significant familial resources to support her future aspiration of studying Veterinary Science

at university. For instance, during secondary school, Charlotte secured work experience with her family's own veterinary surgeon:

Ross: ...how did you get involved in the Vets (veterinary surgeon) at school?

Charlotte: They are my Vets for my animals, so I wanted to go there. But then our school has a mentor, well our high school has a mentoring scheme so people from around [local area] and [local city] that have like a variety of different jobs, they come in and they mentor a group for young people. So, I had a Vet from [local area] as my mentor so that helped too... I did contact them myself initially and they said I could do it...

When aspiring to enter highly competitive courses and fields, such as Veterinary Science, being able to secure work experience during secondary school and make use of familial social capital to advantage oneself in the educational market is significantly important. Moreover, obtaining this opportunity had a snowball effect whereby Charlotte supplemented her work experience with advice and guidance from additional contacts working in her area:

Ross: Does that [having several connections] give you more confidence in the future?

Charlotte: It does because not only for the connections... but they can give advice on what is the best route to take or what universities might be better than some others.

Ross: So, have they given you advice already?

Charlotte: Yeah...

Ross: They give you advice on certain universities to attend or?

Charlotte: The VETs said Royal VET College is probably the best university to go to for veterinary [science].

The work experience and useful advice and guidance provided to Charlotte supplements other opportunities she has participated in because of the resources available via her family background. Looking at this in conjunction with the discussion of Charlotte's educational trajectory in chapter 6 does demonstrate the significance of familial social class background on students' educational career. Specifically, the social capital rooted in her family background has been drawn upon on multiple occasions to acquire 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) regarding her trajectory and to generate opportunities. It is unlikely that many students, sharing similar aspirations to Charlotte, can draw upon comparable forms and volumes of familial capital to actively construct selves conducive to their educational and occupational interests.

The use of familial social capital nested in the family in previous schooling and at college was common among most of the middle-class students in this study. Another example of this is Chloe, where the reflexively instrumental use of social capital, apparent across many

middle-class interviewees, is articulated. Chloe had explained that during her time at college she was initially undecided on which career path to follow; either (a) midwifery or (b) environmental science. However, because of her godmother working for the National Grid,⁴⁰ she explained that she would likely choose this option:

Ross: So, do you think because you have like a connection in the Environmental Science side and not the midwifery side, do you think you might go towards that in the future?

Chloe: I think so. Especially as Environmental Science is my favourite subject.

Chloe reveals here an ability to see forms of capital instrumentally, in this case in deciding on her future trajectory. Although many students were pursuing educational and employment careers untrod by their families, middle-class students were positioned more advantageously given their ability to draw on more advantageous social capital. This is evidenced by Chloe's godmother providing access to work experience at the National Grid:

Chloe: So, I am doing Environmental Science stuff for mine [work experience], so I am working with my godmother which is quite good but it's like it is not Midwifery. But it is the thing that the two things I want to go into are quite different, it is the environmental or the Midwifery, and *I went with the one where I had connections with*.

Ross: So, what are you doing for your work experience?

Chloe: I am working with the National Grid...

Ross: So how did you get involved in that work experience?

Chloe: Well, I was talking to her when we saw her in the summer. She was saying you know "what subjects are you doing?" and things and she said what she worked for and "ooh I'll keep that in mind for when we do work experience". So then when we got told we were doing work experience I sent her an email, was like do you know [if] I could come work with you? And she was like "yeah of course I'll sort it out".

In stating that she chose "the one where I had connections with", Chloe is evidencing an understanding not only of how she can make use of her social capital, but also the limits of it, thus prompting her to choose Environmental Science rather than Midwifery. Consistent with the thread of the *snowball effect* of obtaining opportunities throughout this chapter, Chloe indicated that obtaining this opportunity with her godmother had garnered further, potentially mobilisable, social capital:

...I think [godmother name]'s been really useful with it [gaining experience and networking], especially she's got me in contact with a lot of other people that she knows that will be very helpful.

⁴⁰ *National Grid* is a multinational company delivering electricity and gas in the United Kingdom (and the United States).

Chloe therefore understands the significance of the resources she has at her disposal in pursuing her aspirations and shows a clear desire to use these in the future. This excerpt demonstrates how social capital vested in the family provides access to advantageous opportunities, subsequently broadening the resources accessible to students. This opportunity will not only signify to universities that Chloe has both enthusiasm for and experience in her chosen field of study (e.g., Environmental Science), but it also enables her to speak about a range of experiences and applied skills in her personal statement which she will write when applying to university. Having a close family friend who is able to “sort it out” for her means that Chloe was not required to invest significant effort in securing work experience. This is unlike other students in this study, for instance Alex (working-class) who was currently engaged in work experience with a local employer in conjunction with his Agricultural Engineering course. He explained that the opportunity he had secured (a) required him to pursue the employer himself and (b) was not distinctive from other students on his course, as many of his classmates had also secured this opportunity via college referral. Thus, although beneficial for him, the resources available to him in his working-class family background were of a different order to those available to Chloe.

8.4.2. Social capital in planning work experience

Some students had not already secured work experience opportunities but spoke of their plans to actively do so, which followed a similar patterning according to familial social class background. Anthony was one of the few middle-class students studying a vocational qualification (BTEC Aircraft Maintenance) and described his plans for securing two work experience opportunities while studying his qualification:

Ross: Do you know anyone who works in the aeroplane industry?

Anthony: I know there is one person who works at [multinational aerospace company]. He is the manager there... Experience there would likely help me get to airliners after that and airports. And there is another person who works at the science park and who is doing research on electric engines. I feel like that would probably benefit me because... if they are doing research on electric engines then they will likely have knowledge on different airliners who want those electric engines because they are the future. They will bring in customers and therefore, oh, money.

Ross: So, do you think you can draw upon those connections?

Anthony: Yeah, I feel like I can use those connections to help me... I mean I am planning on getting work experience with both of them.

Anthony indicates a clear strategizing in how he has thought about his potential connections in his chosen area of study and the ways they will be of benefit to his trajectory, reflecting a more general pattern across the middle-class interviewees in this study. He grasps the available opportunities to diversify his CV, gaining experience in areas related,

but also supplementary, to his subject of study. This is an example of a more 'active' disposition towards the pursuit of advantageous opportunities characteristic of middle-class students and illustrates the middle-class tendency to embark on capital accumulation and conversion (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

While many of the students studying vocational qualifications expressed a clear willingness to gain relevant work experience, they were largely unable to access resources other than those provided to all students at their institution. This was particularly the case for students from working-class backgrounds, especially lower working-class family backgrounds, who (a) had limited capital(s) to draw upon and (b) had chosen subjects where their family had no prior relevant experience or connection. These students compared to others from higher working-class backgrounds who did possess some level of social capital that they had used to gain some form of work experience outside of their college course. Ryan, an upper working-class student studying Aircraft Maintenance at Western College, and Ethan, a lower working-class student studying Art & Design at Capital College, aptly illustrate the differential possession of social capital among working-class interviewees in this study. Ethan currently aspired to be a Tattooist yet was unable to find suitable work experience opportunities or future qualifications (e.g., apprenticeship) to pursue in his local area. He explained during the interview that he was informed of the lack of specific opportunities relating to Tattooing available at his institution by his college's reception. Compared to Ethan, Ryan had higher levels of economic, cultural, and social capital in his working-class familial background. Significantly, he was able to draw upon a 'limited' form of social capital (Burke, 2016), at the same company his father works, to gain work experience in aircraft maintenance:

Ryan: I am only at college three days a week and I was just looking for jobs to earn a bit of money. So, obviously I was into engineering like on the aircrafts and race cars and stuff, so I got offered a job down there [at father's company]. So, I took the job and recently I have been up in [national aircraft repair centre] building conveyors and aircraft parts and stuff.

Ross: Nice and do you feel like that really helps with your course?

Ryan: Yeah, it really helps with the course because it also gives me the experience for when we finish the course. But also, it gives me opportunities for something if I wanted to move into something else then I could.

Ross: So how did you hear about that job?

Ryan: Well obviously I heard from my dad that he had some jobs going. So, I went in for an interview and obviously got the interview.

This social capital, although very beneficial for him in enabling him to accrue valuable, and paid, work experience is more limited because it still necessitated Ryan applying for the role and participating in an interview. Whereas, the opportunity Chloe had received to work at the

National Grid was articulated as more of a certain opportunity provided through her informal network – or the ‘grapevine’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998) – which did not require an interview. This indicates that capital possession is not absolute but bound by context, whereby some individuals are in possession of more advantageous forms of capital compared to others for whom the mobilisation of capital may not be possible or necessitate additional effort and uncertainty. It moreover shows that some working-class students are relatively advantaged in the possession of occupationally specific capital via their family. Nonetheless, when contrasted to other working-class students across the sample, Ryan does represent a relatively unique student in terms of the work experience opportunity he has been able to secure during his first year of college study. This can be attributed to his pursuit of an occupation similar to his father, uncle and great uncle, and the associated familial resources at his disposal because of this familial history.

As **table 27** shows, work experience opportunities across the sample, either tentative or already secured, were concentrated among more advantaged students in terms of their economic, cultural, and social capital. Among some students from a working-class background, their choice to pursue a qualification and career aspiration like their parents or other family members enabled them to have tentative or secured relevant work experience during their college studies (e.g., Ryan and Claire). Conversely, most of the middle-class students did not aim to enter a career like their parents, instead choosing to pursue university study and an alternative career. Nonetheless, the possession of tentative or secured work experience opportunities is much more common among middle-class students because of the, what might be called, unrestricted social capital possessed. For example, only Martin and Marianne did not speak of planning to make use of or already using connections to secure work experience. This may be because Martin did not know his future career plans (yet was sure of studying Mathematics at university and had previously used social capital to secure work experience at school). Likewise, Marianne was undecided regarding her career aspiration.

Table 27: Student work experience acquisition relevant to future aspiration

Name*	Subject	Career Aspiration	School Work Experience	Tentative** College Work Experience	Secured** College Work Experience	College ECA Participation
Benjamin	Bricklaying & Construction	Bricklayer	N	N	N	N
Ethan	Art & Design	Tattoo Artist	Y	N	N	N
Connor	Engineering	Pilot/Engineer	N	N	N	N
Bella	A-Levels	Undecided	Y	N	N	N
Matthew	IT	Software Engineer	N	Y	Y	Y
Alex	Land-based Engineering	Agricultural Engineer	N	N	Y***	N
Zach	Aircraft Maintenance	Aircraft Engineer	Y	N	N	N
Julie	A-Levels	Undecided	N	N	N	N
Claire	Land-based Engineering	Agricultural Engineer	N/A	Y	Y	N
Scott	A-Levels	Architect	Y	N	N	N
Jacob	A-levels	Pilot	N	N	N	N
Katherine	Art & Design	Undecided	N	N	N	N
Ryan	Aircraft Maintenance	Aircraft Engineer	Y	N	Y	N
Hannah	A-Levels	TV Production	Y	N	Y	N
Martin	A-Levels	Undecided	Y	N	N	N
Emma	A-Levels	Teacher	N	N	Y	N
Zoe	A-Levels	Pilot	Y	Y	N	N
Liam	Engineering	Engineer/Pilot	Y	Y	Y	Y
Anthony	Aircraft Maintenance	Aircraft Engineer	Y	Y	N	Y
Charlotte	A-Levels	Veterinary Surgeon	Y	Y	Y	Y
Marianne	Applied Science	Undecided	Y	N	N	Y
Chloe	A-Levels	Environmental Scientist	N	N	Y	Y

*Students ordered from lowest to higher social class index score. **By 'tentative' work experience opportunities, the table displays where students discussed their plans to utilise their social connections and/or an ability to do mobilise existing connections to gain experience. Whereas for 'secured' work experience opportunities, the students had explained that they had already secured work experience whilst at college. ***Alex indicated he had, similarly to many classmates, secured work experience with a local employer (thus, it did not require familial social capital).

8.4.3. Classed perceptions of mobilising social capital to 'get ahead'

However, the possession of social capital in one's family background and wider social network was not necessarily perceived in the same way by students from different class backgrounds in this study. This reflects how socially situated dispositions come to structure the perceptions and understandings of potential action (Tomlinson, 2010). The middle-class students tended to talk of the use of connections more unproblematically. Charlotte demonstrated this taken-for-granted attitude when discussing her ability to use familial social capital (linked to ownership of a farm), connections to local veterinary surgeons, and membership and engagement with a national tortoise charity. Unsurprisingly she spoke very positively of the opportunities and experiences granted through using this social capital.

These social resources were spoken of as very important ways through which advice for university study can be acquired and future work opportunity can be secured in a competitive labour market. Chloe, too, shows this attitude when explaining how, when choosing which area of study to focus on in her future university studies, she explained “I went with the one where I had connections”, Likewise, her views on the general utility of her connections indicates a certain ease with the use of connections during her trajectory:

I think having the connections is much better than not having them. It is useful to have them even if they do not go anywhere. It is still better to have them.

This implicit attitude among several of the middle-class students was not shared by some of the working-class students who were also less likely to possess similar levels of social capital. For example, during her interview Claire explained that her brother, who had studied the same qualification/course, had secured employment in agricultural engineering. She felt certain that she could obtain work experience with her brother’s employer and spoke of the benefits this would have for future employment opportunities with that employer. Yet, Claire shows a desire not to make use of this operationalisable social capital below:

No... I have not used him [her brother]. At the minute I have got my [own] work experience by myself, so I do not have to use him which I don’t want to use him because I don’t want to be like I’m following him...

Claire indicates in her desire not to rely on her sibling to find work experience and future employment opportunities (what she calls a “foot-in-the-door” at his employer), a different, more reflective sentiment towards the use of connections. Her preference to rely on herself might represent a certain disposition regarding the use of connections to ‘get ahead’. This more moral sentiment regarding the use of social capital to benefit one’s trajectory has previously been observed by Bathmaker et al. (2016) in their study of university students. What this may represent, similar to the meritocratic discourse implicit in Ethan’s choice to leave Air Cadets and focus on his educational attainment, is the contemporary individualistic meritocratic culture pervading contemporary English society (Littler, 2018; Reay 2021) and its manifestation in a working-class habitus. This discourse asserts the importance of hard work and personal achievement of educational and employment outcomes and the symbolic value of both to individual status and respect (Sandel, 2020). In preferring to rely on her own work experience, which she had secured by contacting another employer and asking for work experience, and not making use of her brother as a potential resource, Claire may be accruing fewer advantageous experiences and levels of ‘employability’ than she may otherwise acquire. What this behaviour does provide for Claire, though, is a sense of pride in

her self-reliance and merit-based success; a sense of authenticity, which Giddens (1991) speaks of as important in what he coins the 'reflexive project of the self'.

This therefore represents a difference in the dispositions towards making use of social capital embedded in one's family background between working-class students and middle-class students, a pattern noted previously by Abrahams (2017). This suggests that not only is social capital differentially located across social class groups in this study, but that perceptions of the operationalisation of social capital are also socially-situated, reflective of the orienting influence of habitus and the dispositions it produces towards certain actions (Bourdieu, 1992).

8.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored how participation in ECAs and work experience opportunities in further education is linked to social class position, whereby access is enabled via the possession of unequally distributed economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This has shown that across different types of activities, there are higher levels of access and participation among middle-class students. Through these activities snowballing into further advantageous opportunities to furnish a suitable self for university attendance and/or entry into the labour market, these findings suggest that ECAs and work experience inequities are an important way through which class-based trajectories during and out of further education manifest. Giddens (1991, p. 6) referred to how the 'reflexive project of the self' in late modernity can be defined 'in terms of class divisions and other fundamental lines of inequality' through 'differential access to forms of self-actualisation'. This chapter's findings suggest that, in the context of further education, this 'differential access' is based on access to and conversion of Bourdieu's economic, cultural, and social capital.

In explaining class differences in ECA engagement, Bourdieu's ideas regarding dispositions bound to class habitus and cultural and educational capital are salient (Tomlinson, 2010). Middle-class students are found to more readily engage in capital accumulation, often via the conversion of capitals to diversify their CV. This compares to working-class students who either were unable to mobilise sufficient levels of social capital (e.g., Ethan) or approached the use of it in a different way (e.g., Claire). Greater emphasis is placed by working-class students in meritorious striving (Reay, 2021), which reveals either a more reflective or limited awareness of the importance of ECA and work experience to educational careers and labour

market entry. Using Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, this reveals both a limited ability to participate in and dissimilar 'feel for the game'. More broadly, working-class students were not found to be engaged in the same forms of ECA and work experience as their middle-class counterparts (see **table 26**). Reflective of differential exposure to structural impediments, they were typically involved in or were seeking paid employment and seldom spoke of the types of ECA that are conventionally seen as related to self-development and the development of transferable skills (e.g., student politics). It is only where institutions offer rich, occupationally-relevant opportunities (e.g., such as in the case of Matthew), that these opportunities are deemed appropriate and worth pursuing alongside their studies. This suggests that it is a combination of structural impediments (e.g., economic necessity to find paid employment), cultural dispositions (e.g., understanding of the student experience), and social capital (e.g., access to opportunities) that produce differential patterns of ECA and work experience participation between working- and middle-class students in this study.

In their study of higher education student experience, Bathmaker et al. (2013, p. 740) concluded that the middle-class university students' 'feel' for engaging in ECAs 'was something internalised through their pre-university experiences in their social milieu' (e.g., secondary schooling and further education). This chapter supports this conclusion, asserting that English further education is yet another field within which middle-class students 'play the game' by mobilising their economic, cultural, and social capital to access and participate in a number of opportunities as part of a wider process of 'self-making' (Tomlinson, 2010). The snowballing effect which has flowed throughout this chapter is once more an example of how 'capital breeds capital' (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 85), in this case in educational contexts.

Chapter 9: Discussion

This study aimed to use a Bourdieusian approach to of social class to investigate students' choices, participation, and experience of further education. Further education has been chronically under-researched within the sociology of education (James & Biesta, 2007), especially research exploring class dynamics in participation and experience, despite the centrality of social class to the sectors history which was outlined in chapter 2. This has resulted in insufficient knowledge of the sector and how it sits relative to other areas of the education system in terms of social class educational inequalities, to say nothing of other sociological characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, see Avis et al., 2017). Consequently, the distinct qualities of the further education college environment explored in this study have received little coverage (examples of work in this area include Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997; Hyland & Merrill, 2003; James & Biesta, 2007). Where research has been conducted, this has tended to offer little insight with into social class disparities in participation and experience or has instead focused on particular areas of study (e.g., A-Level study, see Dilnot, 2016; Moulton et al., 2018). Whilst important, these studies offer limited insights into the breadth of student participation and experience in further education colleges, which are attended by the majority of young people progressing from secondary schooling into further education (House of Lords Select Committee, 2016) who were the subject of this study. Currently, the further education college of the future is being debated, reimagined, and reformed in a context where only limited research-based knowledge is available to policymakers. In this context, this study delivers a timely contribution to current debates surrounding further education sector reform (Department for Education, 2021b; Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020), in particular its relationship to social class inequality found in wider society which chapter 2 demonstrated has been inextricably linked to its development.

In developing a survey instrument to measure further education students' social class, which encompasses indicators for economic, cultural, and social capital, this study departs from prior research which draws largely upon occupational measurements of social class. The survey developed in this study allows for the cultural and social factors – cultural mastery and the possession of an advantageous social network – that give rise to classed subjectivities and positionings to be sufficiently represented in a measurement of social class alongside economic dimensions of class (Stahl et al., 2018). This study's measurement is thus innovative within the sociology of education, even amongst research that draws on Bourdieu's ideas on social class and capital(s) and thus enables for the significance of each form of capital on further education participation to be explored. By making use of occupational measurements, alone, prior research has been unable to explore the multi-

dimensional nature of social class. Indeed, Thompson (2009) concluded his important contribution by calling for a class-based analysis of further education participation and experience, for which a mixed-methods study drawing from the sociology of Bourdieu would appear most suited (p. 41). This study answers this call and answers the following research questions in doing so:

1. What is the relationship between social class background and further education student participation?
2. How are school-to-college transition decisions/choices made by further education students and what is the role of social class background in this process?
3. What are the envisaged educational trajectories and aspirations of further education students studying and what is the role of social class in their formation?
4. In what ways does social class background shape the student experience of further education contexts?
5. What is the relationship between social class background and participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) and access to work experience during further education study?

In answering these research questions, this study makes meaningful contributions to a number of areas of the sociological literature. These are explored below and are followed thereafter by a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for policymakers.

9.1. Theoretical & Empirical Contributions

9.1.1. Understanding Further Education Participation

This study identified a relationship between social class background and participation in further education, whether the outcome variable was level of study, studying an A-Level or not, or subject area studied at college. Moreover, the survey instrument allowed for the respective influences of economic, cultural, and social capital on further education participation to be dissected. Interestingly, data showed that cultural capital, and to some extent social capital, are strongly associated with the level of study and qualification chosen by students participating in this study. By contrast, economic capital is shown to be not as strongly associated to further education participation. Whilst the direction of causality is contestable, specifically regarding the association between educational participation and cultural capital, this finding still contributes to existing research evidence on further education participation, which shows that social class background is associated with the most

prestigious areas of further education study (Thompson, 2009; Dilnot, 2016; Moulton et al., 2018). For scholars approaching social class inequalities from a Bourdieusian perspective, isolating the role of different capitals on further education participation is important. This is because in different fields the significance of each capital will differ according to the types of class-based strategies the field enables and understanding these dynamics is a matter of empirical study (Atkinson, 2020). Thus, this study advances Bourdieusian research within the sociology of education by demonstrating how novel approaches to methodological design can be taken to understand social class disparities in participation.

As discussed in chapter 2, further education has historically been regarded as a sector of English education providing more opportunities for disadvantaged and non-traditional students to progress through education and pursue social mobility, irrespective of prior educational experiences (Thompson & Simmons, 2013; Bibby et al., 2016; Orr, 2020). This is in addition to other purposes assigned to the sector, including supply of intermediate and high-level skills for the national economy and social cohesion through responding to the needs of local communities (Keep, 2018). Further education colleges have been multi-purpose, all-encompassing institutions which touch the lives of many in delivering an array of education and training opportunities since the defining of the sector in the *1944 Education Act* (Hubble et al., 2021; Independent Panel to the Review of Post-18 Education & Funding, 2019). Indeed, Central, Eastern and Western colleges are all examples of large colleges situated in urban centres, which provide a rich array of full- and part-time courses for school leavers and adult learners across several sites. In this way, further education stands in contrast to higher education in the purpose and focus of provision of each. Furthermore, higher education has historically been a bastion of 'elite' education, with participation associated with membership of higher social class groups (Crawford, 2014; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Waller et al., 2018; Woodward, 2019). Whilst further education has historically been seen as a source of opportunity for the disadvantaged, this study troubles this straightforward account, presenting evidence and analysis suggesting that student access, trajectory, experience, and prospects are all framed by social class background, albeit in sometimes quite subtle and varied ways. The findings are consistent with Thompson (2009) in suggesting that further education participation is internally stratified according to social class, similar to other areas of English education (Reay, 2017) and consistent with its historical legacy. Those with higher levels of economic, cultural, and social capital are found to study more prestigious forms of provision, such as A-Levels and other level three qualifications. However, this study is able to build on Thompson's findings by differentiating the influence of class-based capitals on further education participation. In doing so, the study

argues that social class inequality in further education participation is the product of the conversion of economic capital into cultural and social capital. Furthermore, this suggests that the social class inequality, which was shown in chapter 3 to have shaped the sectors development since its origins continues to operate significant influence over the sectors constitution, today.

9.1.2. Understanding Educational Decision-making

The analysis in chapters 5 and 6 posits a two-fold influence of class-based capitals on further education participation: (1) institutional stratification by economic *and* cultural capital and (2) qualification and subject area stratification by cultural capital. The latter is demonstrated in this study through adoption of a mixed-method approach, which overcomes a limitation of earlier studies of social class and further education participation. The findings of chapter 6 build on the statistical analyses presented in chapter 5 by exploring how students made sense of their school-to-college transition and the choices they made. This demonstrated the role students' familial social class background plays in framing how options and opportunities are perceived. Much policy discourse in English education draws from a simplified view of educational decision-making informed by an economic rationality reminiscent of human capital theory. Brown et al. (2020) and a number of other scholars in the sociology of education (e.g., Reay, 1996; Hodgkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Rees et al., 1997; Fevre et al., 1999; Ball et al., 2000) take issue with the decontextualised and highly individualistic approach to decision- and choice-making presented by such a discourse. A core argument of this literature is that failing to take account of the social, historical, cultural, and geographical factors and context that inform the formation of dispositions towards education and training limits the utility of human capital theory and the effectiveness of policy based on it.

This study substantiates these ideas using a Bourdieusian analysis of decision-making during the school-to-college transition. Specifically, the influence of social class is found to manifest through the construction of interests during one's upbringing that is shaped by the economic, cultural, and social resources available within one's familial situation and the dispositions to education these social conditions produce (Bourdieu, 1998). It is here that the concept of habitus adds to prior analyses of educational decision-making in the school-to-college transition. This equips young people with a socially-situated, practical rationality, what Bourdieu (1985, p. 729) coins as 'categories of perception', reflective of the conditions within which they were constructed, which frame the appropriateness, possibility, and

suitability of options 'available' for students. This produces subjective expectations of objective conditions and probabilities: what Bourdieu referred to as the *field of the possible* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Much prior writing makes reference to notions of dispositions to education (e.g., Fevre et al., 1999), yet stops short of applying the theoretical ideas of Bourdieu to reinforce the sociological critique offered of human capital theory. This study adds to an important body of work on educational decision-making which resonates with the sociology of Bourdieu and illustrates the value of the concepts of habitus and capital(s).

This study resonates too with literature which engages more directly with Bourdieu's sociological ideas. Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997, p. 33), over two decades ago, argued that one's habitus 'functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions' that make educational pathways more-or-less tenable and (in)appropriate for the young people making such decisions. This study concurs by showing that decision-making during the school-to-college transition is much more than an economic calculation of available information, as conventional thinking would suggest. On the contrary, the association one's family has with the education system, the types of activity engaged in during one's upbringing, the types of careers one's relatives do/have done, and the experiences available through possession of one's familial social network all shape the horizons for action, the *dispositions*, held by young people. These lead to the development of aspirations, and imagined futures, which are then pursued using young people's agency within the educational field. The notion of aspiration, which is intertwined with decision-making, is not thus something which can be easily changed (or 'improved') by only providing better access to information to young people. The discourse of aspiration is pervasive within meritocratic ideology which sees success and failure as subjective and personal, thus ignoring the rampant inequalities shaping both processes (Collini, 2016; Littler, 2018; Exley, 2019; Sandel, 2020). Aspirations are instead shown in this study to be meaningful, socially situated ideas on the future reflecting who a young person is, their social history, and how they see the world they inhabit – a person *socially situated* making *socially situated choices*. This study adds to the growing sociological critique of contemporary individualising discourses around aspiration which underly much of the education reform in England (e.g., Baker, 2017; Reay, 2017; Stahl et al., 2018).

This study therefore contributes to the growing sociological challenge to contemporary discourses on education decision-making and aspiration by appreciating the role which structure *and* agency operate during the school-to-college transition. The forthcoming

section shows that this study also contributes to understandings of how the pursuit of aspirations meets affordance or constraint in social position.

9.1.3. Understanding Student Experience

Participation in ECA and work experience is typically understood from within the meritocratic and aspiration discourse as advocated by human capital theorists. However, a range of educational research has shown that engagement in such activities is highly stratified by social class. Much of this research focuses on higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke, 2016; Wright & Mulvey, 2021), which signals a contribution of this study. In demonstrating how both access to and participation in ECA and work experience opportunities are subject to the class-based resources at one's disposal, this study shows that such inequalities observed among university students begin much earlier. In this study, middle-class students were similarly found to be engaging in advantageous ECAs (e.g., student politics and the DoE Award) and had better access to beneficial work experience opportunities whilst at college. The stocks of cultural capital transmitted to students from their family background help make sense of the former, whilst the latter is a result of heightened access to mobilisable familial resources, especially connections (social capital), among middle-class students. This access was coupled with a dispositional awareness of how these resources could be used for self-advancement in the post-study educational and labour markets.

These findings are significant because both ECAs and work experience opportunities are of increasing importance in the contemporary education system and highly congested youth labour market (Brown, 2003; Tomlinson, 2010; Brown, 2013). For university applicants, having a range of experiences to build one's personal statement or discuss during interviews can assist in the signalling of what might be considered interest, talent, and potential (UCAS, 2021). More directly, undertaking work experience can benefit students, particularly those pursuing labour market entry following their further education studies. Such work experience can function as a form of distinction for students entering a highly competitive and turbulent youth labour market. Therefore, this study suggests that further education is an arena wherein (typically middle-class) students in possession of mobilisable economic, cultural, and social capital execute the conversion of capitals that have positive implications for achieving their future aspirations. The tendency for working-class students to engage in ECAs that may offer little benefit to their future educational and labour market aspirations (e.g., paid employment in the service sector), relative to those engaged in by their middle-

class counterparts, is important for studies of higher education inequalities. Far from reflecting deficient aspiration, what these findings show is the way through which financial need (i.e., economic capital) plays in the mere possibility of engaging in ECAs and work experience. Despite the expansion of higher education and widening participation policies increasing the representation of traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (UCAS, 2019, 2020), research suggests largely intractable inequalities in university admission (Avis & Orr, 2016; Boliver, 2018; Harrison, 2018; Major & Banerjee, 2019). The findings of this study might help in understanding the reasons for such disparities. Not only does chapter 5 show that the middle-class students perceived A-Levels and university education as the more natural pathway for them, disparities in access to and participating in ECA and work experience explored in chapter 8 may also mean middle-class students are advantaged in the university admissions process. Being able to use a range of ECA and work experience to demonstrate one's 'passion', 'interest' and 'potential' in personal statements allows the middle-class students to position themselves favourably to their working-class counterparts in the competition for entry into 'elite' universities. In this way, further education, like higher education, thus represents another frontier where the middle-class are found to make use of heightened economic, cultural, and social resources to benefit their future trajectory. Likewise, the finding in much higher education research showing the tendency for middle-class students to make use of familial resources to CV-build and 'get ahead' in the post-graduation labour market is thus the next step in an education process beginning at college.

Further education colleges themselves were also found to be a factor in the types of ECA and work experience opportunities available to participating students in chapter 8. This was shown through a contrast between the types of opportunities uniquely available at Central and Eastern Colleges, respectively. This lends support to the concept of learning culture because it demonstrates how two colleges that may share similar areas of provision might in fact be providing different experiences. This divergence is a reflection of each institution's unique history, mission and expectations of students, in addition to the specific cultural components of the local courses in question (James and Biesta, 2007; James, 2014). Thus, this study suggests that alongside the economic, cultural, and social resources differentially available to students, further education institutions themselves reflect different affordances for class-based educational trajectories.

9.1.4. Reimagining the Further Education Sector

Chapter 7 referred to the distinctive qualities of further education colleges studied, referring to the power of these institutions to transform students' perspectives on education and create more positive learning identities. This is consistent with traditional conceptualisations of colleges as 'second chance' institutions for those unsuccessful in secondary school (Bibby et al., 2016). However, this viewpoint is underpinned by an assumption of low attainment and, to some extent, academic failure. In this study, many of the students whose accounts point to the rediscovery of positive learner identities, were not low achievers in secondary school. On the contrary, most had attained the necessary grades to enter level two qualifications at their chosen college and some had chosen to study A-Levels despite their ambivalent sentiments towards their secondary schooling. Thus, far from offering a 'second chance' for those unsuccessful in the academic learning environment of the secondary school, for students in this study the transition into college represented a first chance to escape secondary schooling (and prospective sixth form study) for an alternative. This alternative is characterised by a different learning culture more amenable to their dispositions and educational experiences and spoken of more positively than their time at secondary school. For many of the interviewed student's school was seen and spoken of very differently to college. In chapter 7, school was typically remembered by students with ambivalence compared to the greater independence and respect felt at college and the more positive student-teacher relationships experienced at college. Even among students who did not hold ambivalent or negative recollections of secondary schooling, college was viewed as a more positive environment to be in, both for the freedom and control possessed of one's learning and the wider learning environment.

Such findings call into question the, at times, widely held view of further education as 'low-quality' described in chapter 2 and the little attention received from policymakers unlikely to have ever experienced a further education college (James & Biesta, 2007; Orr, 2020). Instead, and despite chronic underfunding (Hubble et al., 2021), the further education college is shown to offer valuable and somewhat unique learning opportunities for young people disengaged by secondary schooling. Thus, this study contributes an alternative understanding of further education colleges and the role of these in the remaking, or 'rediscovery', of young people's learner identities and the formation of positive educational experiences. The study also depicts college as something viewed very differently by the interviewees to their prior secondary schooling. Far from being institutions which are derided for their comprehensive and broad nature, they are instead institutions to be celebrated for the variety of opportunities and positive experiences they offer to young people. Without

them, many of those young people's relationship to education would be, at best, ambivalent rendering the realisation of lifelong learning very difficult for many for whom it could be most beneficial.

Ultimately, what these findings suggest is that, as is demonstrated in chapter 2's historical account, the sector has a somewhat complex relationship with social class inequality. On the one hand, the sector is rooted in the classed genealogy of English education, with its development and constitution very much shaped by its traditional role in educating the working-class. Yet, this study also shows that in spite of the recurrent themes that have plagued the sector's history, such as its perennial underfunding, low status relative to the academic pathway, and complexity, it still has profound impacts on young people. Thus, this would imply that the sector has been historically misunderstood in terms of the value it offers to the English education system. As is discussed below in the concluding remarks, contemporary policymakers in further education have a significant opportunity to build upon the sectors successes and reverse such recurrent themes.

9.2. Recommendations for Policy

The findings of this research are also of relevance to policymakers in English further education, with three distinct areas of relevance identified in this study. Firstly, the study's contribution is evident in the Department for Education's (2018) recently outlining that further research is needed to understand the influences on young people's decision-making at key education transition points and how issues of access or choice affect disadvantaged pupils. This study therefore outlines a sociologically-informed understanding of decision-making during the school-to-college transition, evidencing how decisions are framed by aspirations formed in specific social conditions. Flowing from this finding, policymakers should work to both (a) create robust and meaningful education and training pathways for the range of aspirations held by young people in England, in addition to (b) improving the accessibility of information on provision available in local further education providers, so that young people are not only reliant on the familial resources to make decisions. Secondly, the positive impact of college participation on learner identities and educational confidence revealed by student interviewees suggests that current discourses surrounding the sector are not entirely accurate. Further education is rarely contrasted with other areas of education in a positive light, yet this study suggests that, for many students, college provides an opportunity for the rediscovery of positive learner identities damaged by prior secondary schooling. It would thus appear appropriate to reframe policymaker perceptions of the sector by taking account

of both its positive contributions and areas for improvement. Thirdly, this research demonstrates that access to and participation in both ECAs and work experience was shaped by social class background among students in this study. Thus, ensuring that opportunities exist for all students to engage in ECA and work experience opportunities whilst studying at colleges of further education will ensure that opportunity is not shaped by economic, cultural, and social resources in the family, but instead by student interest.

9.3. Limitations

This research study does, however, have a number of limitations which inform the formation of suggestions for further research provided in appendix item 14. These limitations relate to: (a) the design of the social class index, (b) the limits of the statistical analyses, and (c) the appropriateness of the research design and methods to explore questions of experience. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

9.3.1. Social Class Index

Whilst a source of novelty in this study, the operationalisation of the social class index is contentious. As outlined in chapter 4, the epistemological perspective chosen in this study was the structural constructivism of Bourdieu. Adopting this perspective demands a more critical approach to methodological design (Albright et al., 2018), especially in a context where most, if not all, social surveys make use of occupational measurements of class (Savage, 2015). It was for this reason, and because this study aimed to explore questions of (numerical) participation in participating further education colleges, that a novel social class measurement was created in this study. Specifically, a measurement which draws on an operationalisation of social class as the volume and composition of different capital(s) was developed (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Few prior research studies have engaged in such methodological innovation (with the exception of Sullivan, 2003; Robson & Sanders, 2009; Savage et al., 2013), with much of recent work drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical ideas being qualitative (e.g., Thatcher et al., 2016) or using occupational measurements of class (e.g., Laurison and Friedman, 2019). This led to the development of a measurement of economic capital (based on parental occupation), cultural capital (based on parental education, cultural knowledge, vocabulary, and reading habits), and social capital (based number of selected contacts) which is both a limitation of this study and offers many lessons to be learnt for future scholars.

The unevenness of the social class index – with cultural capital richly operationalised using several indicators and economic and social capital both measured via a single indicator – is recognised as a limitation of this study’s design. The limited nature of economic and social capital indices relative to cultural capital was a product of methodological (e.g., validity), ethical (e.g., privacy and consent) and logistical (e.g., student participants) barriers. As participants were all aged 16-19 years of age, it was deemed ethically inappropriate and methodologically problematic (e.g., internal validity) to ask them about parental income and asset wealth. Moreover, there are issues, such as those observed in the Great British Class Survey (GBCS), regarding the selectivity of occupations in the social capital indicator used in this survey and the subjectivity inherent in the phrase *know someone personally*, for example. On reflection, exploring possession and mobilisation of social capital during student interviews proved more effective in understanding the social capital each young person had at their disposal. Interviews allowed for investigation of specific social capital possessed, how it was acquired, whether it had already been used, or future use has been envisioned, in addition to students’ understandings of its value and association with their aspired education and career trajectory. In contrast to the economic and social capital indices, the cultural capital index score was richer, relying on four separate indicators: parental education, cultural knowledge, vocabulary, and reading habits. The heightened richness of this index reflects its more cumbersome and multi-faceted nature and the difficulty of quantifying embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bennett et al., 2008; Savage et al., 2013; Burke, 2016; Albright et al., 2018; Atkinson, 2020). In light of the unevenness of the indicators used, it is entirely feasible that chapter 5’s findings may be an artefact of the relative lack of granularity of both the economic and social capital indices and the relative richness of the cultural capital index. As suggested in appendix item 14, there is a need for further sociological research in this area, where each form of capital is evenly operationalised.

Whilst the cultural capital index was comprised of more indicators, similar to prior research which has sought to operationalise cultural capital in quantitative survey instruments (e.g., Savage et al., 2013), there are still issues inherent in the way it was operationalised. For example, how the use of indicators which measure engagement with the arts were used in chapter 5 to investigate the class-based participation in arts courses. Whilst such an association is consistent with the theoretical perspective adopted, it does present issues pertaining to the direction of causality. Likewise, consistent with Bourdieusian sociology, the operationalisation of cultural capital and the categorisations of culture adopted in this study could be argued to reflect the social position of the researcher – an example of the scholarly

gaze Bourdieu was so critical of. Whilst this is accepted as a legitimate criticism of this study's design, the operationalisation of capitals was informed by previous research in this area (e.g., Sullivan, 2003, 2007) and the study in no way attempts to legitimate such arbitrary cultural hierarchies. Furthermore, this study was partly an exploration of how Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social class could be operationalised to explore class-based educational inequalities. In doing so, much has been learnt regarding the future potential of developing Bourdieusian survey research. These lessons can be summarised in the following ways:

1. Firstly, where possible consideration should be given to ensure each capital has several indicators to avoid inequalities in the sophistication of indices. Moreover, this will enable for more sophisticated categorisations to be made based on different capital compositions.
2. Secondly, choice of indicators should aim to address different elements of each form of capital. This is most relevant to cultural capital but applies somewhat to economic capital too (e.g., asset and income wealth).
3. Thirdly, qualitative data collection (e.g., talk based or observational methods) should be used in conjunction with quantitative methods to enable exploration of those elements of capital(s) that are cumbersome without interaction with the participant.

A more fundamental learning from constructing the social class index in this study is that even where a theoretically informed approach to the selection of indicators is present, there is inevitably an arbitrariness implicit in choices made by the researcher (see also Mills, 2014). It is not possible to develop a highly sophisticated measurement of complex concepts without significant resource and, as the GBCS illustrates, even where this is possible there is difficulty in deciding upon what constitutes proximity to the cultural arbitrary (Bradley, 2014). This is especially the case with complex sophisticated ideas, such as Bourdieu's, which have branched out into various directions and wherein there is diverse usage of his key concepts (Sullivan, 2007; Murphy & Costa, 2016; Atkinson, 2020).

Nonetheless, the value of developing a measurement of social class such as in this study, which is not reduced to a single indicator (e.g., occupation), is shown in the capacity of this study to distinguish the influences of different elements of social class on further education participation. In this study, the index was designed to enable for a relational positioning of students to be conducted to aid analysis of participation in further education, in addition to informing class-based analyses of interview data. In such a small-scale study the instrument

developed thus proved effective, yet as is outlined later in appendix item 14, further research is necessary to construct a new multi-dimensional operationalisation of social class fit for contemporary English society, and which minimises exposure to the problems encountered in this study.

9.3.2. Intersectionality & Educational Attainment

Existing literature does suggest that Bourdieu's ideas offer much in understanding other disparities in educational participation, such as ethnic and gender disparities (e.g., Modood, 2004; Reay, 2004; Shah et al., 2010; Tasmin-Bowers Brown, 2016; Wallace, 2016; Woodward, 2018). While focusing on the relationship between social class and further education participation and experience, this study does offer some insights into the intersection of class and ethnicity in further education participation. Chapter 6 does allude to how cultural dispositions towards education situated within ethnic minority students' families were powerful shapers of students' decision-making. All ethnic minority students referred to the strong beliefs held by their parents and wider family on education, especially university study. With the concentration of ethnic minority students in more prestigious areas of further education study, such as A-Levels, Engineering, IT and Science, they have closer parallels to the white middle-class, irrespective of their social class background. Therefore, the study does provide rich analysis touching on the mediation of class-based patterns of further education participation by ethnicity in places, which should be developed in future research.

Yet, the intersectional analysis available in chapter 5 could be considered a limitation of this study, specifically in investigating the role of prior educational attainment, gender, and ethnicity in moderating the role of social class background. Within the survey conducted students were asked for their prior educational attainment for all subjects studied at secondary school. However, when cleaning data the format this was provided in was often inconsistent and a decision was made to not use this data, as it was incomplete and would have likely led to invalid conclusions. For example, some students only listed a selection of 'mainstream' subjects (e.g., mathematics, English Literature and Language, Science) and did not list certain subjects known to be on the GCSE curriculum (e.g., religious education). Before the coronavirus pandemic began, secondary data was planned to be used in this study (e.g., MCS and NPD) because this would provide reliable data on students' prior attainment, which could be used to assess the influence of social class on the school-to-college transition when taking educational attainment into account. However, access to this data was not possible during the timeframes of this study. This is recognised as a weakness

of chapter 5's findings, especially considering that existing research suggests prior attainment partially accounts for the relationship between social class and choices in post-secondary education (e.g., Moulton et al., 2016; Dilnot, 2018; though, the measure of social class used in these studies is occupational group). Furthermore, although gender and ethnicity variables were included in the statistical analyses conducted, sampling issues limited the scope of findings. Thus, while the statistical analyses produced are innovative with respect to their sensitivity to the individual capitals constitutive of social class background, the power to understand how other sociologically relevant factors are important is limited.

9.3.3. Appropriateness of the Research Design

Choosing to explore further education student experience through semi-structured interviewing, alone, may also be considered a limitation of this study in accurately understanding the student experience. Through talking with the young people participating in this research a number of insightful findings, patterns and reflections were garnered. Indeed, without the ability to probe young people and ask them how they, personally, felt about their school-to-college transition, time at school and experience of college, it would be difficult to acquire the rich data collected. However, questions of experience arguably require an additional observational element, such as through ethnographic observation (Delamont, 2014), to understand how learning happens 'in situ' and the inequalities that might occur.

Another limitation relating to research design is the cross-sectional nature of conclusions produced. For example, all surveys were completed between October 2019 and March 2020 and interviews were conducted between January 2020 and March 2020. This limits the scope of the findings and conclusions produced because both relate to a students' experience up until the date of interview and do not track the ongoing and potentially changing experiences students encounter whilst at college. This study lacked a longitudinal element, which could have followed some of the young people interviewed throughout their first and second years of further education study. However, considering the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on those conducting primary research, adoption of a longitudinal perspective would have been impractical and had potentially serious ramifications for this study. As outlined in appendix item 14, this should be an aim of further sociological research on further education.

9.4. Final Remarks

This study has contributed evidence demonstrating the shaping of school-to-college transitions by social class background, whilst attempting a Bourdieusian operationalisation of social class. In the process it delivers a sociological critique of much contemporary policy discourse which individualises young people's decision-making in education, seeing it as merely a question of having (a) high or lacking aspirations and (b) access to good or deficient guidance. The decisions young people make for what type of education to pursue after secondary schooling is much more than a mere economic calculation. It represents the very person they are, situated in an unequal social space, and making sense of the world through their own frames of reference – what Bourdieu termed *habitus*. For many, the transition into a further education college represents an active choice to escape a secondary education recalled with ambivalence and embark on an alternative education. An education more conducive to their ideas of learning, characterised by trust and independence, and where the ambivalence of a secondary school education is chipped away.

This is not to say that the further education experience is not unequal. Despite its origins as a sector for the working-class, and notwithstanding the multiple initiatives across the years to make social class less determining of the further education college experience, colleges are shown to still be internally stratified by social class background. Yet, despite the inequality bolstering the life chances of those well-endowed with economic, cultural, and social capital, the further education college is still able to produce a rediscovery of positive learning identities among those for which prior education has not been positive, as well as representing a positive change for those for which it has. This study thus suggests that in a context of social class inequality, further education colleges can cater for a range of learners, irrespective of social history, interest and/or capacity in a way that other sectors of education seemingly cannot. Further education colleges are thus locked in a complex relationship with social inequality, remedying its effects on young people in education, whilst still implicated in growing inequalities in contemporary society.

Thus, perhaps now is the time that wider cultural perceptions of the further education college, which has a long historical lineage, change. Far from being the inadequate other in a highly unequal education system, the sector should both be seen as a product of that system and serving a remedial purpose for it. It is also time to break with the oversimplified image of a sector that gives everyone an equal second chance, appreciating instead that colleges are places where social class matters for experience and outcomes. The current

moment not only offers an opportunity to alter both the policy architecture governing the sector but also the framing of the sector more generally. This means moving away from derogatory notions of a sector in need of saving and as a place where only other people's children go, towards a more accurate reflection of what colleges do and who they cater for: as institutions for most people's children, from across the social classes, who are pursuing their socially-situated aspirations.

It is only via this reframing of the sector that the historical continuity shaping the sector's development can be bypassed and the college of the future can be realised.

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Appendices

Appendix Item 1: A-Level facilitating subjects

Table 28: List of facilitating subjects

Arabic
Bengali
Biblical Hebrew
Biology
Chemistry
Chinese
Classical Greek
Cymraig ail iaith, Welsh second language
Dutch
English Literature
French
Further Mathematics
Geography
German
Greek (modern)
Gujarati
History
Human Biology
Italian
Japanese
Latin
Mathematics
Modern Hebrew
Panjabi
Persian
Physics
Polish
Portuguese
Pure Mathematics
Russian
Spanish
Turkish
Urdu

Source: Taken from Dilnot (2018)

Appendix Item 2: Primary survey instrument

Table 29: Survey question list

Question	Available Responses
<p>Please tick below to agree to take part in this survey. By completing this survey in full you will be entered into a prize draw to win Amazon vouchers and will help to understand the experience of students in further education. During the survey, you will be answering a range of questions asking about your educational and social background, in addition to your views on education. You do not have to complete any question you do not feel comfortable completing. If you do not know any answers for a questions, it is perfectly fine to write "don't know". The aim of this survey is to understand the experience of students in further education, so by completing it you could have a positive effect on future students. Your data will only be used to by myself to complete my PhD Research at Cardiff University.</p> <p>Please be assured that any answers you provide will not be seen by your school/college and will be protected in accordance with data protection law. If you have any questions about this survey, please email Ross Goldstone at GoldstoneR@cardiff.ac.uk or ask your teacher and I will respond to your query.</p>	Single tick-box [force response]
Q1. Please state below the course you are studying and the name of the qualification(s) to which it will lead (e.g. Level 2 Diploma in Plumbing Studies).	Open comment
Q2. Please state below the name of your college.	Open comment
Q3. What is your parent(s) or carer(s) highest level of education? Please only tick only one box for each parent. If your parents have separated please enter use the two parents you spend the most time with	Students were asked to select each parents' (or one if appropriate) higher level of education from: -Secondary school -College; Sixth Form; Apprenticeship

	-Undergraduate University Degree (or equivalent) -Postgraduate University Degree (or equivalent) -PhD; DPhil (or equivalent)
Q4. Please state what jobs your parent(s) or carer(s) do. Please provide information for both parents or carers, if appropriate. Please be as detailed as possible. If any of your parents are self-employed, please say this below (For example, self-employed builder).	Open comment
Q6. Are any of your parents self-employed (they work for themselves, not a company)?	Yes No
Q7. Each of the following names is a person who you have heard of. For each person, do you associate them with politics, music, novels, art, or science? If you do not know that is ok, please select 'don't know'. Please do not guess.	Respondents asked to select which area of cultural activity each of the following are associated ('don't know' was also available): -Alan Turing -Mahatma Gandhi -Frederic Chopin -Galileo Galilei -George Orwell -Wolfgang Mozart -Marie Curie -Gordon Brown -Charles Dickens -Pablo Picasso -Albert Einstein -Virginia Woolf -Karl Marx -Vincent Van Gogh -Paul McCartney -Bob Dylan -Andy Warhol -Rembrandt -Jane Austen -John F. Kennedy
Q8. Whilst at school, were you ever eligible for free-school meals (FSM)?	Yes No
Q9. Please write which <u>underlined</u> word most likely fills the gap and completes the sentences below. <u>If you find this difficult, that is absolutely fine. You can move on.</u>	Open comment per sentence: <i>Sentence 1:</i> The boss firmly denied any accusation of discrimination; he claimed that the policies of his firm were not dictated by _____. (Available words: <u>shareholders</u> , <u>prejudice</u> , <u>incrimination</u> , <u>accusations</u> , <u>profit</u>).

	<p><i>Sentence 2:</i> Despite the _____ of living in this area, I have managed to save some money. (Available words: <u>convenience</u>, <u>expense</u>, <u>poverty</u>, <u>economy</u>, <u>pleasure</u>)</p> <p><i>Sentence 3:</i> The _____ from the sale of the book were given to a worthwhile charity. (Available words: <u>process</u>, <u>proceeds</u>, <u>page</u>, <u>gain</u>, <u>progress</u>)</p> <p><i>Sentence 4:</i> When the speaker asked if there were any questions he was _____ with queries. (Available words: <u>involved</u>, <u>immured</u>, <u>inundated</u>, <u>implied</u>, <u>instructed</u>)</p>
<p>Q10. Synonyms are words that mean the same or approximately the same as each other. For example, happy and cheerful are synonyms. Please write as many synonyms you can think of for the words below. <u>If you cannot think of any, that is absolutely fine. You can move on.</u></p>	<p>Open comment for the following words:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Angry -Strange -Sad -Small
<p>Q11. In the table below, there are a list of job roles. Please place a tick in the right-hand column if you know anyone personally who does any of these jobs.</p> <p>'Knowing of' someone does not mean you know them personally. For example, do not tick 'doctor or dentist' because you have a local GP/doctor. You must have some form of friendship/connection to them. For example, if a family friend is a doctor or dentist.</p>	<p>Tick-box for each of the following occupations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Chief Executive Officer (CEO) -Police Officer -Member of the Armed Forces -Engineer -Scientist -Doctor or Dentist (does not include nurse) -School or College Governor (<u>not a student governor</u>) -University Lecturer or Researcher -Primary or Secondary School Teacher -Barrister, Solicitor, or Judge -Shop Assistant -Pilot -Journalist -Care Worker -Unemployed Individual -Psychologist -University Student -Accountant -Administrator -Electrician/Plumber

<p>Q12. How many fiction or non-fiction books have you read in your life outside of school?</p> <p>Fiction books are books not based on fact, whereas non-fiction books are books based on fact. Comics and magazines are not included. <u>Books read as part of school work are also not included.</u></p>	<p>None 1-4 5-8 9-12 13-16 More than 16</p>
<p>Q13. Please state below the grades you achieved at secondary school studying in the following subjects during your GCSEs (and/or equivalent). If you did not study any of the subjects listed, please state this in the box provided. Please provide a response for each subject.</p> <p>If you have studied subjects not listed, please write these in the 'other' box. If a subject was split into more than one subject (e.g. Physics, Chemistry and Biology), please write the grade achieved for each subject.</p>	<p>Open comment available for each of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -English -Maths -Science -Religious Education (RE) -Physical Education (PE) -Computing -Citizenship -Art -Design & Technology (DT) -History -Geography -Languages (Please state which language) -Other(s)
<p>Q14. How far do you agree with the following statements? Please only tick one response for each statement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -My current course is of a high quality. -I find my course intellectually challenging. -My time at school prepared me well for my current course. -During my upbringing, my parents often took me to museums, art galleries and the theatre. -I would class myself as academic. -My course is respected by others not studying it. -I feel that my course will lead to good employment or higher education. -People from my background attend the top universities. -Studying is only ever worthwhile if it leads to a job. -It is ok to use your connections to get ahead in life. -I had a clear sense of what I wanted to do before I left secondary school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Strongly Disagree -Disagree -Agree -Strongly Agree

<p>-I spend a lot of time outside of class on work for my course.</p> <p>-I am satisfied with the learning support I receive at my college.</p>	
Q15. Which gender do you identify as?	<p>-Male</p> <p>-Female</p> <p>-Other (open comment)</p>
Q16. What ethnic group do you identify as from the following? If your ethnicity is not provided, please do state this in 'other'.	<p>-White British</p> <p>-Other White (Irish, Gypsy or Traveller, Other)</p> <p>-Mixed</p> <p>-Indian</p> <p>-Chinese</p> <p>-Pakistani</p> <p>-Bangladeshi</p> <p>-Other Asian Background</p> <p>-Black African</p> <p>-Black Caribbean</p> <p>-Black British</p> <p>-Arab</p> <p>-Other (please state)</p>
Q17. If you wish to be entered into a prize draw to win Amazon vouchers, please provide your name below. Your information will only be used for the identification of the prize draw winner and will be erased as soon as the prize is given.	Open comment
Q18. If you are willing to take part in an interview about your experiences of being at college, please write your name below. Your name will only be used for identifying those for interviews and such information will be erased after interviews are conducted. Participating in interviews will enter you again for the prize raffle.	Open comment

Appendix Item 3: Central, Eastern, and Western College descriptions

Eastern College Group

Today, it is a College Group comprised of three further education institutions: Eastern College, Eastern Sixth Form College, and Eastern Agricultural College. Students from each of these sites – described below – participated in this study. No OFSTED assessment is currently available.

Eastern College Main Site

One of the largest colleges in England with a student population numbering over 11,000, Eastern College can trace its origins back to the late nineteenth century when it operated as a Technical School. The College offers an array of qualifications from level one to degree level, including GCSEs and functional skills, A-Levels, Apprenticeships, T-Levels, access to higher education and other pre-degree provision, and higher education degrees accredited by a local university (neither a Russell Group or post-1992 university). Eastern College markets itself as providing a diverse offer to prospective students, with a clear focus being on delivering opportunities to prepare students for their future working life, through access to industry-standard facilities across several subject areas. There is a clearly demarcated sixth form located within Eastern College campus which delivers academic provision.

Eastern Sixth Form

Eastern College Sixth Form is a geographically isolated campus of Eastern College Group that was previously a standalone sixth form college and which is located in a market town in the East of England. It has a history spanning four centuries and was originally formed as an all-boys boarding grammar school that sent most of its students to a specific University of Cambridge 'college'. Twentieth century education reforms saw it convert into a voluntary-aided grammar school (previously operating as a fee-paying grammar school), before which it became a further education sixth form college in the late twentieth century.

Today, it delivers a predominantly academic curriculum to school leavers. However, other courses are available including in Art & Fashion, Health & Social Care, IT, and Media and Performing and Production Arts. Likewise, GCSE provision is available at the College.

Eastern Sixth Form College secures consistently high A-Level results for its students, with over half of all students achieving A*-B in 2019 and almost 80% achieving A*-C grades in 2019. The college also boasts of how a quarter of its students applying to Oxbridge institutions are successful. Moreover, its website showcases several prominent alumni in the United Kingdom and abroad which work in television, politics, and the arts.

Eastern Agricultural College

A geographically isolated college which is located on a 245-hectare estate, boasting a state-of-the-art Equestrian Centre, Animal Management Centre, Construction Centre, and elite indoor and outdoor sports facilities. The college offers level one to degree-level provision across the following areas: vocational and technical provision targeted at school leavers (e.g., Sport, Horticulture, Painting & Decorating, and Land & Wildlife Management), intermediate-level to degree-level apprenticeships (e.g., Stockperson), standalone university degrees (e.g., Zoology, Professional Policing, Land Based Sciences), access to higher education provision (e.g., Land-based studies), professional development training, adult education, and inclusive learning provision (e.g., employability, personal social development).

Central College

Central College, in its current form, became a further education college during the 2010s and has a total student population of over 10,000. It specialises in digital technology, construction, creative industries, business, and pharmacy. As part of this specialisation the college is one of a small number of tertiary education institutions to have secured government funding to open an Institute of Technology, in collaboration with universities and employers.

At the time of this study, the College did not provide opportunities to study A-Levels. Yet, Central College does provide a range of Access to Higher Education and degree-level qualifications, in addition to a suite of vocational programmes that are available. The non-academic focus of the College is reflected in its marketing, which emphasises how it can support effective career progression, illustrating this through an alumnus working in industries such as the creative arts and sport. Department for Education data in 2017 indicates that the College underperforms compared to the national and local authority in

terms of the proportion of students progressing to education or employment (14- and 7-percentage point difference).

Central College achieved a 'Good' rating during its most recent OFSTED inspection.

Western College

Western College, founded over 25 years ago following a merge of two small college, has a student population numbering approximately 14,000 and is situated in a city in the West of England. The college offers over 1,000 courses from level one to degree-level and in academic (A-Levels), mixed (e.g., HNC), and technical and vocational qualifications (e.g., Apprenticeship). School leaver courses are provided across a number of subject areas including, Animal Care, Business Studies, Engineering, Health & Care, & Motor Vehicle and Vehicle Studies.

The College has seven different campuses situated across the city. These include general college sites and University Centre, in addition to specialised campuses such as a Technical Skills Academy, Engineering Centre, Construction Centre, and a site focused on providing independent living training. All three Western College students participating in this study attended the Engineering Centre which specialises in engineering, aeronautical and manufacturing courses.

The College received a 'Requires Improvement' rating during its most recent OFSTED inspection. In the 2020-2021 *RateMyApprenticeship's* assessment of training providers, Western College placed in the top 15 training providers reflecting their work with over 600 employers to provide level three to seven apprenticeship qualifications (RateMyApprenticeship, 2021).

Appendix Item 3: Exemplar student information letter

Hello,

Thank you for taking part in my survey! My name is Ross Goldstone and I am an ESRC-funded PhD student at Cardiff University researching participation and experience in further education. As part of this my research project, I will be conducting surveys and interviews with students at your college.

In these surveys, a range of questions will be asked, including questions about socioeconomic background, cultural knowledge, a vocabulary test, and their social networks and attitudes. It is important that you understand that it is ok if you have difficulty answering any questions in the survey. If a question is difficult and you cannot provide a response, please move on to the next one. However, where you can write an answer, please do. After completing this survey, you are able to take part in an interview with me, for which you will be entered into raffle to win Amazon vouchers. In this interview, I will discuss a range of topics focused on your experience in further education.

My research has received ethical clearance from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Ethical Committee, which requires it not to cause any harm to those taking part and to gain consent from participants. All responses you provide will not be seen by anyone else apart from me and I am legally required to protect your data. If you do not wish to take part, that is ok. In return for participating, students will be entered into a raffle where they can win Amazon vouchers. If you have any further questions for me you can contact me on GoldstoneR@cardiff.ac.uk or tell your teacher the question you have for me.



Appendix Item 4: Social class index summary statistics

Social class index summary statistics

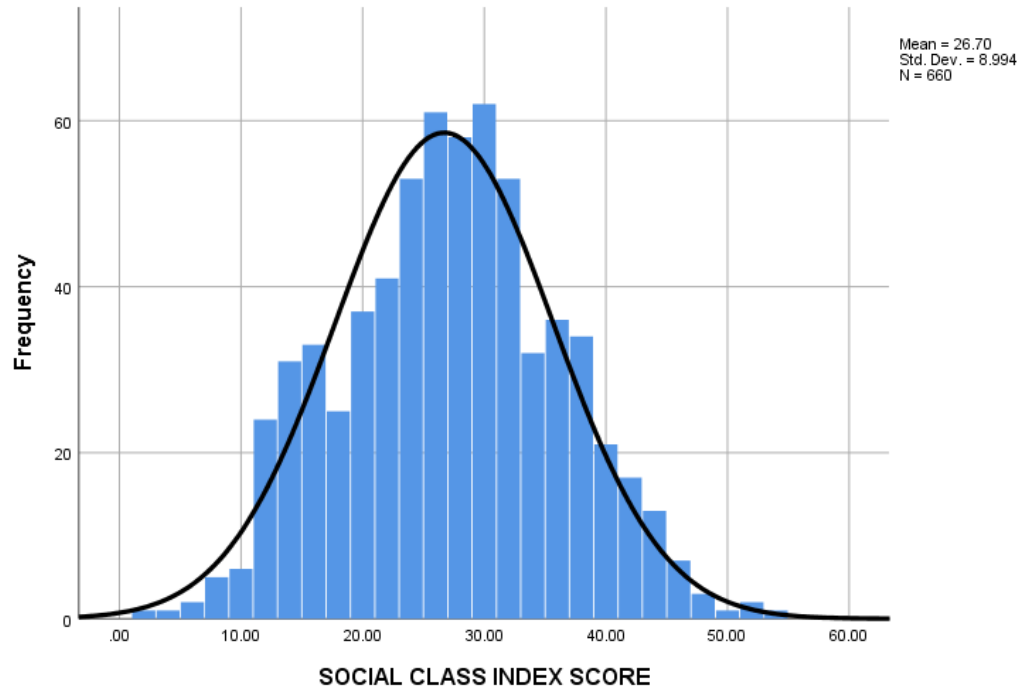


Figure 5: Histogram of student social class index score

Table 30: Student sample social class groupings

Social Class Group	N	%
Lower Working	86	13.1
Upper Working	358	54.4
Lower Middle	206	31.3
Upper Middle	9	1.4
Total	659	100.0

Summary statistics for economic index score

Table 31: Summary statistics for students' economic capital index based on both parents' occupational classification

Economic Capital Index Score	N	%
0	26	3.9
2	38	5.8
4	57	8.6
6	84	12.7
8	83	12.6
10	104	15.8
12	80	12.1
14	73	11.1
16	75	11.4
18	21	3.2
20	18	2.7
Total	659	100.0

Summary statistics for cultural capital index score

Cultural capital index scores were derived from four indicators: parents' highest level of qualification, cultural knowledge test score, number of books read, and passive and active test scores. Summary statistics are provided below.

Indicator 1: Parents' Highest Level of Qualification

Table 32: Summary statistics of students' parents' highest level of qualification

Highest Parental Level of Education	N	%
Secondary Education	157	23.8
Further Education	259	39.3
Undergraduate HE	106	16.1
Postgraduate HE	114	17.3
PhD or Equivalent	22	3.3
Total	659	100.0

Indicator 2: Students' Cultural Knowledge

Table 33: Summary statistics for students' cultural knowledge score

N	659
Mean Index Score	11.5*
Median Index Score	12
Std. Deviation	5*
Minimum	0
Maximum	20

*Values have been rounded.

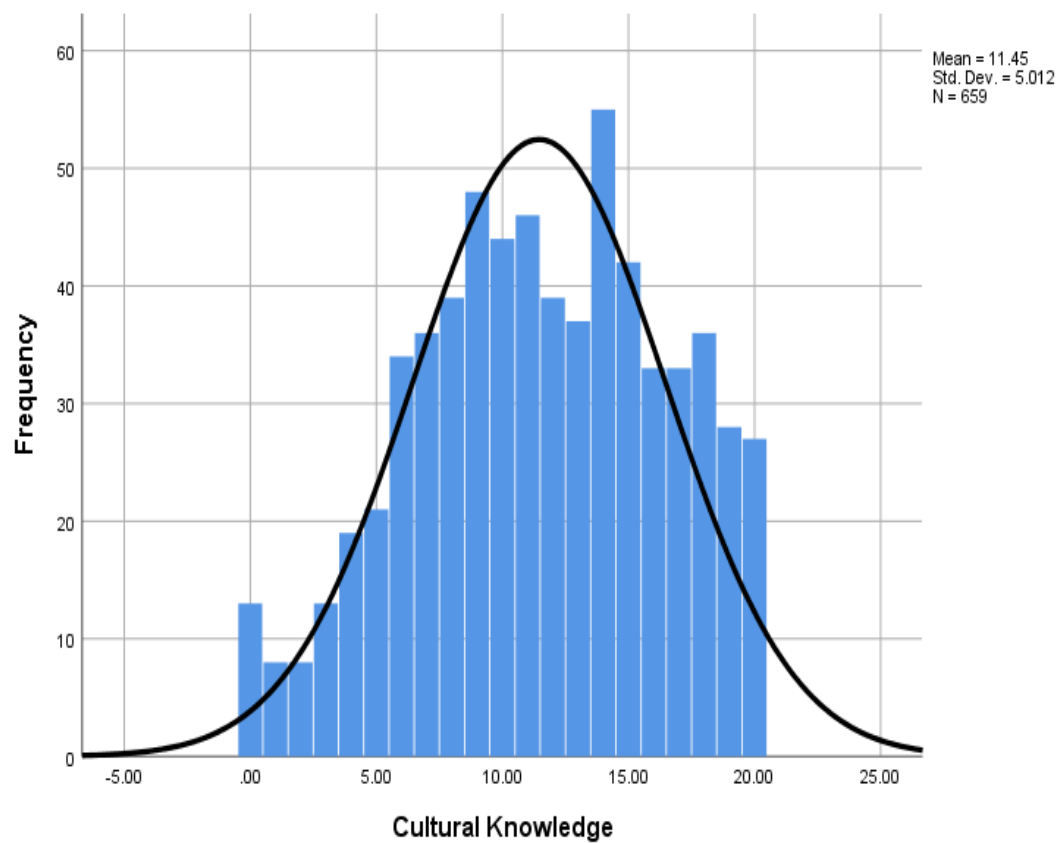


Figure 6: Distribution of students' cultural knowledge values

Indicator 3: Number of Books Read Outside of School/College

Table 34: Summary statistics for number of books students

N of Books Read	N	%
None	72	10.9
1-4	130	19.7
5-8	98	14.9
9-12	74	11.2
13-16	37	5.6
17-20	248	37.6
Total	659	100.0

Indicator 4: Passive and Active Vocabulary Score Average

Table 35: Summary statistics for students' average vocabulary score

N	659
Mean Index Score	8.5*
Median Index Score	9
Std. Deviation	4.7*
Minimum	0
Maximum	20

*Values have been rounded

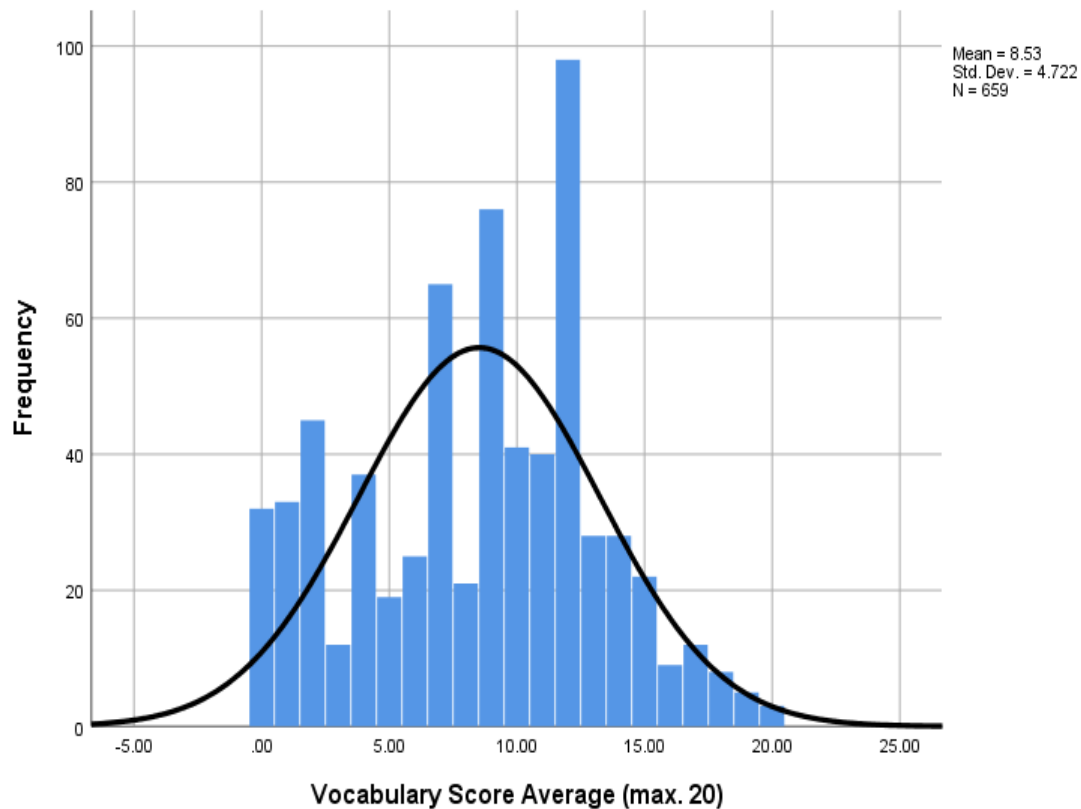


Figure 7: Distribution of students' vocabulary test scores

Summary statistics for social capital index score

Table 36: Summary statistics for students' social capital

N	659
Mean Index Score	6.5*
Median Index Score	6

Mode	6
Minimum	0
Maximum	20

*Values have been rounded

Appendix Item 5: Sample & independent variable summary statistics

Table 37: Student sample by gender

Gender	N	%
Male	320	53.1
Female	275	45.6
Other	8	1.3
Total	603*	100.0

Sample: 659. *Missing=56.

Table 38: Student sample by ethnicity

Ethnicity	N	%
White British	553	84.9
Other White	32	4.9
Mixed	21	3.2
Indian	2	0.3
Pakistani	5	0.8
Bangladeshi	3	0.5
Other Asian	4	0.6
Black African	12	1.8
Black Caribbean	2	0.3
Black British	3	0.5
Arab	1	0.2
Other	13	2.0
Total	651	100.0

Sample: 659. *Missing=8.

Table 39: Student sample by eFSM

eFSM	N	%
Yes	163	25.2
No	484	74.8
Total	647*	100.0

Sample: 659. *Missing=12.

Table 40: Student sample by subject area

Subject Studied	N	%
A-Level	114	17.4
Animal Care	6	0.9
Business, Finance & Accounting	70	10.7
Catering & Hospitality	6	0.9
Computing & IT	38	5.8
Construction	97	14.8
Counselling	2	0.3
Creative Arts, Fashion & Media	71	10.8
Education & Training	9	1.4

Engineering & Manufacturing	76	11.6
Sports, Fitness & Outdoor Pursuits	27	4.1
Hair, Beauty & Therapy	16	2.4
Health, Social Care & Childcare	62	9.5
Motor Vehicle & Transport	22	3.4
Public Transport	14	2.1
Science	9	1.4
Travel & Tourism	3	0.5
Other	7	1.1
GCSE Only	6	0.9
Total	655	100.0

Sample: 659. *Missing=4.

Table 41: Student sample by level of qualification studied

Level of Qualification	N	%
Level One	70	11.0
Level Two	144	22.6
Level Three	392	61.5
Higher Education	29	4.6
GCSE Only	2	0.3
Total	637	100.0

Sample: 659. *Missing=22.

Appendix Item 6: Interview schedule

Interview Introduction

Discuss survey

Interviewee Introduction

Family background: where you grew up, family education & parental employment.

- Prompt: Do your parents own the house you live in?
- Prompt: How would you describe your parent's approach to your education?

Hobbies & interests.

- Prompt: Is there anything you do in your life outside of college which might influence your college experience?
- Prompt: How do you cope with the pressures of your college life and life outside of college?
- Subjects studied at school; school experience; extra tuition received?
- Prompt: Was school a place you liked to be?
- Prompt: How were school choices decided?
- Prompt: How well did you think you did at school? How do your grades make you feel?
- Prompt: Was doing well at school respected where you grew up?
- Prompt: Has your time at college made you feel more confident in your education?
- Prompt: Some people say that people from certain backgrounds do better in school and enjoy school more. Do you think this is true? Do you think people from similar backgrounds to you do well at school?

Views on the purpose of education.

- Prompt: What do you want to get out of education?

Most important educational experience(s).

Education Decision-making, Choices, and Transitions

I would like you to think back to when you began thinking about what to do or what not to do after school. What were the options you were thinking about at that time?

- Prompt: So, did you feel like you had many options when leaving school? Did anyone give you advice when choosing what to study?

- Prompt: Family & parental involvement in educational decisions (e.g. decisions, help studying & coursework).
- Prompt: School & career advice: what options were presented to you at school?

Were alternative qualifications considered?

- Prompt: Apprenticeship; BTEC or A-level)?
- Prompt: When did ideas on educational 'journey' form?
- Prompt: When was it clear to you what you wanted to study after secondary school?
- Prompt: Have your ideas on what you wanted to do after secondary school changed overtime?

Vignette: What would you like to be doing in 5-10 years' time? Why? Same neighbourhood? Have you ever considered money when thinking about what you want to do in the future? Biggest worries about the future?

- Prompt: How will you achieve this (education/employment route)?
- Prompt: What would parents & family feel about this?
- Prompt: Thoughts on higher education.
- Prompt: Do people from your background go to university?
- Prompt: Do you feel you would be more comfortable studying a degree in a college? What might be the benefits of this?
- Prompt: Career relevance of course?
- Prompt: How did your ideas on what you want to do after college influence your choice of course/qualification?

Reasoning for choice of college.

- Prompt: Relevance to future plans?
- Prompt: Practicality (geographical; economic)?
- Prompt: Recommendation?
- Prompt: Peer group influences?

Perception of chosen course & of institution by others

- Prompt: How do you feel other students see your course?
- Students' perceptions of other courses.

- Prompt: Are there any courses in college which have a stigma?

Possession of contacts & connections

- Prompt: Do you know anyone who does a job that you would like to do?
- Prompt: What did you do for work experience in school?
- Prompt: Who will you talk with to help you decide on your future plans?

Educational experiences, attitudes, and understandings

Can you tell me about a positive experience you have had whilst at College?

- Prompt: Likes & dislikes of learning in college.
- Prompt: Do you find learning in college enjoyable?

How current college course compares to school

- Prompt: Can you think about how teaching & learning is different in school and college (Further prompts: theoretical vs. practical/hands-on, language, and relevance)?
- Prompt: What type of learner would you say you are? And why?
- Prompt: How have you found assessments at college and school?
- Prompt: Can you think of a time where you learnt something on your course very well? How? Why?

Relationship with teachers in school-vs-college

- Prompt: Do you feel you can relate to staff more in college than school? Why?
- Prompt: What do you think teachers think of you?
- Prompt: Are staff more approachable in college than in school? If so, why?
- Prompt: How do you interact with staff at college, for example? (treated like an adult? Treated with respect?)
- Prompt: Do you feel that your background is represented more in teaching staff at college than at school?
- Prompt: Would you say you play an active role in the classroom?

Sense of belonging, confidence, & 'fit'.

- Prompt: How would you compare the school & college environments?
- Prompt: What is it about the college environment that makes it more welcoming?

- Prompt: Do you feel part of a community at college?

Wider benefits of learning.

- Prompt: Do you think your course has changed you as a person?
- Prompt: How do you think you have changed since coming to college?
- Prompt: Do you feel you are achieving your full potential at college?
- Prompt: Do you feel your course has increased your opportunities for the future?
If so, why did school not do this?

Extra-curricular activities

- Prompt: What do you do in the rest of your life, apart from College?
- Prompt: Clubs & sports
- Prompt: Employment
- Prompt: Student life
- Prompt: Paid work or volunteering

How has your college experience compared to your expectations?

Finishing Section

One word to summarise your school & college experience.

- Why?

Appendix Item 7: Interviewee summary (including index score)

This appendix item provides a summary of each interviewee in this study, including their social class index score (following the interviewee's name) and family background. Summary characteristics for each interviewee are also displayed in **table 6**.

Central College *Katherine – 29*

Katherine self-identified as a female and Black African. She requires learning support because she has an additional learning need (ALN), specifically learning and communication difficulties. She is a level two Art & Design student who lives with her mother in London in a property her mother owns. Her mother is a Counsellor and previously attended university in England after previously attending schools in Nigeria. Katherine has two sisters, one of which is currently at university studying to become a doctor and the other studied Animation and is now seeking an apprenticeship.

Marianne – 49

Marianne self-identified as a female and Bangladeshi and lives with her parents and two brothers. Her father is a real estate agent and property developer, and her mother is a nurse. She explained how her family frequently move houses whilst her father develops a property. Her older sister passed away in the last five years and this has a dramatic effect on her family, as well as on her education. For example, her performance in secondary schooling went from achieving grade 7-9 to 3-5. At college, she volunteers in the Students' Union and is a college governor. Upon leaving school, Marianne first attended Central College to study Health & Social Care. However, after feeling dissatisfied with the course she changed to Applied Science.

Matthew – 21.5

Matthew self-identified as a male and has a mixed ethnic background, with his mother coming from Pakistan and his father being Italian. His Mother runs a small clothing shop, and his father is an engineer. He has two brothers, one of which is younger and is searching for a job, while his older is currently completing an apprenticeship in Data Science. Matthew is studying a level three BTEC qualification in IT. After leaving school with two GCSEs, Matthew entered a sixth form where he passed his English GCSE and completed a level two qualification to enter college. He did begin an apprenticeship after his time at sixth form but chose to begin a college course after being unsatisfied with the chosen apprenticeship. Between leaving his apprenticeship and beginning his college course he undertook a traineeship in IT. Matthew also has attention deficit disorder (ADD). He disclosed that he had experienced family difficulties in the recent past. Currently, he is a part-time Army Reservist along his college studies. Matthew also volunteers as a college ambassador.

Liam – 35

Liam self-identified as male and Pakistani. Both his parents are from Pakistan and spent either part or their whole education there. His father is an accountant and has educational history studying in Saudi Arabia and then England at a prestigious university. His mother is a tailor and does not have a prolonged educational history. He is currently studying a level two BTEC qualification in Engineering at Central College, before which he studied a level three extended diploma Public Services at a different college for a year.

Ethan – 14

Ethan self-identified as a white British, male and lives with his mother and his brother in London in a rented property. His mother is currently unemployed. During his interview he explained that during his upbringing he had anger management problems and experienced paternal relationship difficulties. After attending anger management classes whilst at primary school he believes this improved, with implications for his educational experience. Ethan is studying a level 2 in Art & Design and aspires to be a tattooist in the future. He is also retaking GCSE English at Central College.

Connor – 16

Connor is a self-identified Black African, male who lives in a rented property London with his mother who works as a cleaner. During his secondary education he experienced significant disruption. He spent most of educational career in Portugal and recently moved to England and continued his education in East England before temporarily returning to Portugal. He then returned to England to finish his secondary education in the Central College due to the lack availability in local secondary schools. He is currently studying a level 2 BTEC qualification in Engineering and aspires to work as a pilot in the future.

Western College

Ryan – 29

Ryan self-identified as a white British, male and lives with his parents in a rented property. His Dad is an accountant but previously worked as an electrician, whereas his mum is a Dietician but formerly worked as a hairdresser. Both have an education history which ended after studying at college. He is currently studying a level two BTEC qualification in Aircraft Engineering and aims to pursue a career in this, similarly to many family members who work in similar engineering roles.

Zach - 24

Zach is a self-identified white British, male who lives with his mother, father, and younger sister. His mother is an administrative assistant and dad works as a disability assistant. Their educational background did not involve higher education, with his mother completing school and entering the labour market and his father entering the labour market after college. He is currently studying level two BTEC qualification in Aerospace Engineering and is retaking his GCSE Mathematics alongside his main studies.

Anthony – 36

Anthony is a self-identified white British, male whose parents have recently become divorced and live apart. They both attended higher education, with his mother now being an occupational therapist and father being a company director and software engineer. He is currently studying a level two BTEC qualification in Aerospace Engineering and hopes to pursue a career in this field after completing his current qualification and the subsequent level three qualification.

Eastern College

Jacob – 29

Jacob self-identified as an Asian, male and lives with his parents, both of which come from Southeast Asia and did not attend higher education. His mother is a nurse, and his father is a caretaker in the NHS. He aspires to be a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force in the future and is chose to study A-Levels in Photography, English Language & Literature, and History. Moreover, he chose to retake his GCSE Mathematics at Eastern college and recently passed it.

Emma – 31

Emma is a self-identified White British, female who lives with her parents and elder brother. Her father is a self-employed electrician, and her mother is a family support worker, but had prior roles in education such as a pre-school worker. Furthermore, she disclosed that a grandparent had previously worked as a teacher. Her elder brother left further education and chose to enter the labour market, changing jobs until he has eventually settled on becoming a Firefighter. Emma is currently studying A-Levels in Drama, English Literature & Language, and Sociology. She aspires to work in acting in the future.

Hannah – 29

Hannah is a self-identified White British, female who lives with her parents and three young siblings. Her father currently works as managing director of sales, and her mother is a community nurse. Her father did not progress beyond further education, whereas her mother returned to study at university after leaving earlier to raise her four children. During her interview Hannah spoke of how many members of her family had, or are currently attending, university. She is currently studying A-Levels in Media Studies, Film, and History. Her current aspiration is to pursue a career in media production.

Julie – 26

Julie is a self-identified White British, female who lives with her mother, stepfather, and younger sister. Both parents did not attend university, with her mother finishing secondary schooling before working and her stepfather entering the labour market with no GCSEs. Julie is currently unaware what she would like to do in the future and is studying A-Levels in Media Studies, Business, and Psychology.

Charlotte – 38

Charlotte is a self-identified White British, female who lives with her parents and older brother. Her brother is currently studying a university degree in a local further education college which is also affiliated to a local university. Her parents did not attend university. Her mother works as an accountant and her father is unemployed, though she describes her family background as 'well-off'. She currently aspires to be a VET and wishes to pursue this at university after her A-Levels. Her A-Levels are in Biology, Chemistry, and Geography.

Chloe – 50

Chloe self-identified as a White British female who lives with her parents. Her father is a director within a large corporation and her mother is voluntarily unemployed. However, her mother previously worked as a secondary school and sixth form teacher. She had recently moved to the local area surrounding the Eastern College sixth form site she attends. She disclosed that her parents now own two houses and rent their previous house. Chloe is currently studying A-Levels in Biology, Chemistry, and Environmental Science and aspires to a career as a midwife, or a role related to Environmental Science.

Zoe – 34

Zoe self-identified as a White British female who lives with her parents who are both self-employed restaurant owners. Both parents do not have an extended educational history, with neither attending university and Zoe's father being a self-employed Electrician before co-owning a restaurant with Zoe's mother. Currently, Zoe is studying A-Levels in Biology and English Literature & Language alongside retaking GCSE Mathematics at the higher tier because she was not able to do this during her secondary schooling. She then plans to choose to study physics and/or Mathematics next year upon completing her examinations. After college Zoe aspires to become a pilot by entering the Royal Air Force (RAF).

Martin – 30

Martin is a self-identified White British male who lives with his parents and has an older brother currently studying at university. His mother works in a victim support role in the police and his dad is a co-owner of a restaurant with his sibling. His parents both migrated to England from Europe where they met. During this time, Martin's father was studying at university. On the contrary, his mother attended higher education in her home country before moving to England. He is currently studying a-levels in mathematics, Further Mathematics and Geography. He currently does not know what he wishes to do in the future but is adamant in his desire to attend university.

Bella – 18

Bella is a self-identified Other White (Irish, Gypsy, or Traveller, Other) female who lives with her parents and older sister. Her parents did not attend higher education and work as a carer and delivery driver. Bella's older sister is currently working in a

nationwide pub-chain after completing her further education, where she studied A-Levels. Bella is currently studying A-Levels in Sociology, Religious Studies, and English Literature & Language. She currently does not know what she wants to do in the future beyond attending university.

Scott – N/A

Scott is 18 years of age and currently studying A-Levels in Mathematics, Psychology and Film Studies. This is Scott's second experience of further education, following his prior 2-year attendance at his secondary school's sixth form college. He lives in a rented property with his stepmother who works for a multinational corporation as a stock assistant. His biological parents both live in Nigeria in the hospitality sector. His biological mother attended university in Nigeria whereas his father studied hairdressing and entered the labour market. Scott currently has aspirations to pursue a degree in Architecture at university.

Alex – 23

Alex is a self-identified White British male studying a level two BTEC qualification in Agricultural Engineering. His mother is a nurse and has an employment history in social care. Recently she attended university as a mature student to enable entry into a nursing career. Alex's father completed an apprenticeship following secondary education and is now a stationary business owner. His current aspiration is to pursue an apprenticeship or enter employment related to agricultural engineering following completing his level two and level three qualifications.

Claire – 27

Claire self-identified as a White British female who lives with her parents and brother. Claire's mother is a school cook in a local school and her father is an engineer. Her parents both did not attend university. Instead, her mother left education after secondary schooling for health reasons and her father completed an apprenticeship. Similarly to her brother, Claire is studying a level two BTEC qualification in Agricultural Engineering and also aims to progress onto level three before entering an apprenticeship or full-time employment in the agricultural engineering sector. However, she also has ambitions to join the Royal Navy.

Benjamin – N/A

Benjamin is currently completing a level one BTEC qualification in Building Crafts Occupations and lives with his mother and older sister, who cares for Benjamin's grandfather and is currently not working. He is half-Portuguese and his father lives in Portugal. During the interview Benjamin disclosed that he has dyslexia. His future plan is to enter the labour market as a bricklayer.

Appendix Item 8: Mind-map analysis exemplar

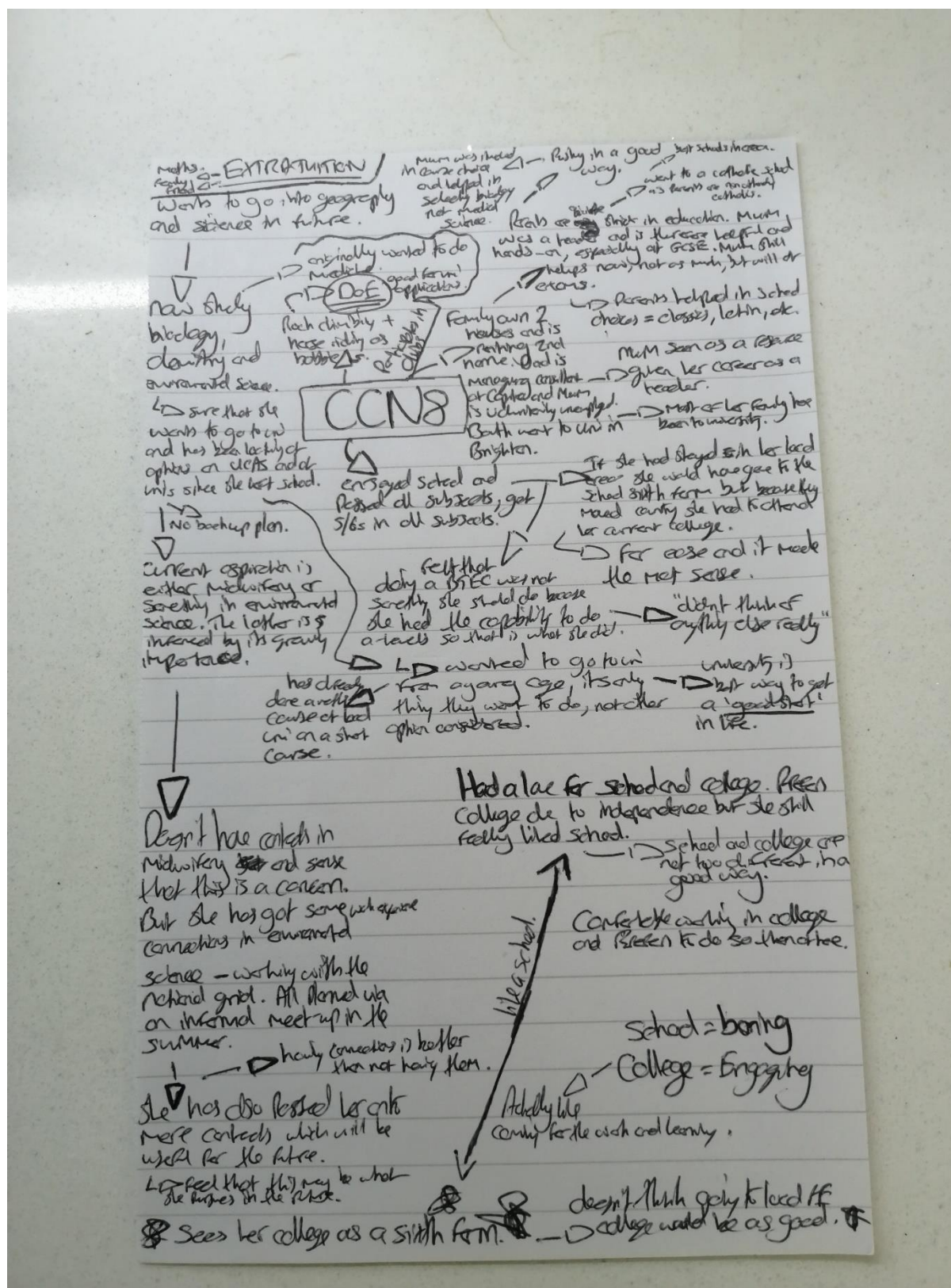


Figure 8: Exemplar of mind-map analysis of interviewee trajectory

Appendix Item 9: Cardiff University School of Social Sciences ethics committee approval



School of Social Sciences
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10 October 2019

Our ref: SREC/3399

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Dear Ross,

Your project entitled '*Social Class and Further Education Participation and Experience in England*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

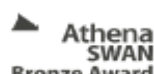
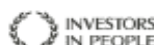
All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Alison Bullock
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee



Registered Charity, no. 1136855
Clusen Gofrestredig, rhif 1136855

Figure 9: Ethics approval confirmation letter

Appendix Item 10: Mean social class index score by level of qualification using a two-group level of qualification variable

Table 42: Mean social class index scores by level of qualification (two groups*)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Level Two or Below	215	23.19	8.84	59.05	.000**
Level Three or Above	421	28.72	8.46		
Total	636*	26.85	8.97		

*Missing = 23. **= Mean significance at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values are rounded.

Table 43: Tamhane T2 multiple comparisons output for table 42 ANOVA

Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Level One	Level Two	.24	1.000
	Level Three	-.74	.874
	Level Four or Above	-2.16	.247
Level Two	Level Three	-.98	.281
	Level Four or Above	-2.40	0.85
Level Three	Level Four or Above	-1.41	.511

Appendix Item 11: ANOVA output investigating the relationship between cultural capital index scores and level of qualification using a two-group level of qualification variable

Table 44: Mean cultural capital index scores by level of qualification (two groups*)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Level Two or Below	215	8.89	3.64	69.099	.000**
Level Three or Above	421	11.40	3.58		
Total	636*	10.56	3.79		

*Missing = 23. **= Mean significance at the 0.05% level. Note: Mean and Std. Deviation values are rounded.

Appendix Item 12: A-Level study by college institution

Table 45: A-Level study by participating college

College	Not Studying A-Levels		Studying A-Levels		Total
	N	%	N	%	
Upside	224	98	5	2	229
Eastern	85	52	79	48	166
Shire	71	100	0	0	71
Municipal	36	71	15	29	51
Norman	42	91	4	9	46
Market	25	74	9	26	34
Central	24	100	0	0	24
Northern	18	86	3	14	21
Western	17	100	0	0	17
Total	542		115		657*

*Missing=2.

Appendix Item 13: Table 15's binary logistic regression assumption tests

Binary logistic regression models require the following assumptions to be met (Field, 2013):

- Sample size: a sufficient sample size proportionate to the number of predictor variables should be used, with each categorical predictor's categories having at least five cases.
- Multicollinearity: independent variables included in the regression model should not be significantly correlated, demonstrated via a Tolerance statistics greater than 0.10 and a VIF statistic less than 5.
- Outliers: A significant number of outliers should be present in the model, specifically a large number of cases should be approaching 3.3 standard deviations.

These assumptions are tested in **tables 46** and **47** and figures 10 and 11.

Table 46: Collinearity diagnostics testing for multicollinearity in table 15's binary logistic regression model

	Tolerance	VIF
SOCIAL CLASS INDEX SCORE	.916	1.091
Gender	.989	1.011
Ethnicity	.993	1.007
eFSM	.928	1.078

Table 46 shows that the assumption of no multicollinearity between the independent variables included within the regression model is met: a tolerance statistic greater than 0.1 is observed and the VIF statistic does not exceed 5 for any variable.

Table 47: Residual statistics testing presence of outliers in table 15's binary logistic regression model

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	-.09	.38	.18	.09	587
Std. Predicted Value	-2.87	2.19	.00	1.000	587
Standard Error of Predicted Value	.023	.07	.03	.01	587
Adjusted Predicted Value	-.11	.38	.18	.094	587
Residual	-.37	1.09	.00	.37	587
Std. Residual	-1.00	2.94	.00	1.00	587
Stud. Residual	-1.01	2.97	.00	1.00	587

Deleted Residual	-.38	1.11	-.00	.37	587
Stud. Deleted Residual	-1.01	2.99	.00	1.00	587
Mahal. Distance	1.21	18.43	3.99	2.99	587
Cook's Distance	.00	.05	.00	.00	587
Centered Leverage Value	.00	.03	.01	.01	587

*Dependent Variable: A-level or not (0 = No, 1 = Yes). Note: All values are rounded.

To examine the presence of outliers, **table 47** and figures 11 and 12 were created. **Table 47** presents the residual statistics for the binary logistic regression model presented in table 10. Using the 'Mahal. Distance' maximum statistic and calculating the Chi-Square critical value for this model⁴¹ we can observe that the assumption of no outliers may not be met – the Mahal. Distance maximum value (18.429) should not exceed the critical value of 7.815. Figures X and X were examined to further test whether table 10's binary logistic regression meets the assumption of no significant outliers. Figure X shows that most cases fall within +/-2 standard deviations, with no cases over the limit of 3.3 standard deviations (which would result in the model not meeting the assumption of no outliers).

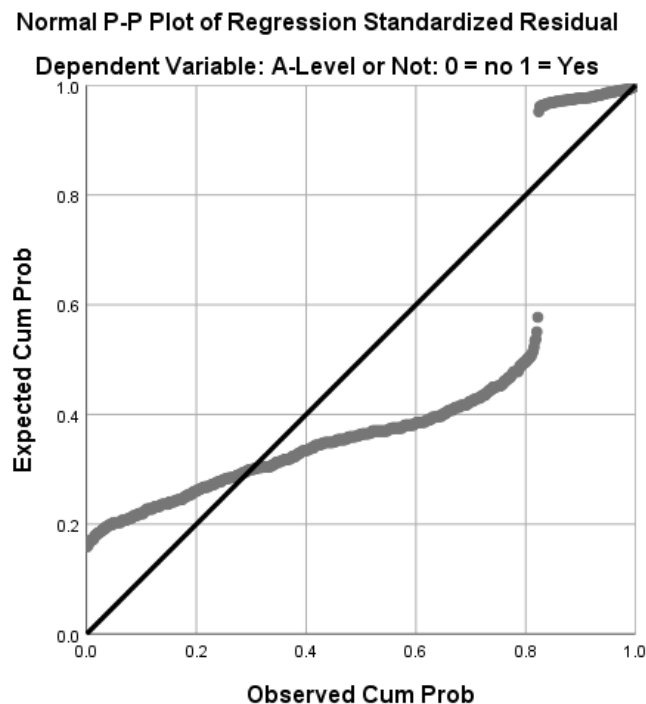


Figure 10: P-P Plot testing for presence of outliers in table 15's binary logistic regression model

⁴¹ The critical value is 7.815 (df = 3, p. < 0.05).

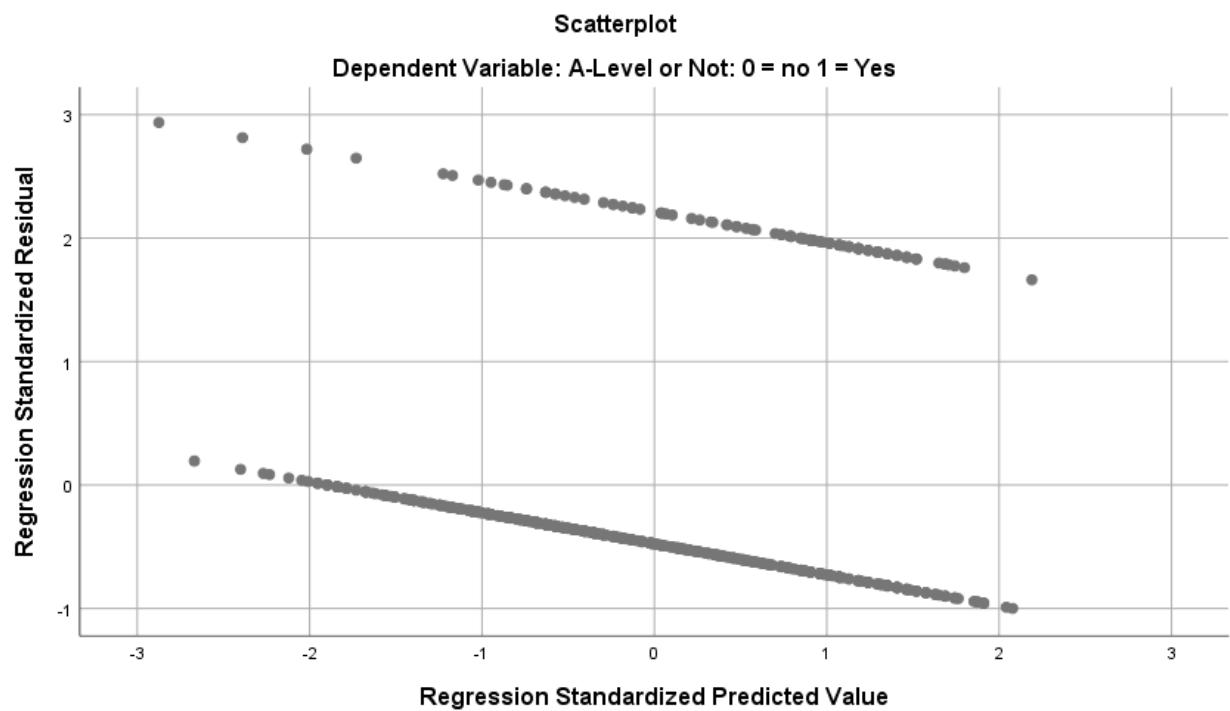


Figure 11: Scatterplot testing for presence of outliers in in table 15's binary logistic regression model

Appendix Item 14: Suggestions for future research

By reflecting on how this study's contribution to existing research on further education student participation and experience and social class-based educational inequalities, in addition to its limitations, the following recommendations for further research are made:

- Research should investigate the applicability of this study's findings to other further education contexts in England. This should be inclusive of different types of further education institution, including further education colleges, specialist colleges, sixth forms colleges and secondary school sixth forms. Considering the relationship between social class and A-Level study observed in this study, exploring whether social class shapes entry into the sixth forms would be an interesting avenue for future research. Adopting a longitudinal research design (e.g., Ball et al., 1999; Burke, 2018) to follow young people from the final years of secondary schooling into further education would enhance the contribution of future research. This would enable for constancy and change in aspirations and experiences to be explored and for the way in which differential educational experiences shape educational and employment trajectories to be investigated. It would likewise build upon the quantitative research conducted on A-Level study choice conducted to date (e.g., Moulton et al., 2016, Dilnot, 2018).
- Research should aim to understand the student experience of further education learning environments by combining observational (e.g., ethnography) and talk-based methods (e.g., interviewing). This would enable investigation of the learning and social experiences of students in further education contexts simultaneously to discussing learning opportunities external to the college (e.g., work experience, ECAs). Adopting James and Biesta's (2007) concept of 'learning cultures' to frame future observational research would be useful in understanding how individual educational experience comes to be shaped by both their social background (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity) and the conditions present in the specific educational institution they attend.
- Research may also seek to clarify the different learning cultures encountered by students in secondary schooling and further education colleges. Sociological research has long recorded the negative experiences of schooling for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., working-class) and those wishing to follow a non-academic pathway (Reay, 2017). Chapter 7 has suggested that further education colleges serve to repair the ambivalence with which many young people view education following secondary schooling. However, a comparative study of secondary schooling and further education college institutions and learning

environments is required to understand this further. This might form part of a wider longitudinal study of school-to-college trajectories, as outlined above.

- Studies exploring the three suggestions above should also foreground the institution more clearly, both in terms of how secondary school institutions and their constitution shapes student trajectories and the way student experience is influenced by the further education institution attended. Such research will offer contributions to existing debates regarding Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework and the status of educational institutions (see Atkinson, 2011, 2013; Burke, 2013).
- As originally planned in this study but prevented by the coronavirus pandemic, future research should make use of available secondary data available on young people in further education. The NPD has been used in previous studies of A-Level choices, however recent data has not yet been utilised, especially NPD data which is linked to other rich secondary data sources like the MCS Age 17 Sweep. This data linkage will allow for an occupational measurement of class background from the MCS to be used in conjunction with NPD census data, which does not contain a measurement of student class background (only eFSM is included). Analysis of this data would benefit existing research conducted on social class and further education participation and supplement the Bourdieusian analysis conducted in this study.
- Lastly, there is a need to build upon efforts to develop a multi-dimensional measurement of social class background, possibly, yet not necessarily, informed by Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social class. This should build from the lessons outlined in this discussion, in addition to the debates arising from the GBCS's publication (Savage et al., 2013, 2014; Bradley, 2014; Dorling, 2014; Mills, 2014; Devine & Snee, 2015) and other innovations (Sullivan, 2003; Albright, 2018) to create a theoretically rooted operationalisation of social class referring to the different constituent properties of social class position. This is arguably a necessity to ensure that sociological analyses of social class inequality maintain their efficacy in contemporary English society. A number of social changes may render existing measurements based on occupation and/or parental education less reliable indicators. Firstly, change to the occupational structure and the increasing casualisation and presence of market forces in more 'higher' or middle-class occupations means that occupational difference does not necessarily equate to (dis)advantage. Secondly, the massification of higher education today will mean that parental education (or higher education participation) may become increasingly redundant as a proxy for differentiating between social classes. There is thus a need for innovation in sociological research on social class.