

Subject From FE to HE: further education colleges and widening access

Dr Neil Raven

This study was commissioned by Higher Horizons, part of the Uni Connect programme (formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme). Uni Connect is a government-funded initiative which aims to increase the number of young people accessing higher education from target wards where HE participation is low and lower than expected based on level 2 (GCSE) attainment. Higher Horizons is a partnership of universities and further education colleges led by Keele University. It delivers widening access interventions to young people in years 9 to 13 across target schools in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire and has offices at Keele University, Staffordshire University, Harper Adams University and the University of Chester.

Contents

1.	**Executive summary**	**4**
2.	**Introduction**	**18**
3.	**Methods and approach**	**21**
4.	**Student participants, and the choice of college and course**	**29**
5.	**Post-college plans**	**36**
6.	**HE reservations and concerns**	**45**
7.	**Support received and reviewed**	**50**
8.	**Support ideas**	**60**
9.	**Reflections on the focus group experience**	**69**
10.	**Conclusions**	**71**
11.	**Acknowledgements**	**74**
12.	**References**	**75**

1. Executive summary

Overview and objectives

The *Conversations with Teaching Professionals* study (Raven, 2022) drew attention to the need to better understand the ambitions of those taking advanced level vocational qualifications in further education colleges (FECs), given the comparatively low rates of higher education (HE) progression associated with the vocational option in FE. The Office for Students (OfS, 2021a, 45 and 46) guidance to Uni Connect partnerships also emphasises the need to focus on HE progression from FECs.

In response, this study considers the experiences of students on a range of level 3 applied general (vocational) courses at two of the partnership's FE colleges, along with the views of their tutors. Whilst the study investigates the potential challenges to progression, it also explores the post-college options being considered by these students, and the support that is currently available to them, and whether, and how, this might be enhanced.

Methods and approach

The study adopts a qualitative approach to gather in-depth insights from a sample of students and tutors. In seeking a range of perspectives, the two partner colleges selected were located in different parts of the HH region (one in the south east, the other in the north west). Consequently, they drew on geographically distinct catchment areas. In addition, the subjects delivered by the staff and taken by the students who participated in the study differed between the two institutions. However, since the study's concern was on progression, both colleges offered some HE provision in the form of a university centre, which provided the option for advanced level students of progressing onto HE courses at the same institution.

The decision was also made to focus on the experiences of level 3 students in the first year of their two year programmes. This choice reflected the claim that these students were likely to be less certain about their next (post-college) steps than their second year counterparts and would, consequently, be able to offer suggestions for the kinds of support that would help them in making informed decisions (Raven, 2022). It would also provide an opportunity to explore whether participants were intending to stay onto the second year of their course in order to gain a full level 3 qualification.

In terms of methods of data collection, semi-structured interviews were used to gather the insights of tutors, whilst focus group were deployed to capture the student perspective. Both methods have been used by the researcher in a number of previous studies and found to be effective. Three members of staff and three groups of students from each college (a total of 14 students from College A, and 17 from College B) took part in the study.

Key findings

1. Student participants and the choice of college and course

1.1. Route onto the course

Typically, students on the six vocational programmes considered in this study moved onto their current level 3 college course following completion of school year 11.

However, some had taken a different route, including:

- Progressing internally from a level 2 course at the same college
- Deciding to change from the A-levels they had started at their school, or
- Changing from another level 3 course they had embarked upon at the same college.

In addition, a few had returned to study after a period of employment.

1.2. Why college

For many focus group participants the decision to choose college rather than school sixth form was influenced by the view that studying at an FE college would offer them greater independence.

1.3. Why this college

Proximity to home was a key factor in determining participants' choice of college.

Knowing those who had gone to the college was also referenced by a number of focus group members, as were recommendations from contacts, or advice received from their school.

1.4. Why a vocational course

The comparative advantages of the vocational option

A range of reasons were given by focus group members for choosing a vocational rather than academic programme at advanced level. These comprised the:

- Practical nature of their course
- Opportunity to concentrate on one subject area
- Chance to pursue a subject of particular interest.

Participants also considered that vocational programmes have certain advantages over A-levels, specifically in relation to gaining work experience and enhancing employment prospects.

1.5. The course experience

For the clear majority of focus group members, the course experience was proving to be a positive one, with reference made to enjoying the subject, the varied nature of the work involved, and the quality of the support provided by their tutors.

1.6. Progression onto the second year

Interviewees reported that a substantial majority of those who embark on the level 3 vocational courses featured in this research complete both years of study.

Various destinations were described for the small numbers who decide to leave after their first year. These comprised:

- Enrolling on a different vocational course
- Seeking an apprenticeship
- Going into employment.

Whilst these options were being explored by some focus group members, most intended to complete their two year programmes of study. Two principal reasons were offered for this:

- To learn more about their subjects, and to
- Gain a qualification equivalent to three A-levels.

However, some described being uncertain about what they would do after their first year.

2. Post-college plans

2.1. Options considered

The interviewees' perspective

Interviewees discussed a range of post-level 3 options available to their students and that had been taken by previous cohorts. These comprised:

- Securing employment
- Pursuing an apprenticeship
- Embarking on further training related to their level 3 course
- Taking a gap year to travel, or opting for a year out to decide on their next steps.

However, across all of the subject areas considered at both colleges, HE represented the choice made by a significant number, ranging, it was reported, from 40 to 60 per cent of those who enrol on these courses.

From a comparative perspective, one interviewee with a wide subject remit considered these figures to be some of the highest recorded amongst the level 3 vocational courses their institution offers.

The students' perspective

The post-college plans detailed by focus group members were consistent with those described by interviewees for previous cohorts.

Although some focus group members considered that their planned next step (including going into employment) would be an intermediate one, with the option of returning to education and progressing onto HE as mature students.

However, a number of focus group members expressed a degree of uncertainty over their post-college plans, including in terms of higher level study and training.

2.2. Rationale for decisions being made

Non-HE options

Both interviewees and focus group members identified a comparable set of reasons for the appeal of the apprenticeship option (including those offered at higher and degree level). These comprised:

- Learning and earning at the same time
- Avoiding student debt
- The work experience (and work-associated skills) that would be gained, and
- The enhanced employment prospects that this option could offer.

In addition, a number of focus group participants provided reasons for seeking employment once they had completed their current course. These included:

- Securing an income
- The experience gained from employment.

There was also the view that there would be opportunities for acquiring additional qualifications in the work place.

Although some expressed the view that they would have had enough of education by the time they had completed their current course.

The HE option

The reasons for the attractions of HE-level study were explored in all six focus groups. These comprised the opportunity it would offer to:

- Increase knowledge
- Concentrate on learning
- Study nearer to home (than might be possible in pursuing a higher or degree apprenticeship)
- Be independent
- Mix with others, and develop new networks and contacts
- Become more employable
- Secure a 'better job'
- Access particular professions.

Whilst still a concern, some emphasised the view that the debt they would incur in gaining a higher education would be manageable since it could be paid back over a period of time.

2.3. HE progression: the external and internal study options

Destinations

Interviewees observed that most of those from the featured courses that progress do so by taking courses offered by other HE providers, rather than pursuing HE in FE.

Whilst a broad number of UK-based HE providers were mentioned in these conversations, all interviewees referenced institutions located in the West Midlands.

However, they also noted that some of their students go onto HE courses offered by their college, although the proportions in recent years doing so were judged to be modest, ranging from around 10 to 14 percent.

Rationale for pursing HE elsewhere

Interviewees and focus group participants discussed the attractions of pursuing higher education at another HE provider, rather than continuing their studies at college.

These comprised the appeal of moving away from home, exploring somewhere new, and of living independently.

In addition, reference was made to the limited range of HE options available at their college.

Rationale for HE in FE

Whilst studying HE elsewhere had its attractions, both interviewees and focus group members recognised the appeal of the HE in FE offer for students, including in:

- Not having to leave friends and families
- Being able to continue with their existing commitments, including part-time jobs
- Studying a higher education course that closely aligned to their level 3 programme
- The opportunity to progress incrementally, through taking level 4 and 5 qualifications
- The high levels of support offered at college.

In addition, focus group members discussed the chance to earn and learn, given the perceived flexibility of HE in FE, along with the reassurance of studying in a place that was familiar to them.

3. HE reservations and concerns

3.1. Costs and debt

Although HE was identified as a popular next step destination by interviewees and focus group participants, the conversations and discussions highlighted a number of challenges to progression.

Prominent amongst these were concerns over fees and the debts that would be incurred. These included costs associated with accommodation.

For various focus group members, this meant viewing the HE option as a significant risk that may not be worth taking.

Meanwhile, interviewees drew attention to the limited awareness amongst students of the availability of HE bursaries and grants.

3.2. Standards required in HE

A further challenge to HE progression referenced by interviewees and focus group members concerned the standards required to access and succeed in HE.

- Interviewees discussed students who were unclear about course entry requirements and doubtful about being capable of studying at HE-level

- Focus group participants highlighted the prominence they considered HE-level study placed on theory and written work, along with the limited number of contact hours with teaching staff associated with this option.

3.3. Not fitting in

Concerns about not fitting in at university were also highlighted by interviewees and focus group participants.

- Interviewees talked about the view held by some of their students that HE was for 'very clever people [and] the rich.'

- Focus group members expressed concerns over the social aspect of university life, and of leaving their friends and families.

3.4. Impact of the pandemic

The impact of the pandemic was considered by both interviewees and focus group participants to represent a challenge to progression.

- The former noted the heightened levels of concern amongst students about leaving home, and of those who had not been able to take part in outreach activities and who, consequently, were unfamiliar with the HE option

- The latter talked about the impact of the pandemic on the schooling they had missed.

Although discussions with focus group participants also revealed the complex nature of the experience, with some identifying the time they had during this period to consider their next step options, and the motivation they had gained in wanting 'to do more.'

3.5. Cost of living crisis

Interviewees and focus group members expressed similar views on the negative impact that the cost of living crisis was having on the appeal of HE as a next step option.

In particular, reference was made to the view that higher education had become more expensive and less attractive compared with gaining employment.

4. Support received and reviewed

4.1. Information, advice and guidance

Subject tutors

One key element of the support identified by interviewees across both colleges was that provided by subject tutors. This included:

- Introducing students to the standards of work expected at HE, including referencing and the structuring of assignments

- Acting as role models in talking about their own learner journeys.

In addition, mention was made to how some tutors continue to offer support once their students have completed their level 3 courses.

The level of support provided by tutors was confirmed by focus group members, including the value of tutors drawing on their own progression experiences.

Recommendation 1.

Recognise the key role that subject tutors can play in encouraging students to explore their next step options and in preparing them for HE-level study

Consider how the work of subject tutors could be further supported.

On-course provision

Interviewees discussed the on-course support offered to their students. This included the provision of study skills modules and the work experience component of their programmes.

The value of work placements was also commented upon by focus group members, including in informing decisions on whether to continue with training and education after completing their current programmes of study.

Recommendation 2.

Consider how IAG and outreach interventions can recognise the role - and capitalise on the potential - of the work experience component that is a feature of advanced level vocational programmes.

Guest speakers

Interviewees and focus group members talked about the influence that guest speakers can have, notably when discussing their learner journeys.

Both groups highlighted the value of hearing from those (including former college students) who come from comparable backgrounds to participants and who have encountered challenges to progression they are likely to relate to.

In addition, focus group members discussed in positive terms engaging with those studying at their college's university centre.

Recommendation 3.

- Consider how to support colleges in accessing guest speakers, especially those whose learner journeys are likely to be relatable to participants.

Careers support

Whilst less discussed by focus group members, interviewees described the careers support available to students in their college.

- This included the value of offering regular IAG sessions from the time that students embark on their level 3 programmes onwards.

Also referenced were talks provided by staff at their university centre, and taster days held by the college's HE department covering the same subject areas as those being pursued on level 3 programmes.

4.2. Outreach support received and reviewed

HE visits

Although not identified by all interviewees or focus group members, those who referenced HE visits talked about them in positive terms. This included in providing opportunities to gain first-hand experience of university.

Moreover, focus group members who had been on a university visit considered the experience to have been influential, including in raising levels of interest in HE.

Recommendation 4.

Consider providing tailored HE visit opportunities to college-based learners on vocational programmes.

4.3. Wider influences on next step plans

Interviewees and focus group participants discussed other influences on their next step plans, most notably the role played by parents and other family members, as well as friends and those in their wider networks.

Whilst this could include supporting them in considering HE, it could also involve encouraging them to explore other options, including apprenticeships and full-time employment.

Recommendation 5.

Explore instances of effective practice amongst partner FE colleges in providing IAG about post-level 3 options (including HE) to parents/guardians and other family members.

4.4. Rationale for more next step support

The value of doing more to support students in their post-level 3 plans and ambitions, especially in terms of HE-level study and training, was acknowledged by interviewees and advocated by focus group members.

- For the former, a key driver for this concerned the likely differences between the numbers applying to university and those who subsequently enrol on HE programmes
- A second concern was whether students were applying for the most suitable HE courses
- Whilst a third related to the significant numbers who remain undecided.

The insights from focus group members confirmed these concerns, with some participants drawing attention to their uncertainty over university entry requirements, as well as their limited understanding of higher and degree apprenticeships.

Recommendation 6.

Recognise the value of additional IAG and outreach activity targeted at FE colleges, in terms of:

- Converting HE applications into enrolments
- Supporting progression onto suitable HE programmes, and in
- Ensuring those on advanced level vocational programmes have a clear understanding of university entry requirements and higher level work-based options.

5. Support ideas

5.1. What is needed

Having acknowledged the value of more next steps support, interviewees offered suggestions for what additional IAG and outreach should address. Notably in:

- Communicating the differences between FE and HE-level study
- Informing students about the different routeways into HE
- Exploring the opportunities that a higher education could present, and
- Ensuring current level 3 students are aware of the HE in FE option and what distinguishes this offer.

Whilst focus group members made a similar range of suggestions, emphasis was placed on informing them about the full range of post-college options available, including HE, HE in FE, employment, travel, and apprenticeships, as well as the possibility of pursing HE as a mature student.

- Focus group members also highlighted the need to ensure those on advanced level vocational courses were aware that BTECs (and other level 3 vocational qualifications) are recognised by the majority of HE providers.

Recommendations 7 and 8.

Ensure IAG and outreach interventions recognise the different progression routes open to - and taken by - those on advanced level vocational courses.

- There is value in tailoring such provision to the subjects participants are taking.

- This support should also acknowledge that some may favour a non-linear route into HE, and enrolling in HE as mature students.

Recognise the role that HE in FE can play in offering an alternative to higher education provided by other HE institutions, including in the:

- Proximity of this provision to students' homes, networks, and extra-curricular commitments
- Confidence that they will fit in (to somewhere that is already familiar to them)
- Often higher staff to student ratios
- Generally lower comparative costs of study (including in terms of fees)
- Opportunity to take intermediate qualifications (at levels 4 and 5) and to progress in stages.

However, there is also a need to ensure that the HE in FE offer is suitable and relevant.

5.2. Source of IAG support

There was considerable agreement amongst interviewees and focus group members about who should be providing additional IAG support. These comprised:

- Subject tutors, including in explaining different routeways into HE, ensuring that their students have the necessary study skills, and in providing opportunities for students to discuss their post-college plans.

- Former students, including those who have progressed onto HE in FE, as well as others who have gone onto HE programmes at other institutions.

  Here, focus group members highlighted the value of engaging with those at different stages in their HE-level studies (from first to final year students).

- Graduates. Especially those who took comparable level 3 courses and have secured 'good' jobs, including in sectors of interest to participants

- Staff from a number of HE providers who can provide insights into the range of higher-level options available.

Recommendation 9.

Consider how partner FE colleges can be supported in engaging current undergraduates, as well as former HE students now employed in professions associated with the programmes of study taken by level 3 vocational learners.

Explore ways in which FE college students can hear from staff based in a range of different HE providers, including those in the West Midlands.

5.4. Outreach suggestions

HE visits

Whilst IAG was important, both interviewees and focus group members recognised the value of more experiential (outreach) interventions.

For interviewees, these included HE visits that would:

- Provide first-hand insights into university level study
- Include an interactive component related to the subjects participants were interest in
- Inform participants about the role of student services and welfare.

Suggestions were also made for university-based events that would enable students to experience a day in the life of an undergraduate, as well as those offering a residential component.

In addition, reference was made to running a:

- College-based university week, replicating the work and activities of those studying in HE
- Mentoring programme supported by undergraduates.

Focus group members also advanced the idea of HE visits. Here, emphasis was placed on visits that:

- Involve undergraduates on courses of interest to those attending the event
- Enable participants to experience a day at university.

Recommendation 10.

Explore the option of:

- Providing HE visit days (and short residential events) to level 3 vocational learners at partner FE colleges that enable participants to explore and experience HE, and that inform them about the support services provided to HE students

- Developing a college-based university week that would provide participants with insights into undergraduate study

- Establishing a mentoring programme that involves undergraduates supporting college learners on level 3 vocational programmes.

Experiencing the professions

A further outreach idea from interviewees concerned enabling students to experience the graduate professions they are interested in pursuing.

- This, it was suggested, has the potential to encourage more vocational students who apply to HE to take up their university places.

A comparable suggestion was made by focus groups members who discussed work-place visits and job taster opportunities.

- An intervention of this nature has, it was argued, the advantage of enabling participants to see and experience the role, rather than being 'told about it.'

Recommendation 11.

Explore how outreach activities can provide information and insights into the placement opportunities/work-related experiences offered on many HE programmes.

- This is in the context that those pursuing advanced level vocational programmes may perceive HE as predominantly classroom-based and theoretical.

5.5. Timing of support

Focus group members discussed the timing of IAG and outreach support. Most considered this needed to be offered from the start of their level 3 programmes.

Such provision would ensure that they would be prepared for applying to HE at the start of their second year.

Recommendation 12.

Explore the opportunity - and benefits - of initiating a progressive programme of IAG and outreach support that commences soon after FE students have embarked on their advance level vocational courses, since at this stage many students remain uncertain about their post-college options.

5.6. Strategic approach to planning support

Interviewees made suggestions for a strategic approach to the provision of next steps support and an enhanced role that Higher Horizons could play.

- This included engaging in a review process towards the end of the college year that would provide tutors and students with a chance to feedback on the impact of existing provision, identify areas of additional need, and plan a programme of support for the following year.

In addition, reference was made to the value of more communication between schools, sixth forms and colleges, and something which, potentially, could be facilitated by HH.

- It was considered that this support would help to reduce the number of students dropping out at 17/18, or changing their courses once the school/college term had started.

Recommendations 13 and 14.

Explore ways in which HH can develop a calendar of support tailored to each partner FE college.

Consider also how HH could support more collaborative working between local schools, sixth forms and FE colleges, in terms of learner progression onto suitable advanced level programmes of study, including vocational courses.

6. Reflections on the focus group experience

Time was allocated at the end of discussions for participants to reflect on the focus group experience.

It also provided an opportunity to consider how any new studies involving student focus groups could be developed.

- The feedback indicated that participants had found the experience enjoyable and had felt comfortable to express their views.

- The discussion also provided them with an opportunity to hear and learn from some of their peers, and time to reflect on their next step options.

- Moreover, participants favoured focus group discussions over written methods of gathering their views and perspectives (such as questionnaires).

7. Further research

Whilst this study was able to provide in-depth insights into the experiences of students on a range of level 3 vocational courses, as well as their tutors, it does have limitations. Notably in:

- Capturing the views of students at one particular point in their learner journeys
- Being based on a modest sample of participants.

Further research has the potential to address these limitations and establish the wider relevance of the study's findings.

Recommendations 15 and 16.

Consider new research that adopts a qualitative approach (comparable to that applied in this study) in seeking the views and perspectives of FE college staff and students in:

- Both the first and second years of their advanced level vocational programmes
- Level 3 vocational subject areas where progression rates are recognised as being significantly lower than those explored in the current study.

Consider also the potential of further qualitative research based on those who have taken the vocational route from partner FE colleges into higher level programmes of study and training (including HE in FE), and who can provide:

- Detailed insights into the progression experience
- Contextualised accounts of the challenges and enablers associated with progression
- Critical reflections on the support provided on their level 3 and HE programmes
- Relatable case studies of progression, and
- Examples of post-college destinations.

2. Introduction

2.1. Context

The *Conversations with Teaching Professionals* study (Raven, 2022) identified a number of potential avenues for further investigation. Most notably, the subject of HE progression from further education colleges (FECs), with interviewees discussing the need to better understand the ambitions of those taking advanced level vocational qualifications in FECs, given the comparatively low rates of progression associated with this option.

This new study seeks to address this gap by considering the experiences of students on a range of level 3 applied general courses at two of the partnership's FE colleges, along with the views of their tutors. Whilst investigating the potential challenges to progression, this study also explores the post-college options being considered by these students, and the support that is currently available to them, and whether, and how, this might be enhanced.

2.2. Rationale

Need to direct more attention to HE progression from FE colleges

The Office for Students (OfS, 2021a, 45 and 46) guidance to Uni Connect partnerships emphasises the need to focus on HE progression from FECs. In this respect, the HE regulator talks about 'expect[ing] to see an increase in the proportion of programme information, advice and guidance (IAG) and outreach directed towards learners in FE colleges, and in priorit[ising] FECs for targeted outreach activity.' Similarly, partnerships are encouraged to increase their focus on engaging 'learners in years 12 and 13 in further education colleges' (OfS. 2021b, 9).

2.3. The literature

FECs and progression rates

It seems reasonable to assume that the increased level of attention being directed towards FECs by the OfS reflects the tendency for HE progression rates from these institutions to be 'lower than from school sixth forms,' as evidenced in a number of recent studies (See Raven, 2021a, 3, Bowl 2012, Smith, Joslin, and Jameson, 2015, Tazzyman et al. 2018). Indeed, a London-based investigation by Beech and O'Neill (2020, n.p.) found that a young person's 'chances of entering higher education depends heavily on the type of institution they attend between the ages of 16 and 18.' Whilst 56 per cent of those from the capital's school sixth forms were found to progress onto HE, the comparable figure for FE colleges was 17 per cent (see also Raven, 2021b,79).

However, it should be noted that reported progression figures vary considerably. Destinations data released recently by the government relating to 2019/20, show that 48.4 per cent of FE college learners with level 3 qualifications went onto some form of higher level (level 4 or above) education. Although this compares with 76.3 percent of those in sixth form colleges and more than 77.6 per cent in 'state-funded mainstream schools' (GOV.UK, 2023).

Explaining the differences

Some of these institutionally-associated variations may reflect the differences in their student populations.

Prior attainment

Tuckett et al (2021) discuss the lower average attainment scores of students at FE colleges compared with those returned for other types of 16-19 institution. However, Lisauskaite et al.'s (2019) study found young people who attend FE colleges are less likely to progress onto HE than their counterparts in sixth forms, even with the same prior attainment.

Socio-economic background of students

Other studies discuss how FE college students are more likely to be from widening participation backgrounds 'than their school and sixth form college counterparts,' including those from economically and socially deprived areas (Raven, 2023a, 56, Raven, 2021b, 82, Norris and Francis, 2014). Indeed, Crawford, Macmillan and Vignoles (2014, report in TASO, 2023, 29) showed that 'once they have decided to stay on in full-time education, students in poorer areas are 14.4 per centage points more likely to choose a further education college over a sixth-form college, even after allowing for academic achievement at GCSE and school characteristics.' This, it is suggested, may reflect 'the local [post-16] options available' to learners.

Routes taken

Other evidence points to the nature of level 3 provision offered by FE colleges. Although many colleges offer academic qualifications, their 'comparative strength' tends to be in vocational and professional qualifications (Raven, 2023, 55 and 56. See also Anon, n.d.; Archer, 2023), including BTECs. Although they attract UCAS points (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2023), and are recognised and accepted as an entry qualification on a wide range of HE courses, progression rates from vocational courses are generally lower than those returned for academic qualifications including A-levels (Lynch et al., 2015).

Intersectionality

In addition, a number of authors, including Kelly (2017), Shield and Masardo (2018) Tuckett et al. (2021), and Anon (2023), found that those taking vocational qualifications at advanced level (including BTECs), are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, including low participation neighbourhoods and lower social-economic groups, than their A-level counterparts. In this respect, Vidal et al. (2020, 8) found that a comparatively higher percentage of those on vocational programmes at Key Stage 5 (advanced level) were from deprived backgrounds (See also TASO, 2023, 28).

Limited research

In sum, the evidence offered by a number of recent studies suggests that students on level 3 vocational programmes at FE colleges are more likely to derive from WP backgrounds. Consequently, they may be more likely to experience the challenges to progression associated with groups that are under-represented in HE. However, it can be argued that an awareness of such general tendencies does not provide a sufficiently sound platform of evidence on which to base a programme of IAG and outreach support aimed at vocational learners in FE colleges. A greater insight is needed into the environment

in which level 3 qualifications are being pursued by these students, alongside a more detailed understanding of how these courses are delivered and experienced.

Indeed, the limited extent of research in this area has been acknowledged by various commentators. Lewis (2022, 707) observes that whilst more research into the educational decisions being made by young people is now being conducted, much of this is concerned with 'choices made about GCSEs' and the HE option. There is 'a gap,' it is argued, 'in the literature relating to vocational education and training.' Raven (2023a) makes a comparable point. Whilst the factors influencing the post-level decisions being taken by students has received attention from various scholars (Moogan et al., 2002; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Wilkins et al., 2013; Raven, 2022), 'comparatively few studies,' it is observed, 'have explored this subject in relation to those pursuing advanced level vocational and professional courses in England's FE colleges' (Raven, 2023a, 57). In fact, the need for more evidence is, in part at least, acknowledged by the OfS (2022, 13) in its request that Uni Connect partnerships 'share with each other any relevant research and effective approaches for successfully engaging further education learners, as well as supporting different learner pathways.'

2.4. Aims of the study

This study seeks to address this research gap by considering the experiences of students on a range of advanced level applied general courses at two of the partnership's FE colleges, along with the views of their tutors. Whilst investigating the potential challenges to progression, this study will also explore the post-college options considered by these students, and the support that is currently available to them, and whether, and how, this might be enhanced.

3. Methods and approach

3.1. Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach, given the remit to explore the experiences and ambitions of FE students on advanced level vocational courses, along with the views and perceptions of their tutors (Nicholls, 2009). Qualitative research is capable of generating detailed insights. Moreover, it is an approach that has proved to be effective in a number of other in-depth studies conducted for the partnership by the researcher.

However, the depth of analysis associated with this approach necessitates working with a smaller sample size than would be the case in a broader quantitative exploration. For this study, the aim was to gather rich data from a sample of students and tutors in a range of subject areas from a small number of Higher Horizon's partner FE colleges.

Informed by the findings from the *Conversations with teaching professionals* (2022) study, and some of the other investigations conducted by the researcher, it was also decided that this new study would focus on the experiences of first year level 3 students and those who teach them. The choice of first years reflected the claim that these students were likely to be less certain of their next (post-college) steps than their second year counterparts, and would, consequently, be able to offer suggestions for the kinds of support that would help them in making informed decisions. The choice of first years would also provide an opportunity to explore whether participants were intending to stay onto the second year of their course and thereby gain a full level 3 qualification.

3.2. Methods

Semi-structured interviews

Two methods of qualitative data collection were selected. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for gathering the insights of subject tutors. Posing the same broad set of questions to each interviewee presents the opportunity to conduct cross-case comparisons, whilst the use of supplementary questions, which is a feature of this form of interview, provides the chance to explore particular points raised during the conversations in more detail, as well afford a method of clarifying elements of the conversation, where needed, and as a way of checking the researcher's understanding and interpretations.

It was also decided to conducted these interview by telephone. This would enable them to be scheduled at a time and in a location that would be most convenient to the interviewee, rather than require arrangements to be made to host the researcher and find a suitable venue. In addition, in recognising the busy schedule of participants, telephone interviews can, if required, be relatively easily rearranged at short notice. As a recognised way of conducting interviews (Thomas and Purdon, 1994; Drabble et al. 2017), this approach was found to be effective in a number of previous studies by the researcher (Raven, 2015, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021 and 2023b).

Focus groups

Focus groups represented the second method of data collection and were selected for gathering the experiences of student participants. They are considered to be a particularly suitable when seeking a range of 'viewpoints' (Nicolls, 2009, 642), and in the opportunity they present for participants to

communicate 'their own priorities and perspectives' (Smithson, 2000, 116). They have also been widely used in educational research, including in the field of WP (Raven 2021b). In this respect, Gartland and Smith (2015, 11) describe how focus groups provide an opportunity to explore the 'perceptions and expectations' of those from under-represented backgrounds, and 'articulate' the progression 'challenges' they face.

For this study, it was decided to use online focus groups using MS Teams, which is the platform widely adopted by schools and colleges, and one that, as a result, is likely to be familiar to students. Although comparatively new, a number of previous studies have found the data generated by online focus groups to be comparable in quality to that derived from those held in person (Kite and Phongsavan 2017, Daniels et al. 2019, and Raven, 2023c).

Questions posed to participants

Interviews

Whilst they were semi-structured, allowing supplementary questions to be asked in response to initial replies, each interview covered the same key themes. These comprised:

- Details about the selected course
- Number of students enrolled on the course, including first years
- Background of students (including socio-economic background, age and gender), as well as the route taken onto the course
- Proportion going onto the second year of study, and the destinations of those not continuing into year two
- Post-college destinations, including HE and the HE in FE option
- Assessment of current HE progression rates
- Students' perceptions of HE, along with their motivations and reservations
- Impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis on post-college decision making
- Influences on next step plans
- Progression support received and assessed, including that offered by the college, as well as any provided externally
- Ideas for further subject and college level support, as well as that which might be provided by Higher Horizons
- Questions for focus group participants.

Focus groups

As similar set of questions were asked of focus groups participants:

- Students' background and rationale for choosing to pursue level 3 study in college
- Reasons for opting for a professional/applied general course
- Subject choice
- Route onto the course
- Course experience
- Progression to year 2 intentions
- Post-college plans and rationale
- HE perceptions, reservations and motivations
- Views of HE in FE
- Impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis on post-college plans

- Influences on next step intentions
- Next steps support received (and assessed)
- Idea for further support
- Review of the focus group experience.

3.3. Data capture

The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed either by the research or an experienced transcriber. Participants were informed in advance that data would be captured via an audio recording in a participant information sheet and consent form that was sent out to both groups. To preserve the anonymity of participants, and any other individuals referenced in the conversations and discussions, it was made clear that any names mentioned would be removed during the transcription process. For security reasons, the recordings and transcriptions were stored on the researcher's password protected laptop. Once transcribed, the recordings were destroyed.

3.4. Data analysis

The interview and focus group schedules provided an initial guide to analysis and the identification of key themes. However, more detailed thematic analysis then took place (Nicholls, 2009; Guyan, 2018; Fox, 2004; Nowell et al. 2017). This involved a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts in order identify themes. Corresponding codes were then added to copies of the transcripts, denoting each of the themes and sub-themes. Although no software was employed, a table generated in a WORD document was used to organise and order the themes and sub-themes. Excerpts from the transcripts were then copied into the table. The contents of this table (including section headings and sub-headings) form the basis of the next five chapters (4 to 10).

3.5. Institutional selection

An initial group of potential participant colleges was drawn up with guidance from the HH research manager. In seeking to gather a diversity of student and staff experiences, those identified included colleges from across the HH region. Each college was then approached by their respective HH account manager (account managers are assigned to local groups of schools and colleges within the wider HH region). This involved informing their key contact in the college about the project, its aims and objectives, and what it would involve. Those college representatives that expressed an interest were then contacted by the researcher, who provided them with more detailed information.

In the event, two colleges took part in the study. Whilst both were classified as further education colleges (GOV.UK, 2024), one was based in the south east of the HH region (comprising Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire), the other in other in the north west. Consequently, each college drew on students from distinct catchment areas. Whilst many of those attending one of the colleges derived from nearby urban areas, their counterparts in the other college came from a wider and more rural district. Moreover, whilst one college catered for some 13,000 students, the other was noticeably smaller, in supporting just over half this number. However, both offered a wide range of level 3 vocational programmes and each college provided some HE provision in the form of a university centre.

3.6. Participant selection

The key contact in each of the participating colleges identified the three subject areas in their institution deemed suitable for study. They then informed tutors of the research. Once the permission of tutors had been granted, they were contacted by the researcher. Initial correspondence, usually by phone, involved providing further information about the study, addressing any questions, and supplying them with student and tutor participant information sheets and consent forms. Guidance on criteria used to identify participants was also provided. Notably, that participants should be in the first year of their advanced level applied studies programmes, and be interested - and comfortable - in taking part in an online focus group discussion with some of their peers.

Subject areas explored

Six different subject areas were selected (three from each college). Five of the six subjects were BTECs, with an extended diploma option in the second year. The other was a sector developed qualification, which is widely recognised by universities. The subject selected ensured that the study would consider the experiences of those on a range of vocational courses. However, one common theme associated with all six was the desire amongst key contacts for more students in these areas to go onto some form of higher-level study, given that more had the potential to do so.

3.7. Field work

It proved possible to conduct interviews with three members of staff from each college (six in total). These were either course/curriculum directors, or subject managers and leaders. Each had a remit that included one or more of the subject areas selected for the study. It was decided to hold interviews ahead of running the student focus groups since this would allow background information on each of the courses to be gathered (including recent progression trends). It also provided an opportunity to ask interviewees what questions they would like to be pose to focus group members.

In the event, the suggested questions from tutors proved easy to incorporate into the planned schedule, since they addressed many of the same themes the study had set out to explore (including post-college intentions and views on HE as a next step destination, including the option of continuing their studies at the college, and assessment of the support offered by the college). Interviews were held in Spring 2023.

Following the interviews, six focus groups discussions were conducted in early Summer 2023, with three held in each college. Each discussion group comprised those taking one of the selected subject areas. In total, 31 students participated in these discussions, 14 from College A and 17 from College B. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 4 to 6. Ethical approval was granted in Winter 2022 by the lead institution for HH.

3.8. Key themes

Table 3.1. provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this analysis. Accordingly, Chapter 3 opens by exploring the background of student participants. Here, consideration is given to age profiles and socio economic backgrounds, as well as the number of first years on each of the featured courses, and the catchment area the courses draw upon. Whilst much of the background information was provided by tutors, student participants offered details about the routes

they have taken onto the course, and their rationale for their choice of college and course, as well as their intentions for progression onto second year.

Post-college plans are then addressed in Chapter 5, with tutors providing an overview and student participants a more detailed and specific perspective. This chapter addresses both the HE and non-HE options being considered, and the relative merits of each, with the former including a consideration of the attractions and perceived limitations of HE in FE. The next chapter (Chapter 6) explores the HE reservations and concerns identified by tutors and expressed by focus group participants. This chapter also considers the impact that the pandemic and the current standard of living crisis has, and is having, on students' progression plans.

Chapter 7 explores the forms of support offered to those on the profiled courses and, from the student participant perspective, how this is viewed. Here, consideration is given to IAG and outreach support, as well as recognising the influence on next step plans exercised by others, notably parents and guardians, as well as friends and, in some reported incidents, older siblings. The second part of this chapter considers the rationale for the provision of more support, as expressed by tutors and students.

In Chapter 8 attention is turned to an exploration of what this additional support, in the form of IAG and outreach, should seek to achieve, as well as the form it should take and who should be providing it. The chapter closes by considering the timing of support and the potential benefit of interventions directed at those starting their level 3 programmes, as well as the value of adopting a strategic approach to planning support, and the role that HH could play in this. Chapter 9 provides some reflections of the focus group discussions, drawing on the feedback from student participants. The concluding chapter (Chapter 9) offers a summary of the study's key findings and a consideration of where further research could be effectively directed.

Table 3.1. Key themes from interviews and focus groups (summary table)

Theme	Tutors (interviewees)	Student (focus group discussants)
Background of students	• Number of first years on each course - variations in cohort size • Catchment area - predominantly local • Age profile - predominantly young but with some older students • Socio-economic background - including from disadvantaged homes/ neighbourhoods • Route onto the course • Not always linear	• Including instances where a change of direction was made
Rationale for choice of college		• Why college - the experience and independence • Why this college - proximity and recommendations

Motivations for taking a vocational route		• Why a vocational course
		  • Rejecting A-levels - the practical element of the vocational option and opportunity to concentrate on one subject
		  • The course experience – enjoyment and the varied nature of work

Progression into year two	• General retention figures - majority progress onto the second year of level 3 study • Destinations of those who withdraw - the various routes taken	• Plans of those intending to leaver after their first year - employment, apprenticeship, uncertain

		• Rationale for completing two years - learning, gaining a full advanced level qualification

Post-college plans	• Overview:
	  • Options available - HE and non-HE
	  • HE progression - subject variations, choice of staying (HE in FE), or HE elsewhere
	• Non-HE options and the rationale
	  • Employment - a positive step
	  • Further training - often in same field
	  • Apprenticeships - the comparative advantages
	• The HE at another provider and rationale
	  • New environment, tailored courses
	• Rationale for FE in HE
	  • Established networks, other commitments, incremental progression
		• Post-college options considered - employment, further training, apprenticeships, gap year, HE, undecide
		• Earning, experience gained in employment
		• Opportunity to gain qualifications in work
		• Practical component of apprenticeships, not incurring debt, work experience gained
		• HE option and rationale
		  • Increase knowledge
		  • Proximity of suitable HEIs (compared with apprenticeship provision)
		  • Networking opportunities
		  • Enhanced employment prospects
		• New environment, wider range of subject options, more independence
		• Continuing with current employment, taking intermediate steps
		• Lower cost, same qualifications available, familiarity with environment

HE reservations and concerns	• Costs of HE study, limited awareness of bursaries, accommodation concerns • Standards required to access and succeed in HE, lack of self-belief • Not fitting in, for the clever and rich	• Student debt concerns, financial risks of HE • Hard work involve • Limited contact hours • Classroom and theory based • Concerns with social aspects of HE • Not being 'smart enough' • Leaving home and family
Impact of pandemic on progression	• Heightened levels of anxiety about leaving friends and family • Missing out on outreach	• Impact on year 10 and GCSE grades • Time to think, additional motivation
Impact of cost of living crisis on next step plans	• Increased concerns over costs (and benefits) of HE • Imperative to earn money	• Concerns over repaying student loans • Needing to secure employment

Support received and assessed	• Subject tutors
	  • HE skills taught
	  • Role models
	• Offering next steps guidance
		• Valuable of sharing HE experiences
		• Provision of realistic insights into HE
		• One-to-one meetings on post-L3 plans
		• Knowing their students

	• Course level support
	  • Study skills modules
	  • Work experience
	  • Guest speakers, inc. former students
		• Usefulness of work placements
		• Value of other work experiences
		• Relatable former students
		• Role of students in corresponding HE level courses at the college's university centre

	• Other sources of college support:
	  • Careers guidance
	  • Talks by the university centre	

	• Outreach: HE visits • Experiencing university	• Generating interest in HE • Providing reassurance

	• Wider influences on next step plans
	  • Parents and guardians
	  • Role of social media
		• Role of parents and older siblings in considering HE and non-HE options
		• Influence of friends and other contacts

Rationale for more next steps support	• Differences between applications and enrolments • Concerns over HE course choices • Lower progression of WP students • Many in first years remain undecided	• Limited understanding of HE - inc. entry requirements and application process • Need for more information on higher and degree apprenticeships • Value of learning more about HE in FE
What additional IAG support should include	• Providing IAG on different routes into HE • Explaining differences between HE and FE level study • Ensuring awareness of HE in FE	• IAG on the range of post-level 3 options - including taking a break from education • More information on HE in FE • Need for greater awareness/reassurance that HEIs accept BTECs and similar vocational qualifications

Sources of additional IAG support	• Tutors
	  • Guidance on different pathways
	  • Acquisition of HE skills
	• Other voices
	  • HE staff
	  • Former students now in HE - including those studying HE in FE
	  • Graduates - including those who took same L3 qualification
		• Support within the classroom
		• Weekly tutorials
		• Role of progress tutors in next step support
		• Engaging with HE staff - including via UCAS fairs and visits to college by HE lecturers.
		• Undergraduates and the reality of HE
		• Graduates employed in sectors of interest
		• Those at different stages in their HE studies and in graduate employment

Outreach: value and support ideas	• HE visits • Opportunity to experience university • University week at college with mentoring from HE students • Experiencing graduate professions	• Insights into what university would be like • Workplace visits and job taster opportunities in related professions
The timing of support		• Support from early in the first year - enabling time to explore options
Planning support	• Strategic approach to planning next steps support and role HH could play	
Reflections on the focus group discussions		• Enjoyable experience • Chance to express views • Benefits - learning from others, feeling valued, time to think about next steps • Comparative advantage over other (written) methods of data collection • Suitability of online format

4. Student participants, and the choice of college and course

4.1. Cohort and catchment

Size of first year cohort

The interviews with staff identified variations in the size of the first year cohort on the six featured courses. Whilst the largest had some 80 students (Interviewee 1, College A), the smallest returned eight (Interviewee 1, College B). The others ranged in number from around 50 first years (Interviewee 2, College A) to a little over 20 (Interviewees 2 and 3, College B).

Catchment area

Interviewees noted that the intake onto these courses was predominantly local, including from nearby schools (Interviewee 2, College A), although one course attracted students from further afield, reflecting that comparatively few other FE colleges offered this particular programme (Interviewee 3, College B). Consistent with this, the majority of focus group participants described how their college was local to them. Whilst participants from the programme that had a wider catchment were predominantly local, reference was made to the commutes that some of their peers undertook (Focus group [FG] 1, College B).

4.2. The students

Student profiles

All six interviewees described a similar age profile for their first years students. The majority were 16 to 17 year olds, although reference was made to a few 18 year olds and 'one or two' more mature students (Interviewee 1, College B). In most instances, the gender mix was fairly even. However, in one subject area those identifying as males represent the majority of students (Interviewee 2, College A), whilst in the other females comprised most of the intake (Interviewee 1, College A). Although in the former case it was observed that the gender gap had started to close in recent years. Moreover, one interview, whose remit included all three subject areas in their college, talked about a growing number of students who were from ethnic minority groups (Interviewee 3, College A).

Socio-economic background

Interviewees were also asked about the socio-economic backgrounds of their students. Whilst it was generally considered that the intake was mixed, all made reference to students from more deprived backgrounds. One interviewee observed that a significant proportion of their students would be from lower socio-economic groups (Interviewee 2, College A). Another noted that a lot of their students would fall into the WP category and that this had 'always been the case' (Interviewee 1, College A). Elsewhere, reference was made to students who had encountered 'digital poverty' during the pandemic, with limited IT and internet access at home (Interviewee 1, College B).

4.3. The college and vocational option

4.3.1. Route onto the course

Interviewees

The evidence provided by interviewees confirmed that most students on the six case study courses would have moved to the college from school, following the completion of year 11. However, some would have taken a different route. This included initially embarking on A-levels but, as one interviewee noted, deciding to 'do something more vocational' (Interviewee 2, College B). In a number of instances, students had progressed internally, having ' previously completed level 2' qualifications at the college (Interviewee 1, College B), whilst 'sometimes', it was noted, they will have started a different level 3 course at the college before deciding that this was 'the wrong choice' (Interviewee 2, College B). Finally, a small number, it was observed, will have 'gone out and worked' for a period of time and then 'come back to get further qualifications' that can 'push them on a bit more' (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

Focus group members discussed the routes they had taken onto their course. For some, the programme they were now on had not represented their original option. One recalled coming to the college and 'really enjoy[ing] the atmosphere but [not] the course that I was on. It was not me,' it was added (FG 1, College A). As a consequence, they had changed to their current programme. A similar experience was described by another participant from a different focus group. 'Last year I was doing electrical installation. I wasn't really enjoying it so ended up dropping out half way through the year' (FG 2, College A).

Typically, students on the six vocational programmes considered in this study moved onto their current level 3 college course following completion of school year 11.

However, some had taken a different route, including:

- Progressing internally from a level 2 course at the same college
- Deciding to change from the A-levels they had started at their school, or
- Changing from another level 3 course they had embarked upon at the same college.

In addition, a few had returned to study after a period of employment.

4.3.2. The college choice

Focus groups

Focus group members also revealed their motivations for choosing college over sixth form. 'I considered (sixth form) but then thought college would be better,' replied one focus group member (FG 1, College A). A fellow participant concurred. 'Yes, I wanted the college experience.' Exploring this in more detail, the second participant considered the 'experience at college' to be a 'more mature' one that afforded 'more independence and freedom.' Elaborating, it was added, 'we are doing unit seven at the moment and we are getting on with it independently but we get to ask our teacher if we need any help' (FG 1, College A).

Similar sentiments were expressed by members of one of the focus group at College B. 'High school was very restrictive in what you had to do [and] wear,' it was observed. 'There was no personality and you couldn't be yourself. I think it's carried on in sixth form. Here, they respect you more and treat you on the same level, where your opinion matters' (FG 2, College B). Likewise, those in a second group (this time at College A) described choosing college because there is 'more freedom.' This, one participant recalled, had greater appeal 'than sitting in a classroom for five days a week', which was associated with the sixth form option. As confirmation of this freedom, reference was made to the option of 'go[ing] home after lessons [to] revise' (FG 3, College A).

For many focus group participants, the decision to choose college rather than school sixth form was influenced by the view that studying at an FE college would offer them greater independence .

4.3.3. Why this college

Focus groups

Members of another focus group (FG 1, College A) explained their choice of particular college. In most instances, the college's proximity was an important determining factor, with the college being 'quite close by and easier than going to a different college.' Accompanying this, reference was made to knowing those who had gone to the college before them. Elaborating, one focus group member added that the person they know had 'really good things to say about it. It sounded right for me,' it was added, 'so I thought I would give it a go, and they were right' (FG 1, College A). Although another participant talked about not being from the area and, consequently, having to 'travel', it was added that 'my brother came here and recommended it to me.' In a further case, the recommendation had come from a combination of 'friends,' including a 'friend's mum [who] works here,' and advice received from their school (FG 3, College A).

Proximity to home was a key factor in determining participants' choice of college.

Knowing those who had gone to the college was also referenced by a number of focus group members, as were recommendations from contacts, or advice received from their school.

4.3.4. Why a vocational course

Focus groups

- ***An initial A-level experience***

Focus group participants described a range of motivations in deciding to take a vocational qualification at advanced level. These included 'not want[ing] to do A-levels' (FG 2, College B), along with the desire to do something different. 'I did A-levels last year,' one participant replied, 'but I didn't really enjoy it, so thought I'd start afresh' (FG 3, College A).

A further reason for rejecting A-levels concerned the lack of independence associated with the academic option. Related to this, one participant described their experience of A-levels as being 'too full-on.' We were 'always in early, Monday to Friday, and [did] not [have] time to do anything else. I work part-time,' it was added, 'and also own my own couple of fast-food restaurants around the area in partnership with my dad.' In addition, the method of course assessment was judged to be a 'better option for me [since] I don't like exams' (FG 3, College A). A preference for 'coursework to exams' was also highlighted by members of another focus group (FG 2, College B).

- ***Practical component***

Elsewhere, focus group participants highlighted the attractions of the 'practical' nature of their vocational programmes (FG 1, College B). One participant describing how 'I learn more doing hands-on and coursework than sitting in a class listening to a teacher' (FG 3, College A).

- ***Concentrating on a single subject***

In addition, a number of focus group members discussed the opportunity their course offered to concentrate on a single subject. One observed that 'I like to be able to choose one subject, [so that] I can put all [my] effort into [that]' (FG 2, College B). This point was emphasised by those in another group, who drew a contrast with A-levels, where 'you have to focus on three subjects [and] need to split your time equally so you can pass all three of them' (FG 3, College A). In addition, various participants described the unwelcome 'pressure' and 'stress' they would feel if they were to do 'three subjects' at A-level. 'I don't have to worry about [that] doing a diploma,' one observed (FG 3, College A).

- ***Pursuing a subject of interest***

A number of focus group participants also highlighted the opportunity the vocational route had given them to concentrate on a subject area that was of interest to them. One discussed being able to 'do something I enjoy [and that] interest[s] me' (FG 1, College B). Another talked about enjoying the two components that their course would be covering (FG 3, College). In some instances, this interest originated from studying a particular GCSE. In others it was described as a 'long-held' interest (FG 1, College B), and something they had 'always loved' (FG 3, College).

- ***Comparative advantage of vocational courses over A-levels***

A further attraction of the vocational option related to the work experience opportunities provided. 'We have to do 315 hours work experience a year,' observed focus group member observed, 'and [that] helps you more in the future as you know the working environment.' In contrast, it was argued that 'A-Levels and high school just set you up in the school system.' In elaborating, this participant

added that 'I chose this [course] because it opens it up a lot more. You can decide what you want to do, not what someone tells you' (FG 2, College B). Asked whether they considered that the work experience component of their course would place them in a stronger position than if they had taken A-levels, the shared view from this same group was that it did. 'A set of A-levels would get [you] a good job but the course we do, [with the] extra work experience, would also have people wanting to take us. You wouldn't do [work experience] if you were doing A-levels. That's why BTECs [are] better,' it was added (FG 2, College B).

In particular, participants talked about the enhanced employment opportunities that doing a vocational course would bestow (FG 3, College). Whilst schools might consider that A-levels are a better option, it was employers, it was argued, recognise the value of BTECs (FG 2, College B). Indeed, some participants suggested that the work experience provided on their course had motivated them 'to get out and work' (FG 3, College).

A range of reasons were given by focus group members for choosing a vocational rather than academic programme at advanced level. These comprised the:

- Practical nature of their course
- Opportunity to concentrate on one subject area
- Chance to pursue a subject of particular interest

Participants also considered that vocational programmes have certain advantages over A-levels, specifically in relation to gaining work experience and enhancing employment prospects.

- ***Course experience***

Focus group members also discussed their course experience. In a clear majority of cases, this was proving positive. It is 'good,' one participant observed. Others from the same group expressed similar sentiments. I am 'enjoying it so far,' 'I really enjoy the course, as [I am] interested in it,' replied two others (FG 2, College B). Although it involved 'a lot of work, I really enjoy it,' remarked a member of another group (FG 1, College A). Meanwhile, all of those in two other groups talked about their course in positive terms (FG 3, College and FG 2, College A). Exploring this further, the varied nature of the work and the support provided by their tutors were highlighted (FG 1, College A), as was the 'practical side' of the course (FG 1, College B).

For the clear majority of focus group members, the course experience was proving to be a positive one.

Here reference made to enjoying the subject, the varied nature of the work involved, and the quality of the support provided by their tutors.

4.4. Progression in to the second year

Interviewees

- ***Overview***

Interviewees reported that a substantial majority of first year students go on to the second year of their level 3 courses. Although the number discussed varied, the withdrawal rates quoted were similar across the featured subject areas in both colleges. We 'probably lose 10 per cent on each cohort,' estimated one interviewee whose remit covered all three subject in College A (Interviewee 3, College A). 'I would anticipate it would be 95 percent, or something like that,' remarked an interviewee from College B (Interviewee 2, College B).

- ***Destinations of those who withdraw***

Various destinations were described for the small numbers who decided to finish their studies after the first year. These included 'go[ing] across to some other vocational [area], seek[ing] an apprenticeship, or if they are 19 or 20, [going] into employment' (Interviewee 2, College A). In one instance, reference was made to a student who 'decided she was going to go to uni as she was a mature student anyway,' and did not need to stay on to complete the course (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

Further insights into post year one progression intentions were provided by focus group members. A few discussed their plans to leave after completing their first year. One talked about wanting to 'get an apprenticeship.' This, it was added, would provide them with the 'grades and qualifications' they needed and secure them with 'first-hand experience' of work. Another member of the same group observed that 'I'll be leaving [at the] end of this year,' with the aim, it was confirmed, of securing a job (FG 2, College A).

- ***Uncertainty***

A number of other participants described being uncertain about what they would do after their first year. 'I'm not sure yet,', one remarked. 'Half of me wants to go to uni and the other half of me just wants to go into work' (FG 1, College A). Another member of the same group expressed a similar dilemma about whether to 'stay on' or not (FG 2, College A).

- ***Plans to complete the two year course***

However, consistent with the observations made by interviewees, most focus group participants talked about intending to complete their second year, and for two principal reasons. The first concerned a desire to 'learn more about the subject' (FG 1, College A). The second was based on needing to 'get the grades to go onto higher things. If I just do this one year,' one focus group member observed, 'it is only equivalent to 1.5 A-levels. If I do two years, it is equivalent to 3 A-levels.' 'I want to stay on and then go to uni,' remarked member of the same group (FG 1, College A). Indeed, all the members in one of the groups expressed an intention to do the full two years (FG 3, College A).

Interviewees reported that a substantial majority of those who embark on the level 3 vocational courses featured in this research complete both years of study.

Various destinations were described for the comparatively small numbers who decide to leave after their first year. These comprised:

- Enrolling on a different vocational course
- Seeking an apprenticeship
- Going into employment.

Whilst these options were being explored by some focus group members, most intended to complete their two year programmes of study. Two principal reasons were offered for this:

- To learn more about their subjects, and to
- Gain a qualification equivalent to three A-levels.

However, some described being uncertain about what they would do after their first year.

5. Post-college plans

5.1. Options considered

Interviewees

- ***Overview***

Interviewees outlined a range of post-level 3 options available to their students, and based upon the destinations taken by previous cohorts. 'Some go into employment, and some take a gap year and travel,' noted one interviewee, others, it was added, go onto some form of higher-level training (Interviewee 1, College B). A similar range of options was outlined by another interviewee. Besides HE, 'some [take] apprenticeships in various places, some might go into industry and see how they go. [Others] may decide on taking a year out, or working whilst they decide on the next steps' (Interviewee 2, College B).

- ***HE progression rates***

However, across all subject areas HE represented the choice made by a significant number, although the reported figures varied between the subject areas. 'If I look at last year's cohort, [I would] estimate 40-45 percent' would have gone on, remarked one interviewee (Interviewee 2, College A). 'I'd probably say 50 per cent university, and 30 percent onto higher level apprenticeships,' observed another. This, it was added, 'is based on this year' (Interviewee 1, College B). Two others also considered that 'probably 50 per cent would go to uni of some kind (Interviewee 2, College B, and Interviewee 1, College A), whilst another talked about '50 to 60 percent, [perhaps] slightly higher will apply,' with the sixth interviewee observing that '60 per cent of the students [will] progress onto university' (Interviewee 3, College B). Moreover, two interviewees noted that these figures had not changed much in recent year (Interviewee 3, College B, and Interviewee 2, College A).

One of the interviewee whose remit included all three subject areas in their college provided some context on the reported progression rates. These, it was observed, were amongst the highest across the range of level 3 vocational courses their institution offers. 'These three subjects, and possibly art and creative, are where we have high percentages going onto HE. If [we were] talking health and beauty and motor vehicle [it would] be different.' Progression rates in 'these and other areas [are] really, really low.' Explaining this, it was observed that 'in motor vehicle and beauty, you can start earning and get into the industry with a level 2 or 3' (Interviewee 3, College A).

Having outlined the post-college choices open to their students, interviewees provided more details on each of these options.

- ***Employment***

'A lot of the time' the employment of those leaving college will, one interviewee noted, involve 'entry level jobs.' Whilst these would include practical roles, some would also comprise 'office administration' related to their vocational course (Interviewee 3, College B). Similarly, a second interviewee talked about learners who go onto 'work in the industry.' Importantly, it was added, 'they are going into employment, which is a positive step.' Expanding on this point, it was noted that 'we offer additional qualifications which enhance their employability (Interviewee 2, College A).

- ***Further training***

Additional training was also referenced by other interviewees. This, one observed, would include qualifications closely related to their level 3 course and which would enable them to become 'instructors' (Interviewee 3, College B). Similarly, another interviewee recalled that 'last year some of our learners went onto international placements' (Interviewee 2, College A).

Interviewees discussed a range of post-level 3 options available to their students and that had been taken by previous cohorts. These comprised:

- Securing employment
- Pursuing an apprenticeship
- Embarking on further training related to their level 3 course
- Taking a gap year to travel, or opting for a year out to decide on their next steps.

However, across all of the subject areas considered at both colleges, HE represented the choice made by a significant number, ranging, it was report, from 40 to 60 per cent of those who enrol on these courses.

From a comparative perspective, one interviewee with a wide subject remit considered these figures to be some of the highest recorded amongst the level 3 vocational courses their institution offers.

Focus groups

Focus group members talked about a range of post-college plans. Whilst the destinations being contemplated aligned with those identified by interviewees, the student discussions drew attention to the possibility that their next step might represent an intermediate one.

- ***Employment***

Some members talked about their intention to gain employment once they have completed their current course. 'I am not looking to go to university next year,' one participant observed, 'because it is not something I want to do. University has never been one of those things I've been set to go to. I just want to get to 18 finish education and get into a job' (FG 2, College A). Another talked about securing a job in the short-term and then making a longer-term decision. 'I'll probably just get a job and then work out what I want to do from there' (FG 3, College).

- ***Further training***

For a some of those in another focus group the options being considered were employment or some unspecified form of further training. 'I will either go full-time with my job in the restaurant, as there are higher places I could go in to, or go for another qualification if I want' (FG 3, College B). Whilst the 'opportunity' to gain employment after completing their 'diploma' was appealing, another participant talked about a desire to 'get more knowledge and make sure all areas [of] my knowledge [are] covered'(FG 3, College A).

- ***Apprenticeships***

However, some participants were more specific in the types of training being sought, with apprenticeships featuring in a number of plans. I want to do an 'apprenticeship afterwards rather than uni,' one observed, although 'I'm not sure what level yet, whether a degree apprenticeship or normal [one]' (FG 2, College B). A second focus group members was more certain in wanting 'to progress onto a degree apprenticeship.' Although they were also considering a 'full-time degree instead' (FG 3, College A). Whilst taking an apprenticeship was planned, a further participant expressed a desire to 'go off for a few months' first (FG 2, College B).

- ***HE progression***

However, for a good number of focus group members going onto some form of higher education was identified as the main objective. 'I think I'm going to carry on into the second year and then uni', observed one participant. 'I am going to stay and then do uni too,' replied another from the same group (FG 1, College A). Comparable comments were heard across the other five groups. 'I definitely want to go to uni, as I do want a degree' noted a member of one of College B's discussion groups (FG 1, College B). Some were quite specific about the courses they were intending to take. In explaining their next step plans, one focus group member replied that 'I would like to go to university as I have seen some courses that I'm interested in' (FG 3, College A). A number of others also had a clear idea of where they wanted to study. This included doing 'a degree in London somewhere' (FG 3, College A). I am going 'to either Manchester Met or Northumbria', remarked another (FG 2, College B), whilst a further participants talked about a 'dream' of completing their extended diploma and going onto the University of Derby (FG 2, College A).

This said, the intention to have a break before HE was mentioned by various discussants. I am 'leaning more towards [taking] a gap year to get work experience and then go[ing] to uni to get a degree in the next academic year,' replied one participant (FG 3, College A). 'My current plan,' observed another, 'is to save up and travel instead of going to uni. I might apply to uni just in case I change my mind but take a year out and then go' (FG 2, College B). In one instance the thinking was to go onto HE as a mature student. 'I don't think university is the only option now. There are lots of university things for adults too, so you can choose to go later in life' (FG 1, College B).

- ***HE uncertainty***

Whilst they were considering HE, some also expressed a degree of uncertainty over this option. Two participants outlined their thinking. 'I would quite like to take a year out and travel abroad. Whether I decide to come back and [work] straight away or go to uni, I don't know yet,' observed one(FG 3, College). A member of another group noted that 'I am very in the middle. The area that I want to go into does involve going to university but, at the same time, I don't know what I want to do yet. I don't know my career path (FG 1, College A).

The post-college plans detailed by focus group members were consistent with those described by interviewees for previous cohorts.

Although some focus group members considered that their planned next step (including going into employment) would be an intermediate one, with the option of returning to education and progressing onto HE as mature students.

However, a number of focus group members expressed a degree of uncertainty over their post-college plans, including in terms of higher level study and training.

5.3. Rationale for decisions being made

5.3.1. Non-HE options

Interviewees

- ***Apprenticeships and their comparative appeal***

Interviewees also elaborated on the apprenticeship options taken by their students once they had completed their level 3 course. These included apprenticeships at level 3, as well as those offered at higher and degree level. In some instances it was noted that these would be available locally (Interviewee 2, College A). However, it was also acknowledged that this option can take '4-5 years', compared to three years for a full-time university degree. Despite this, the work-based route had certain attractions. Notably, the chance to 'learn and earn at the same time' (Interviewee 1, College A). In addition, student debt that could be avoided by opting for an apprenticeship. Drawing on their encounters with students who had gone onto higher level apprenticeship programmes, one interviewer talked about the 'really good work ethic' that had been instilled in these students, and the next step opportunities that it presented to them. To illustrate the point, reference was made to a former student who was 'really shy. [They] didn't want university or shared halls, [and] didn't [initially] feel confident to do an apprenticeship but,' it was added, they are 'now on [company name] apprenticeship scheme. They are being managed with expectations set by [the] employer. They are paying for [their] qualifications, and [they have] seen in the business where [they] might go,' and what they could earn. They have come back to the college 'and [are] completely different' now (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

- ***Apprenticeships and the appeal of the work-based option***

Focus group members who were planning to take an apprenticeship after the completion of their current courses also discussed the reasons behind their choice. The practical element of the work-based option was highlighted as one significant factor. 'I want to take the apprenticeship route as I am more a practical person and feel I'd get more out of it than sitting in a classroom at uni,' remarked one participant (FG 1, College B). Another observed that 'not everyone is good at written work or exams and might find it easier if [they did something] hands-on' (FG 3, College A). Similarly, a third focus group member described how they 'generally learn by doing things practically rather than in a classroom' (FG 1, College B).

In addition, those planning on this route talked about the work experience that would be gained and the opportunity of 'doing an actual job, not just learning about it' (FG 2, College B). The prospect of earning whilst being trained also had a significant appeal, along with acquiring a qualification without incurring 'student debt' (FG 3, College A). In contrast, it was observed that 'as soon as you leave uni, you'd be paying it, or working your way up to that wage' (FG 3, College A).

It was also argued that the work-based route would offer enhanced employment prospects. One focus group member commented that 'most people with a straight degree seem to find it hard to get a job as you don't have the experience behind you. If I was an employer, I'd pick someone with the experience' (FG 3, College A). Another participant argued that 'you're getting the qualification that you need and also the work experience. You're more likely to get a job from the company you're

working for, or, if not with them, someone else, as you have that experience alongside the qualification' (FG 3, College A)

- ***Employment and further training***

A number of focus group participants also offered a rationale for seeking employment once they had completing their current course. The draw of having an income featured prominently in these accounts. 'I want to earn money,' remarked one. The experience gained from employment was also highlighted, whilst some focus group members expressed the view that they will have had enough of education after completing their current course. 'I just want to get my [diploma] and move on to the next stage,' one remarked. 'I don't want to spend my whole life in education' (FG 3, College A). Elsewhere, focus group members who were exploring the employment option talked about the opportunities of gaining additional qualifications whilst working (FG 1, College B).

Both interviewees and focus group members identified a comparable set of reasons for the appeal of the apprenticeship option (including those offered at higher and degree level). These comprised:

- Learning and earning at the same time
- Avoiding student debt
- The work experience (and work-associated skills) that would be gained, and
- The enhanced employment prospects that this option could offer.

In addition, a number of focus group participants provided reasons for seeking employment once they had completing their current course. These included:

- Securing an income
- The experience gained from employment.

There was also the view that there would be opportunities for acquiring additional qualifications in the work place.

Although some expressed the view that they would have had enough of education by the time they had completed their current course.

5.3.2. The HE option

- ***Rationale for HE***

Focus groups

The case for full-time HE was made by various members in all six focus groups. This included being able to pursue an area of interest. 'Going to university,' one participant observed, means that 'you can study' one particular 'area' (FG 3, College A). The opportunity to 'increase [one's] knowledge,' and to be able to just learn, also featured in a number of explanations (FG 3, College A, and FG 3, College). Indeed, one participant argued that they will acquire more knowledge from three years of university study than if they would if there were to take a degree apprenticeship, which, it was considered, might provide a more diluted level of insight (FG 3, College A).

Studying for a full-time degree could also be done close to home. In contrast, one focus group member observed that 'sometimes with degree apprenticeships you can get them far away. With the degree I want to do, I can live at home with my parents but go to university at the same time' (FG 3, College A). Linked to this was the possibility of being able to maintain local friendship networks.

Whilst the prospect of being 'alone and independent' was identified as an important draw of the HE option (FG 3, College A), so too was the chance to mix with others. 'I'd meet new people, possibly close friends that feel like family,' one focus group member observed (FG 2, College A). Another argued that those you meet at university 'might be the people that help you do other things in work, or outside of work' (FG 2, College B).

A number of participants also talked about becoming 'more employable by having [the] level of knowledge' that would be acquired from studying in HE (FG 2, College B). 'I want to go to university,' another focus group member argued, 'because you learn more and have a better chance of employment. I don't want to go for an apprenticeship,' it was added, 'as it may not give me anything at the end' (FG 2, College B).

Similarly, there was the view that a higher level qualification could help secure a better paid job (FG 3, College A, and FG 2, College A), whilst some participants discussed the 'need' to have a degree for the careers they wanted to pursue (FG 1, College A). Some also talked of not being too concerned about incurring debt. You 'don't have to pay it off immediately', observed one focus group member (FG 3, College A). A second talked about 'a sense of achievement when you've paid it off,' and of not letting the prospect of repayments stop you achieving your 'end goal' (FG 2, College A).

The reasons for the attractions of HE-level study were explored in all six focus groups. These comprised the opportunity it would offer to:

- Increase knowledge
- Concentrate on learning
- Study nearer to home (than might be possible in pursuing a higher or degree apprenticeship)
- Be independent
- Mix with others, and develop new networks and contacts
- Become more employable
- Secure a 'better job'
- Access particular professions.

Whilst still a concern, some emphasised the view that the debt they would incur in gaining a higher education would be manageable since it could be paid back over a period of time.

- ***HE progression: the external and internal study options***

Interviewees

Interviewees observed that most of those who opt for HE from the featured courses will enrol on programmes offered by other HE providers, rather than pursue HE in FE. Whilst a broad number of HE providers were mentioned in these conversations, all interviewees included references to institutions located in the West Midlands. 'Harper University seems very popular, along with the RAU [and] Aberystwyth,' one interviewee noted (Interviewee 3, College B). A second highlighted Derby, along with Southampton and London (Interviewee 2, College A). A third, remarked that 'a lot go to Staffs

Uni, Nottingham, Birmingham, Derby and Keele. It is everywhere but they are the ones your hear about the most' (Interviewee 1, College A). Although a fourth considered that there were no strong trends, it was added that 'some last year went to MMU, Harper Adams, Chester and Keele' (Interviewee 2, College B). Elsewhere, it was observed that 'Nottingham Trent has been quite popular over the last couple of years, [as well as] Harper Adams, Liverpool and Reading. A lot of them are quite local to the area so they want to go to Liverpool, Nottingham and places like that' (Interviewee 1, College B).

However, each of the interviewees noted that some of their students do opt to progress onto the HE courses offered by their college, although the proportion doing so was judged to be modest. 'About 10 per cent will carry on here,' one interviewee who oversaw all three courses at their college observed (Interviewee 3, College A). Elsewhere, reference was made to a 'about 14 per cent stay[ing]' on (Interviewee 3, College B).

Interviewees observed that most of those from the featured courses that progress do so by taking courses offered by other HE providers, rather than pursuing HE in FE.

Whilst a broad number of UK-based HE providers were mentioned in these conversations, all interviewees referenced institutions located in the West Midlands.

However, they also noted that some of their students go onto HE courses offered by their college, although the proportions in recent years doing so were judged to be modest, ranging from around 10 to 14 per cent.

- ***Rationale for pursing HE elsewhere***

Interviewees

Interviewees discussed the attractions for their students of pursuing HE away from the college. One observed that 'once [they] have done their two years [here] they're ready to move away from home, explore a city, [and to] live independently with a greater sense of freedom. Sometimes,' it was added, 'they find that the courses offered by universities are more tailored to what they want' (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

The desire to study somewhere else was also explained by focus group members. 'If we went to university' here, one participant observed, 'we'd just go home, so I want to go a bit further away (FG 2, College B). 'I'd like a change of environment, to go somewhere different and see how they do it,' remarked another (FG 3, College). Similarly, a third participant argued that 'when I go to university, I want to go somewhere else to get that different experience,' specifically, it was added, in a city (FG 2, College B).

Accompanying the desire to go somewhere new was that of wanting greater independence. 'If you move somewhere else, you learn to be independent of family members and move into adult life,' noted one focus group member (FG 3, College A). In addition, others expressed the view that their college offered limited subject options at higher level. 'If I want to specialise in something,' one participant observed, 'I'd have to go to a university that does that' (FG 1, College B). Others talked

about wanting to do subjects that they considered were not available at their college (FG 2, College B).

Interviewees and focus group participants discussed the attractions of pursuing higher education at another HE provider, rather than continuing their studies at college.

These comprised the appeal of moving away from home, exploring somewhere new, and of living independently.

In addition, reference was made to the limited range of HE options available at their college.

- ***Rationale for HE in FE***

Whilst studying HE elsewhere had its attractions, both interviewees and focus group members recognised the draw of the HE in FE offer.

Interviewees

Some of our students, one interviewee observed, 'do not want to leave and have commitments here,' including part-time employment (Interviewee 3, College A). Moreover, in a number of instances the HE options provided at the college closely aligned with the subjects being pursued at level 3. In addition, those staying had the opportunity to progress incrementally, by taking level 4 and 5 qualifications, and then 'top[ping] up' to a full degree (Interviewee 1, College B). In this respect, interviewees talked about the foundation degrees offered by their college. Whilst one noted that students could gain a full degree at 'our partner' university, it was added that 'we are bringing in level 6' as well, including for the three subject areas featured in this study (Interviewee 3, College A).

Some of the interviewees also talked about the increasing number of commuter students who decide to live at home and either continue their studies at the college or at a nearby university. Exploring this trend further, one interviewee observed that 'post-covid what is right for learners has changed. What we offer here [has], I think, become a lot more suitable for learners who require a little more support in HE. At uni,' it was added, they 'could be one of 200 in a lecture. [Here we offer] smaller class sizes and more tutor contact and support' (Interviewee 2, College A).

Focus groups

In some instances concerns over the cost of pursuing a higher education were motivating focus group members to exploring the HE in FE option. One participant noted that they had not 'ruled out' the possibility of progressing internally. 'Our college,' it was added, 'is part of [named university], so that's something you could definitely do. You'd get the same qualification, even if a foundation degree, and probably be paying less than elsewhere. It could be quite feasible and you may be able to pay off most of it. It is definitely an option.' The chance to earn and learn by opting for HE in FE was mentioned by another member of the same group. 'My older brother is there right now and only doing two days out of five, so [there is] a lot more flexibility to go and do work' (FG 3, College A).

Other motivations for favouring internal progression were also highlighted by focus group members. These included the option of taking intermediate steps towards a full degree. 'I've been looking,' one participant noted, 'and after my level 3, there's a level 5 I could do at this college in partnership with

[named university]. It's either a 2 or 3 year course. The first year is level 4 and [the] second level 5' (FG 3, College A). There was also the reassurance of studying in a place that was already known to them. In this respect, one focus member who was considering staying on observed that whilst there would be 'new students, it wouldn't feel completely new.' Another member of the same group made a comparable point in observing that 'everything [will be] familiar' (FG 1, College B).

Whilst studying HE elsewhere had its attractions, both interviewees and focus group members recognised the appeal of the HE in FE offer for students, including in:

- Not having to leave friends and families
- Being able to continue with their existing commitments, including part-time jobs
- Studying a higher education course that closely aligned to their level 3 programme
- The opportunity to progress incrementally, through taking level 4 and 5 qualifications
- The high levels of support offered at college.

In addition, focus group members discussed the chance to earn and learn, given the perceived flexibility of HE in FE, along with the reassurance of studying in a place that was familiar to them.

6. HE reservations and concerns

6.1. Costs and debt

Interviewees

Although higher education was identified as a popular next step destination by interviewees, the conversations also considered the challenges to progression faced by some of their students. Prominent amongst these were concerns over fees and the debts that could be incurred.

'When we had some speakers [who] talked about fees,' one interviewee recalled, the students were 'surprised about what it costs.' Exploring this further, it was added that they were surprised 'in a negative way. I don't think they quite understand that they don't have to pay it back until they reach a certain level of income' (Interviewee 2, College B). A similar observation was made by a second interviewee. 'Students do struggle with the cost of it. They see how much it costs per year and the total but they are not fully aware [that] you can still get bursaries and the student loan is very good' (Interviewee 3, College B). Another interviewee observed that 'the biggest barrier is explaining that the student loan is a different kind of debt. They see the course fees and accommodation fees and panic' (Interviewee 2, College A). It was also observed that the costs can 'sometimes' lead parents to suggest that they do not go onto university (Interviewee 3, College B).

Besides the 'worry about debt and not [being able to] afford to go to university,' two interviewee talked about student concerns over accommodation and living costs, and uncertain employment prospects after graduation. 'Accommodation costs are getting higher and higher aren't they,' one interviewee remarked (Interviewee 2, College A). Another observed that some of our students 'are absolutely petrified with the cost of living.' Their perceptions of university are 'very much based around debts, [and of] 'not [being] guaranteed a job,' it was added (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

Those students participating in the focus group discussions also expressed concerns over the costs of HE and the debt that could result. 'It's a lot of money and you have to get out student loans,' one participant observed. 'Another reason I wouldn't go to university is because of the cost,' replied second member of the same group. 'I don't want to have to pay that much,' and, it was added, I don't 'know what I want to do' (FG 2, College B). Similar views were expressed by two members of another focus group. I 'don't want student debts,' one observed, whilst their fellow group member added that 'my boss has brought it up quite a bit, saying if I went to university I'd get more highly educated but [it is] not really for me. I just see all the money that you'd spend on it' (FG 3, College).

Another participant considered that the HE option was 'risky [given] the money. I think it's a give or take whether it's going to be any good' (FG 2, College B). The risk associated with this option was also highlighted by a second discussant. 'If you go through all those years at uni, then start at the bottom level in a job, it's going to take at least 10 years to pay it [the student loan] off half-way, and your end goal's just getting further and further away' (FG 2, College A).

Although HE was identified as a popular next step destination by interviewees and focus group participants, the conversations and discussions highlighted a number of challenges to progression.

Prominent amongst these were concerns over fees and the debts that would be incurred. These included costs associated with accommodation.

For various focus group members, this meant viewing the HE option as a significant risk that may not be worth taking.

Meanwhile, interviewees drew attention to the limited awareness amongst students of the availability of HE bursaries and grants.

6.2. Standards required in HE

Interviewees

The standards required to access and succeed at HE were also referenced by interviewees. 'I think they are still a little unclear about entry requirements for courses and things,' one interviewee remarked. Elaborating, they described how their students were 'a little surprised [that] they have to get more than just a pass if they want to go to more of a leading establishment' (Interviewee 2, College B). A second interviewee confirmed that some of their student are 'absolutely' concerned about whether they are capable of studying at HE level (Interviewee 2, College A). Whilst a third observed that many of their first year level 3 students 'think it [will be] really hard,' and, it was added, 'they are worried about not having that help.' (Interviewee 1, College A). Linked to this, another interviewee talked about students who lack self-belief. 'Because they are doing a BTEC, they [think they] are less capable than A-levels. Sometimes we are the second choice but,' it was added, 'it is changing because we offer a lot of industry placements (Interviewee 1, College A).

Focus groups

Focus group members expressed similar concerns, in particular with the hard work that the university option would require. 'I don't know that I'd want to go to uni because of all the written work involved,' observed one focus group member. Although it was added that 'I haven't shut off my options, so as I go through the course I might decide that I want to.' A comparable concern was expressed by another member of the same group. 'I don't think I'd enjoy [university] as I am not the kind of person who likes a focused task of writing about one thing' (FG 1, College B).

In addition, some discussants highlighted their concerns over the limited number of contact hours associated with university. Drawing on the example of their sister, one focus group member noted that she 'doesn't have many hours, so the hours are compacted, meaning she doesn't go in [to the university] a lot but when she does,' it was added, 'some of the teachers don't turn up' (FG 2, College B). They also considered that it would be class-room and theory based, and that this would have a cost in terms of foregoing work experience (FG 2, College B). Whilst the amount of practical work was likely to vary depending on the subject being taken, one focus group member added that there will still be 'a lot of theory-based [work], as you would need to learn about what you're doing (FG 1, College B). Another expressed their concerns that, although they would be 'fully qualified by age 21' if they were to go to university, the first day of work following three more years of education might prove 'too much for me' (FG 1, College A).

A further challenge to HE progression referenced by interviewees and focus group members concerned the standards required to access and succeed in HE.

- Interviewees discussed students who were unclear about course entry requirements and doubtful about being capable of studying at HE-level

- Focus group participants highlighted the prominence they considered HE-level study placed on theory and written work, along with the limited number of contact hours with teaching staff associated with this option.

6.3. Not fitting in

Interviewees

Interviewees also talked about the view held by some of their students that HE was for 'very clever people' and 'the rich' (Interviewee 1, College A). Whilst these perceptions were not discussed by focus group members, student participants did express doubts about fitting in, concerns over the social aspects of university life, and of abandoning their family and friends.

Focus groups

Asked if they thought they would fit in were they to go to university, one focus group member replied 'probably not, [I am] not great with new people. If I really wanted to go and tried hard, I could but to start with I wouldn't feel very comfortable there' (FG 1, College B). Another participant in the same group observed that 'I don't think I want to go to uni. I don't think it's for me' (FG 1, College B). Similar reservations were expressed by a member in another focus group:

> 'I've always thought from a young age that going through school I was smart enough but then I got to secondary school and thought, did I really want to go down the university route? All my teachers said I could do it but it never really came to me that I wanted to go. I have a private life and don't really like to go out for a drink with university students. I'm not very sociable with people' (FG 2, College A).

Concerns over leaving family were also expressed by the same focus group member:

> 'My mum wouldn't like it if I moved away to university. She likes me to be near her. My brother left home and she was distraught, which I had to deal with. If I left, I don't think she'd cope. I do a lot with her which is the relationship we have' (FG 2, College A).

Concerns about not fitting in at university were also highlighted by interviewees and focus group participants.

- Interviewees talked about the view held by some of their students that HE was for 'very clever people [and] the rich.'

- Focus group members expressed concerns over the social aspect of university life, and of leaving their friends and families.

6.4. Impact of the pandemic

Interviewees

The consequences of the pandemic on HE progression prospects were also explored in the interviews and by focus group members. Interviewees emphasised its negative effect, in terms of heightened levels of concern amongst their students around leaving their homes and neighbourhoods. In this respect, one interviewee discussed 'the anxiety, particularly post-covid, learners feel in social situations. It has impacted on education [with] learners being at home for so long' (Interviewee 2, College A).

Also referenced were the consequences of not being able to engage in outreach activity whilst at school as a consequence of lockdowns. Here, reference was made to a generation of young people now at college who 'may not have had the same experience at school,' and who would have missed out on 'trips and speakers, and those sorts of things, where the idea of HE may have been introduced.' As a result there seems to be 'a little bit of a lack of knowledge really,' including, it was added, in terms of 'options when they finish their course,' as well as a lack of experience about what university will be like (Interviewee 2, College B).

Focus groups

Focus group members also discussed the education they had missed because of the pandemic. One group talked about being 'majorly affected' and of missing the 'majority of year 10' (FG 2, College B). Elsewhere, a participant talked about the pandemic slowing 'progress down a little, as we did miss some of the education we needed in year 10' (FG 2, College A).

A number of participants discussed the challenges of engaging online during this period. We had, one focus group member recalled, 'a lot of online teaching during the pandemic which wasn't the best for me as prefer face-to-face, [and] physically being able to ask questions rather than just being shown power-points' (FG 1, College B). Another member of a different group recalled finding it 'hard to get motivated. [I] couldn't get on with the work at home as [I] got distracted by everything' (FG 2, College B). 'I hated every single day. I was awful,' noted a third participant. 'I didn't like being sat at my desk in my room six hours a day with teachers just talking at me. On top of that, I had to sit doing homework after, which I found boring' (FG 1, College B). Some also discussed the adverse impact the experience had on their level 2 results. One participant talked about having 'no GCSEs, just a few little mocks, then predicted grades' (FG 2, College A). Another judged that 'it definitely affected my GCSEs, as the lessons my high school taught weren't as beneficial when taught at home' (FG 1, College B).

However, these discussions also revealed a more complex experience with the pandemic. For one focus group member, online represented a 'different way of learning.' 'I think,' it was added, 'that it has just altered the way we learn' (FG 3, College). Some also argued that the experience did not have a noticeable impact on their next steps decision making. Indeed, in some instances it was considered to have been positive. One participant observed that it 'gave me time to think about what I want to do' (FG 2, College B). The opportunity to think was also referenced by another focus group member, in terms of their post-18 plans. 'I knew,' they recalled, 'that university is the main route to success but probably [also] one of the safest options. Whereas going for a degree apprenticeship is hard, especially in the areas we are in. It's not a big city' (FG 3, College A).

The experience was also described as providing motivation by various discussant. 'It restricted us by not being able to travel, explore and just staying in the same place.' As a consequence, one participant observed, it has made me want to do it more (FG 2, College B). A member of another group noted how the experience 'made me want to keep learning to go further in the future' (FG 2, College A).

The impact of the pandemic was considered by both interviewees and focus group participants to represent a challenge to progression.

- The former noted the heightened levels of concern amongst students about leaving home, and of those who had not been able to take part in outreach activities and who, consequently, were unfamiliar with the HE option
- The latter talked about the impact of the pandemic on the schooling they had missed.

Although discussions with focus group participants also revealed the complex nature of the experience, with some identifying the time they had during this period to consider their next step options, and the motivation they had gained in wanting 'to do more.'

6.4. Cost of living crisis

Interviewees

The impact of the cost of living crisis also received comment from interviewees. Asked if it was influencing their students' next step plans, one interviewee observed that 'a lot of the learners are wanting to go into work [now] because they don't see the benefit of university with the cost of living. A lot of ours,' it was added, 'have to help their parents so they might go straight into work to help out. I think the money is a big issue' (Interviewee 1, College A).

Focus groups

The negative impact of the cost of living crisis on progression plans was also discussed by focus group members. For one, the crisis was considered to be 'the main reason I don't want to go to university.' Another described how they were currently 'trying to move out' of their house, which, it was added, is 'already costing too much, plus student loans, so,' it was concluded, 'it is just not worth my time.' Instead, their intention was to secure employment. Another member of the same group observed that whilst 'you can take out a student loan, how long is it going to take you to pay it back,' given the increases in the cost of living (FG 3, College).

Interviewees and focus group members expressed similar views on the negative impact that the cost of living crisis was having on the attractions of HE as a next step option.

In particular, reference was made to the view that higher education had become more expensive and less attractive compared with gaining employment.

7. Support received and reviewed

7.1. Information, advice and guidance

7.1.1. Subject tutors

Interviewees

A central element of support recognised by interviewees across both colleges was that provided by subject tutors. Interviewee talked about the role tutors played in introducing students to the standards of work expected at HE. We 'get them used to understanding the referencing [and] help them to structure their assignments,' one interviewee observed. In addition, it was added that 'when they submit work, it is [through] Turnitin, so they see the plagiarism checker as well' (Interviewee 2, College A). A second interviewee noted that as a tutor 'I always talk to them about HE. You have to think of your future and set yourself up. [I also] talk to them about the financial benefits of having a degree. So the tutors on level 3, we really push that from the beginning and the moment they walk in the door' (Interviewee 1, College A).

There was also a recognition of the unique part tutors can play, given the regularity with which they interact with their students. In some instances, it was observed, that can include being role models. 'I was a former student myself,' observed one. 'I did the HE course here and I teach here.' I tell them about having 'sat where you did 10 years ago. I have been on that journey. I know their learner journey. I can relate to their trials and tribulations' (Interviewee 2, College A).

Whilst the support provided by tutors could be integrated into subject delivery, two other approaches were highlighted. Asked what works in preparing students for their next steps, one interviewee reflected on the effectiveness of the regular 'one-to-one meetings we have with each learner, individually' (Interviewee 2, College A). A second talked about the post-college guidance they offer. 'I always say to them [that] if you are not going to university this year, don't worry we will always help you. Then they know they have that support. Sometimes they go through a lot and just need that break and come back. One person said to me the other day 'I just need that year out'' (Interviewee 1, College A).

Focus groups

The level of support provided by tutors was confirmed by focus group members, including the value of tutors drawing on their own learner experiences. One group talked about how 'very supportive' their 'main teacher' on their course had been in 'help[ing] us to move on and expand in our careers. She also talks about her children,' it was added, 'and how they have done this and got into uni, and shows us from a personal point of view. I feel like teachers tell you that you can do this and that but when you get given personal stories it gives you much more perspective, [and that] kind of sticks' (FG 1, College A).

Elaborating on this, one member of the same discussion group noted that their tutors 'are very honest as well. They don't sugar coat it. They say if you want it, then you have got to work to earn it. They don't say it's easy. They give you the raw truth. I feel like that is what you need because so many people live in fantasy land and think they can do this and that.' The impact of providing a realistic insight into HE was also commented upon. 'It made me feel that I could think about it more because I know what it's going to be like. I've got an idea now. It gave me more motivation' (FG 1, College A).

Similarly, another group discussed the opportunities to have one-to-one chats with their tutors about their next step options. At these meetings, it was noted, 'they go through our work, tell us if anything is going wrong, [and] are we feeling ok.' In addition, reference was made to the practice amongst their tutors of taking '5 minutes out of [their] day to check on the [students] to make sure they're ok. They can spot,' it was added, 'if we're having an off day, as we see them 3-4 days a week.' The same group also talked about their progress tutors and how 'early on they explained what we'd need,' in terms of qualifications to go onto HE (FG 2, College A).

One key element of the support identified by interviewees across both colleges was that provided by subject tutors. This included:

- Introducing students to the standards of work expected at HE, including in referencing and the structuring of assignments
- Acting as role models in talking about their own learner journeys.

In addition, mention was made to how some tutors continue to offer support once their students have completed their level 3 courses.

The level of support provided by tutors was confirmed by focus group members, including the value of tutors drawing on their own progression experiences.

Recommendation 1.

Recognise the key role that subject tutors can play in encouraging students to explore their next step options and in preparing them for HE-level study

Consider how the work of subject tutors could be further supported.

7.1.2. On-course provision

Interviewees

The conversations with interviewees also discussed the provision that was included on their courses. One participant highlighted a study skills module aimed at improving students' 'academic work,' including 'referencing and soft skills,' and equipping them for success on their current courses and in higher level study (Interviewee 3, College B).

Another interviewee discussed the work experience provided on their programme and the objective of 'massively pushing working with employers, and [of] get[ing] them into industry to see how these jobs really look.' 'Some' students, it was noted, 'have been offered jobs as a result of it' (Interviewee 1, College B). However, another interviewee observed that some employers who offer placements can have views on progression that are 'sometimes historical. They say you don't need to go to uni, or you should do this, or go into work. They can be very influential [but] they can be outdated' (Interviewee 3, College B).

Focus groups

The value of work placements provided on their courses was also commented upon by focus group members. One participant talked about how the experience had 'help[ed] me with skills I needed to improve on,' and, it was added, 'it helped me narrow down my career for me' (FG 1, College A). A member of another focus group also commented on their placement. 'It really helped as you have to learn about the working environment so you can see whether you want to go straight into employment or continue with FE. It has made me realise I want to go more into the apprenticeship working side' (FG 2, College B). Although this participant also noted the conversations they had during their placement 'about options at university' (FG 2, College B).

This said, some also discussed the value of the work experience they had gained away from college. 'Most of my work experience,' one focus group member observed, 'came over the summer half-term and every Tuesday night. I've learned a lot, [including] how to handle situations.' This, it was added, has influenced what they plan to do after college (FG 2, College A). Another recalled talking to those they worked with during the Christmas period who had 'come back from university.' This included learning about the 'university they're at [and] which course. It has made me realise,' it was observed, that 'there are a lot of different courses out there. It's about finding the one that's best for you' (FG 2, College B).

Interviewees discussed the on-course support offered to their students. This included the provision of study skills modules and the work experience component of their programmes.

The value of work placements was also commented upon by focus group members, including in informing decisions on whether to continue their with training and education after completing their current programmes of study.

Recommendation 2.

Consider how IAG and outreach interventions can recognise the role - and capitalise on the potential - of the work experience component that is a feature of advanced level vocational programmes.

7.1.3. Guest speakers

Interviewees

Interviewees also discussed the role that guest speakers played in helping to inform students about their post-college options. Indeed, one interviewee argued that:

> The biggest influences are our guest speaks because when the girl came in to [speak] about [specific profession], I had 10 applications that day because she came in and was not a learner that it came easily to, and they were really inspired by her, and she was saying how much she loved university and that it was brilliant and don't give up. The past learners really create that.

The influence of such speakers was especially noticeable, it was agreed, if they had encountered challenges and were not what would be considered outstanding students, because they can be more readily related to (Interviewee 1, College A). The importance of such role models was acknowledged

by a second interviewee. ‘We try to get people coming in who have worked hard and are not from a privileged background. Someone to relate to’ (Interviewee 3, College B).

Former students in particular were referenced by interviewees. ‘Our ex-students,’ one interviewee remarked, are especially effective at ‘myth busting,’ helped by the fact that ‘they have done the BTEC’ (Interviewee 1, College A). One former student, it was added, who had completed a degree and was now working in the profession, ‘really inspired them [when] she did a talk’ (Interviewee 1, College A). Another interviewee recalled a visit from an ex-student who ‘left my course and went on to do a higher level app. I asked him to come back and sell what he was doing to my current students. He is now a completely different person too: being managed, working for somebody, [and] managing expectations. For me, when it’s relative to the students and they can relate, they listen.’ ‘We use a lot of this previous student stuff,’ it was added, ‘to really help and encourage’ (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

The influence of a particular speaker was recalled by members of one of the focus groups. The person in question was described as a very relatable former student who had progressed and was now working in the sector that many current students are hoping to go into. This individual’s talk, one participant noted, ‘kind of got me thinking about what I really want to do. So I looked through all the options’ (FG 1, College A).

Elsewhere, focus group members discussed engaging with those studying at the college’s university centre. ‘We have a university centre in the college and on a Wednesday we do sessions with the university students.’ This was judged to be useful because ‘they say how university is going for them’ and provide subject-based coaching (FG 2, College A).

Interviewees and focus group members talked about the influence that guest speakers can have, notably when speakers discuss their learner journeys.

Both groups highlighted the value of hearing from those (including former college students) who come from comparable backgrounds to participants and who have encountered challenges to progression they are likely to relate to.

In addition, focus group members discussed in positive terms engaging with those studying at their college’s university centre.

Recommendation 3.

- Consider how to support colleges in accessing guest speakers, especially those whose learner journeys are likely to be relatable to participants.

7.1.4. Careers support

Interviewees

Although less discussed by focus group members, interviewees described the careers support offered to students in their college. One interviewee noted that they provide 'a careers unit on how you get from A, B and C, and how you recognise [that] you need university for that' (Interviewee 2, College A). Another highlighted the value of 'get[ting] our guidance officer in right at the start, so in the first week in September she is in telling them all about UCAS. We have got it in their heads from the start. We are collaborating with [the guidance officer] all the time,' it was added (Interviewee 1, College A). Elsewhere, reference as made to talks and voluntary one-to-one sessions provided by the college's careers department (Interviewee 2, College B), as well as a 'careers team who do drop-in sessions [and] offer UCAS support' (Interviewee 1, College B).

Also referenced by one interviewee were the talks provided by the college's university centre. These 'introduce [our students] to some of the course options and [give] snap shots, so they are able to plant a seed and [then] make an informed choice closer to the time' (Interviewee 2, College B). A second interviewee highlighted taster days offered to their students by the 'HE department. Some students,' it was argued, 'feel that [in] going onto an HE programme [they] are going to get the same experience as they would in FE. We have a different faculty and building where our HE team are [based]. It is a very different experience to FE. We are trying to work hard at the moment on that difference between FE and HE' (Interviewee 3, College B).

Whilst less discussed by focus group members, interviewees described the careers support available to students in their college.

- This included the value of offering regular IAG sessions from the time that students embark on their level 3 programmes onwards.

Also referenced were talks provided by staff at their university centre, and taster days held by the college's HE department covering the same subject areas as those being pursued on level 3 programmes.

7.2. Outreach support received and reviewed

7.2.1. HE visits

Interviewees

Whilst not widely discussed in the interviews, one tutor did highlight a visit their first years had taken to 'Sheffield University, [where] they put a taster on for them about their offerings.' The event, it was recalled, provided an opportunity for our students to 'experience the course and walk around the university.' More particularly, reference was made to 'see[ing university] students going about their day, and in the library. They [saw that] it is not too dissimilar to what they do. It is just on a grander scale, and [this will] help with the transition from FE to HE as well,' it was suggested (Interviewee 2, College A).

Focus groups

Members of the corresponding focus group discussed the same visit in equally positive terms. There was a shared view that the experience had been influential. 'To be honest,' one participant observed, 'I'd never even heard of the university before we went. I'd looked at Liverpool John Moore's University first but Sheffield gives a good vibe' (FG 2, College A). Asked whether they had an interest in university before their visit, one focus group member replied 'I had a slight interest but going to it, and seeing how it was, really boosted it.'

Exploring the same issue, another focus group member observed that 'I don't think it looks as hard as people say. People say that when you go, they put a lot of pressure on you but there's nothing really to worry about, as long as you get your head down and do your work then you'll be fine. [It is] not like you're catching up.' There was also a general view that their university trip had been comprehensive in what had been covered. 'They were showing us the accommodations around the university and which one would be best for where we would be going to, [in terms of] transport routes. They were showing us everything. It was a good experience,' it was concluded, 'and [I] would recommend it to others if they want it.' (FG 2, College A).

Although not identified by all interviewees or focus group members, those who referenced HE visits talked about them in positive terms. This included in providing opportunities to gain first-hand experience of university.

Moreover, focus group members who had been on a university visit considered the experience to have been influential, including in raising levels of interest in HE.

Recommendation 4.

Consider providing tailored HE visit opportunities to college-based learners on vocational programmes.

7.3. Wider influences on next step plans

Interviewees

The discussion with interviewees also recognised the role of other influences on next step plans, most notably the part played by parents. Here, emphasis was placed on the importance of engaging with parents and carers. Parents, one interviewee contended, 'want information in black and white from us because they don't always think the student portrays their understanding of it properly. I think as a parent you're naturally going to want to know what they're going to do' (Interviewee 1, College B). Another interviewee talked about a current review of their approach to parental engagement. 'We used to run a parent advice and guidance [session] on HE,' it was observed (Interviewee 3, College B).

Some interviewees also drew attention to the influence of social media. 'I think a lot of the students have this stigma that goes around on social media, especially on GCSE and A-Level results day, where a lot of these social influencers post things about being billionaires after getting GCSEs but,' it was added, 'it doesn't work for everybody. If they want to have those things in life, they need a bit of

education behind them. I think they're getting over consumed by the world of social media' (Interviewee 1, College B).

Focus groups

Focus group members also discussed the role of parents and wider family members. This included in considering non-HE options. 'Neither of my parents went to university but just worked hard [and] bettered their careers' that way, replied one focus group member who was planning to go into employment after completing their college course (FG 2, College A). Another member from a different group who was interested in taking up an apprenticeship talked about the insights provided by their two older sisters. Whilst one 'is at uni', the other is 'in an apprenticeship.' 'I've seen both sides', it was noted, and 'I like [the apprenticeship] side more' (FG 2, College B).

Elsewhere, family influence was discussed in relation to HE as the next possible step. One focus group member noted that 'my uncle, grandfather and dad have all gone to uni, so [there is] an expectation to uphold: go to university as well' (FG 3, College). Another participant talked about having their 'parents behind' them. They are 'giving me guidance on what I want and the right steps to take to go to university,' it was added (FG 2, College A). A third described receiving 'a lot of support from my mum who has a bachelors in law and told me it would be a good idea to get a higher education' (FG 3, College A).

A fourth focus group member recalled 'having a conversation with [my] mum and step dad. Neither,' it was added, 'went to college or university and kind of regret it. Mum was 19 when she had me so didn't get a chance. To me, it sounds a good idea as I can then get a job before having a family.' This participant went on to discuss the nature of the parental support provided. 'They were researching it to see what they could do, as [my] step dad [was] looking at going back to college for a degree to see if that would help him get a better job' (FG 3, College A). Another talked about how they had 'done a lot' of research into HE with their parents, including the 'costs and fees, looking at the courses, where I can apply, and what it involves' (FG 2, College A).

The experience of, and examples provided, by older siblings was also mentioned by various focus group members. One participant observed that the prospect of student debt was not discouraging them. 'My brother has just started and is in same situation as me. [He has] taken out a student loan. I'm thinking that if he can do it, then I should be able to manage it' as well (FG 3, College).

Friends and those in participants' networks were also proving influential in some instances. One focus group member who was intending to go onto university observed that 'one of my dad's friends had a son that went. [He] said it was good and he got a good degree from it' (FG 3, College A). Another talked about 'a mate who I go to skate park with [who] is in the university centre at the same college as us.' They also noted that 'quite a few friends from school in the year above [have] gone to university and are all enjoying it. They've ventured into something that they've never done before and are meeting a lot of people. I think it's something to look forward to,' it was added (FG 2, College A).

Interviewees and focus group participants discussed other influences on their next step plans, most notably the role played by parents and other family members, as well as friends and those their wider networks.

Whilst this could include supporting them in considering HE, it could also involve encouraging them to explore other options, including apprenticeships and full-time employment.

Recommendation 5.

Explore instances of effective practice amongst partner FE colleges in providing IAG about post-level 3 options (including HE) to parents/guardians and other family members.

7.4. Rationale for more next step support

Interviewees

The value of doing more to support students in their post-level 3 plans and ambitions was acknowledged by interviewees. One reason given for this was the likely differences between the numbers applying to university and those who subsequently enrol. It is possible, one interviewee remarked, that some 'are just applying because their friends have applied [but] when it comes to the summer [they will decide] I won't go' (Interviewee 3, College A).

Linked to this were concerns about whether some students were applying for the right course, given the impression that after graduating many do not go into the sector related to their degree. 'We don't hear enough about the success stories,' one interviewee argued, to be convinced of this (Interviewee 3, College A). Another raised the same doubts, in wondering 'how many are still working' in the sector after five or so years of leaving the college and going onto HE' (Interviewee 3, College B). Closely associated with this were concerns about the suitability of some of the HE courses their students were considering, and those earlier cohorts had taken. 'When you look at the modular make up' of some of these courses, it was added, 'it is not robust enough for the industry' (Interviewee 3, College B).

In addition, one interviewee argued that widening participation students on level 3 programmes were less likely to progress than their peers. 'Even when we try to promote it to students,' it was observed, 'they challenge [it] because of different factors' (Interviewee 3, College B). Although it was also argued that many of those who will be 'the first ones from [their] families' do progress (Interviewee 1, College A).

More generally, interviewees drew attention to the significant numbers of first year level 3 students who are still uncertain about their next steps, including HE as a possible destination. 'Most,' one interviewee contended, 'are undecided' at this stage in their BTECs. 'Whether they want to see how things go with the course, whether they like the subject [enough that] they want to do it long-term,' I am not sure, it was added (Interviewee 2, College B).

Two interviewees also remarked on the different levels of certainty about the HE option between those on vocational programmes, such as BTECs, and their counterparts pursuing A-levels. One reason for the this, it was suggested, might be that 'A-level students have a clearer path' onto higher level study, 'whereas our students are weighing up their options a little bit further.' Although the possibility was also raised that those on vocational courses may not have 'received enough information' (Interviewee 2, College B).

Focus groups

The value of more support with their post-college options was also discussed in the focus groups. One participant acknowledged that they did 'not really' feel well informed. I have 'never considered going to university,' it was observed, 'so I am not sure what the options are' (FG 3, College). 'At this moment,' a member of another group replied, 'I don't feel prepared' but after the second years I hope so' (FG 1, College B).

Similarly, some focus group members drew attention to their limited awareness of university entry requirements and, in particular, the UCAS points system. 'I might have been told,' one participant remarked, 'but I don't think I [was]' (FG 1, College A 3). Another member from the same group observed that 'I knew that I could get into university from this course but I'm going to be honest with you, I don't even know what UCAS points are.' In offering a comparison, a member of another group noted that they had embarked on A-levels at a different institution 'last year, where they drilled into us that everyone would go on to university so,' it was added, they 'sent [us] on university days' (FG 3, College).

Two particular areas where focus group members called for more information and insights concerned higher and degree apprenticeships, and the HE provision offered by their colleges. 'No one's really talked about apprenticeships,' one participant observed. People don't talk about apprenticeships like they do about university and I think we need to shed more light on that' (FG 3, College A). Members of another group noted that 'we haven't really been told much about HE at [the college] but [are] more focused on what we're doing now.' Actually, it was added, 'there hasn't been much talk of university within the course overall, let alone staying at [the college]' (FG 3, College). Asked about taking a higher level course at the college, a member of a different group admitted that 'I hadn't really noticed it was there' (FG 2, College A). However, some expressed an interest in staying at their college. I might carry on here, one participant observed, 'if they did a course I was interested in. It depends if they do what I want to do at the time,' it was added. Although they wanted to go to university, another member from the same group observed that 'it depends how specialised I want to go and whether the course is offered here. If it is then everything [would be] familiar' if I were to stay here (FG 1, College B).

The value of doing more to support students in their post-level 3 plans and ambitions, especially in terms of HE-level study and training, was acknowledged by interviewees and advocated by focus group members.

- For the former, a key driver for this concerned the likely differences between the numbers applying to university and those who subsequently enrol on HE programmes
- A second concern was whether students were applying for the most suitable HE courses
- Whilst a third related to the significant numbers who remain undecided.

The insights from focus group members confirmed these concerns, with some participants drawing attention to their uncertainty over university entry requirements, as well as their limited understanding of higher and degree apprenticeships.

Recommendation 6.

Recognise the value of additional IAG and outreach activity targeted at FE colleges, in terms of:

- Converting HE applications into enrolments
- Supporting progression onto suitable HE programmes, and in
- Ensuring those on advanced level vocational programmes have a clear understanding of university entry requirements and higher level work-based options.

8. Support ideas

8.1. What is needed

Interviewees

- ***Differences between HE and FE, and information on pathways***

Having acknowledged the value of more support, interviewees offered a range of suggestions for what additional IAG (information, advice and guidance) and outreach should address. Here, reference was made to explaining the differences between the demands and requirements of HE study and what level 3 programmes involve. There was a call for this because, as one interviewee concurred, students can assume HE will be more of the same (Interviewee 3, College B). Accompanying this was a need to provide information and advice on the different routeways into HE, as well as the opportunities that a higher education could offer (Interviewee 3, College B).

- ***HE in FE option***

In addition, a number of the interviewees emphasised the importance of ensuring that level 3 students are aware of the HE in FE option. For one interviewee, a big challenge that needed to be overcome concerned 'the stigma' associated with the HE courses offered at their college. There is, it was argued, a perception that anyone who stays will be viewed as 'just a college learner. Removing that stigma would create a much more positive view on [the college's] HE provision. They are fantastic offerings,' it was added, 'that help certain learners who would not flourish if they went into a 200 people lecture theatre. [Moreover] our foundation degree is cheaper as a course than going to Manchester University. They can live at home and [would not be] increasing [their] debt as much as [they] think [they will be] (Interviewee 2, College A).

Focus groups

- ***The range of post-level 3 options***

A similar range of suggestions were advanced by focus group members. They included the need to be informed about all the options available after college, 'so you can look into them.' Whilst this should include the 'pros and cons of university degrees, employment and travel,' one group placed particular emphasis on the need to be equipped with a greater awareness and understanding of apprenticeships. 'Everyone knows you have to apply and go around universities,' it was suggested, 'but', one member added, I wouldn't know how to go and find an apprenticeship' (FG 2, College B). Linked to this, participants in another group argued that it was 'important for people to know [you] can take years out and don't have to carry on with education.' There was a need for students to understand that they can go to university as mature entrants (FG 2, College B).

- ***HE in FE***

In corroborating another of the suggestions made by interviewees, focus group members talked about the value of being provided with more information on HE in FE. Whilst those in one group thought that such insights were likely to be provided in 'year two lessons,' there was a view that this information should be given in 'year one lessons too.' 'I think now is the perfect time,' one participant observed, since 'time goes so quickly' (FG 3, College A).

- ***Value of BTEC***

Moreover, it was important to know that BTECs are widely accepted by universities. 'Some people,' one focus group participant observed, 'think that if you're doing a BTEC, you can't get into university, whereas they are equivalent to A-levels. You get the same qualifications.' Illustrating the point this member added, 'someone I was speaking to said he did [subject name] at university after doing A-levels, and that 90 per cent of the people he went to do the course with had done BTECs. So that needs to be kept in mind. This,' it was added, 'also applies to the people reviewing the applications' (FG 3, College A).

Having acknowledged the value of more next steps support, interviewees offered suggestions for what additional IAG and outreach should address. Notably in:

- Communicating the differences between FE and HE-level study
- Informing students about the different routeways into HE
- Exploring the opportunities that a higher education could present, and
- Ensuring current level 3 students are aware of the HE in FE option and what distinguishes this offer.

Whilst focus group members made a similar range of suggestions, emphasis was placed on informing them about the full range of post-college options available, including HE, HE in FE, employment, travel, and apprenticeships, as well as the possibility of pursing HE as a mature student.

- Focus group members also highlighted the need to ensure those on advanced level vocational courses were aware that BTECs (and other level 3 vocational qualifications) are recognised by the majority of HE providers.

Recommendations 7 and 8.

Ensure IAG and outreach interventions recognise the different progression routes open to - and taken by - those on advanced level vocational courses.

- There is value in tailoring such provision to the subjects participants are taking.

- This support should also acknowledge that some may favour a non-linear route into HE, and enrolling in HE as mature students.

Recognise the role that HE in FE can play in offering an alternative to higher education provided by other HE institutions, including in the:

- Proximity of this provision to students' homes, networks, and extra-curricular commitments
- Confidence that they will fit in (to somewhere that is already familiar to them)
- Often higher staff to student ratios
- Generally lower comparative costs of study (including in terms of fees)
- Opportunity to take intermediate qualifications (at levels 4 and 5) and to progress in stages.

However, there is also a need to ensure that the HE in FE offer is suitable and relevant.

8.2. Source of IAG support

There was considerable agreement amongst interviewees and focus group members about who should be providing this additional support, and how.

8.2.1. Tutors

Interviewees

Discussions with interviewees began by considering subject level provision and the key role that tutors can play in discussing next step options with their students, including informing them about the different routeways into HE and the opportunities that HE can provide (Interviewee 3, College B). The benefits of ensuring that their students had the skills required to succeed in HE was also highlighted. This, one interviewee noted, included 'giv[ing] them those independent skills, because,' it was added, 'we will not be there.' (Interviewee 1, College A). The same interviewee also talked about equipping students with time management skills, whilst another emphasised that tutors were the ones who could help to reassure their students that they will be able to manage the workloads associated with higher level study (RC, BSDC).

Focus groups

Focus group members also talked about the central role that their tutors could, and in a number of instances did play. Whilst this included support within 'lessons', weekly tutorials provided another opportunity to 'talk about' HE and post-college options (FG 3, College A). In addition, one group discussed the potential for progress tutors to provide more tailored next step support through gaining greater knowledge about the sectors their students were interested in entering (FG 1, College B).

8.2.2. Other voices

Whilst tutors had a key role to play in providing information and advice on next step options, including HE, other sources of insight were also identified by interviewees and focus group participants. The value of hearing 'different voices,' rather than relying on the 'teacher just telling' them, was emphasised by one of the interviewees. If 'an external person' comes in who 'knows about [the] situation,' they can 'reaffirm what their tutor has said,' and this, it was added, 'enhances the weight behind the message' (Interviewee 2, College A).

Interviewees

- ***Former students and graduates***

For interviewees, these other voices included former students now in HE, including those who had taken the 'internal pathway' and gone onto HE level study at the college (Interviewee 2, College A). These individuals, another interviewee observed, could provide success stories and level 3 students would be able to relate to them (Interviewee 2, College B). Building on this, reference was made to these former student being able to communicate 'the benefits of an HE pathway in an FE setting,' including 'the smaller class sizes in FE.' (Interviewee 2, College A). The same interviewees also talked about the potential for more interaction between FE students and those pursuing HE at the college. This included providing opportunities to 'sit down and [hear] why they choice the route' they did. Meanwhile, a third interviewee highlighted the value of hearing from graduates, especially those who

had taken the same BTEC course and had secured a 'really good role afterwards' (Interviewee 2, College B).

- ***HE staff***

Besides former students, interviewees discussed providing their students with opportunities to hear from university staff. For one interviewee, this included 'tak[ing] them to a university fair [featuring] different provides.' This, it was argued, could 'give them an idea of what opportunities are available. It sounds a bit better from different people. It is more interesting to speak to lots of people rather than the same person telling you information,' it was added (Interviewee 2, College B).

Focus groups

- ***HE students and reality of HE level study***

Hearing from those on HE level programmes was also discussed in the focus groups. Here, the emphasis was placed on being informed about the reality of HE from someone with first-hand and current experience. 'I don't want someone who has been to university and just shines the positives on it,' one participant observed. 'I want to hear the negatives too, such as money issues, as that will always be part of it.' This view that was shared by others in the same group, with one member adding that 'in school they talk about the highs of university and I think this has been sugar coated a lot. I know of people who say it's not like that, so I already have that in my mind' (FG 2, College B).

- ***Graduates***

Various groups also discussed being provided with an opportunity to talk with those now employed in the sectors and businesses they are interested in (FG 1, College B, and FG 2, College B). This, one group emphasised, would enable us 'to hear from their experience,' and to learn 'if you are definitely on the right track, or if you need to change. It's obviously better to know sooner rather than later,' it was added, 'otherwise you might be going down the wrong path, and you might need to retake courses so it would be longer.' Such insights, it was agreed, would build on what tutors can provide (FG 1, College A).

- ***A range of perspectives***

Members of the same focus group also highlighted the value of gaining insights from multiple perspectives, including 'some first year university students and maybe people who have actually finished it, and started the job, or [are a] few years into the job. It would be nice,' it was added, 'to know what the university course would be like, and also nice to know what the career would be like, and the types of things you would be getting into' (FG 1, College A).

- ***UCAS fairs and information on higher apprenticeships***

Consistent with the suggestions made by interviews, some focus groups also discussed the value of attending UCAS fairs. These, members of one group argued, would enable students to speak with people from different universities (FG 3, College A). However, it was added that such events should also provide attendees with a chance to hear about degree apprenticeship opportunities. 'I went to a convention,' one participant recalled, 'where there were hundreds of unis but nothing really on degree apprenticeships, just the conventional route' (FG 3, College A).

- ***College visits by university lecturers and tutors***

Also discussed by various focus group members were the potential benefits that visits to their college by university lecturers and tutors would bring. One participant recalled that lecturers had visited their sixth form. They should, it was argued, also talk to college students (FG 3, College A).

There was considerable agreement amongst interviewees and focus group members about who should be providing additional IAG support. These comprised:

- Subject tutors, including in explaining different routeways into HE, ensuring that their students have the necessary study skills, and in providing opportunities for students to discuss their post-college plans.

- Former students, including those who have progressed onto HE in FE, as well as others who have gone onto HE programmes at other institutions.

  Here, focus group members highlighted the value of engaging with those at different stages in their HE-level studies (from first to final year students).

- Graduates. Especially those who took comparable level 3 courses and have secured 'good' jobs, including in sectors of interest to participants

- Staff from a number of HE providers who can provide insights into the range of higher-level options available.

Recommendation 9.

Consider how partner FE colleges can be supported in engaging current undergraduates, as well as former HE students now employed in professions associated with the programmes of study taken by level 3 vocational learners.

Explore ways in which FE college students can hear from staff based in a range of different HE providers, including those in the West Midlands.

8.3. Outreach ideas

Whilst IAG was important, both interviewees and focus group members recognised the value of more experiential interventions.

8.3.1. HE visits

Interviewees

HE visits were prominent amongst the suggestions made by interviewees. 'We don't visit other institutions,' one observed. Whilst it was important to 'promote the programmes here at [the college], the value of exploring other HE providers was also recognised (Interviewee 3, College B). Similarly,

another interviewee observed that 'visiting local universities would definitely be a beneficial thing.' This, it was added, would 'almost [be] like a try before you buy.' The students can 'see if it meets what they imagine it to be and if it is the content they are looking for.' This interviewee also had suggestions for what such a visit should include, notably 'giving [students] a tour [of the campus, and] showing them some of the facilities.' In addition, it should involve some interactive activities aligned with the subjects they were currently studying. It would also be important, it was added, for students to find out about the role of student services and welfare (Interviewee 2, College B).

A second interviewee talked about the need with such visits for participants to gain a sense of what it would be like to be a university student. This would help to provide 'that realisation of what HE is about and whether [they] are the right kind of learner for higher education, because HE is a different world' (Interviewee 3, College A). A third interviewee developed this line of thinking. First, with the idea of running workshops at a university where students would be able to do 'practicals,' and second with the suggestion that students could be provided with a opportunity to experience 'a day in the life of' an undergraduate (Interviewee 1, College B). Elsewhere, mention was made to an 'extended [HE] event' for college students. This, it was added, could perhaps be offered during holidays and involve a short residential component (Interviewee 2, College B).

Whilst a number of the suggestions from interviewees concerned university visits, one discussed the possibility of 'a university week' based at their college and involving level 3 students 'do[ing] things which they would do at university.' Moreover, this could involve some form of 'mentorship' where HE students and staff come in and do a week's project with college students (Interviewee 2, College A).

Focus groups

Focus group participants also advanced the idea HE visits. These, one group observed, could provide us with 'an insight into what universities would like.' They should include, it was suggested, 'a tour' and involve 'students who are currently doing that course,' and who could tell you 'how they feel and what their tips would be' (FG 3, College A). Moreover, the comparative advantages of such visits over 'UCAS conventions' was highlighted. 'With a convention,' members of one group argued, 'you're not actually there. You can't talk to professors, nor see live classes and how study groups work. You're not getting a true insight into what you'd be putting yourself up for at a convention. Going to universities and actually experiencing a day' would be different (FG 3, College A).

Whilst IAG was important, both interviewees and focus group members recognised the value of more experiential (outreach) interventions.

For interviewees, these included HE visits that would:

- Provide first-hand insights into university level study
- Include an interactive component related to the subjects participants were interest in
- Inform participants about the role of student services and welfare.

Suggestions were also made for university-based events that would enable students to experience a day in the life of an undergraduate, as well as those offering a residential component.

In addition, reference was made to running a:

- College-based university week, replicating the work and activities of those studying in HE

- Mentoring programme supported by undergraduates.

Focus group members also advanced the idea of HE visits. Here, emphasis was placed on visits that:

- Involve undergraduates on courses of interest to those attending the event
- Enable participants to experience a day at university.

Recommendation 10.

Explore the option of:

- Providing HE visit days (and short residential events) to level 3 vocational learners at partner FE colleges that enable participants to explore and experience HE, and that inform them about the support services provided to HE students

- Developing a college-based university week that would provide participants with insights into undergraduate study

- Establishing a mentoring programme that involves undergraduates supporting college learners on level 3 vocational programmes.

8.3.2. Experiencing the professions

Interviewees

One interviewee discussed the idea of enabling level 3 students to experience the graduate professions they might be interested in pursuing. This, it was argued, could encourage more who go through the process of applying to university to take up their places (Interviewee 3, College A).

Focus groups

A similar idea was advanced by focus group members who discussed workplace visits and job taster opportunities. Colleges, it was argued, 'will have connections with different places that they could use.' We could, it was then suggested, 'have a timetable where you could look into different areas of the industry and try [these] out. Whilst those in these professions could visit the college, it would be especially 'beneficial to go out to them, in mini groups. We could then see them doing what they actually do, rather than just getting told about it' (FG 1, College B). Although it was acknowledged that work experience is part of their current course, this, it was contested, is 'all in one placement.' Yet, there are 'lots of different areas' in the sector (FG 1, College B).

A further outreach idea from interviewees concerned enabling students to experience the graduate professions they are interested in pursuing.

- This, it was suggested, has the potential to encourage more vocational students who apply to HE to take up their university places.

A comparable suggestion was made by focus groups members who discussed work-place visits and job taster opportunities.

- An intervention of this nature has, it was argued, the advantage of enabling participants to see and experience the role, rather than being 'told about it.'

Recommendation 11.

Explore how outreach activities can provide information and insights into the placement opportunities/work-related experiences offered on many HE programmes.

- This is in the context that those pursuing advanced level vocational programmes may perceive HE as predominantly classroom-based and theoretical.

8.4. The timing of support

Focus groups

Focus groups members also discussed the timing of support. Whilst there were some variations, most considered that next steps support needed to offered from the start of their level 3 programmes. If it is early in the first year, one group observed, 'you would be prepared for applying [to university] in second year' (FG 2, College B). A similar argument was made by a second group:

> Overall, I think it is really important for colleges and courses to bring it to your attention and start looking into things for you, and help you with a path, because I know it might seem a bit early [but] by the time [you] get to the end of the first year, start of the second year [and] the idea of university comes up, it can be really overwhelming. It's a good idea to start talking to students about it throughout the first year.

There are, it was added, 'a wide range of careers and it can be really confusing to know where you really want to go. There is so much to choose from' (FG 1, College A). A comparable case was made by a third group. 'We have to start applying [for university at the] beginning of year two, so if you haven't had the chance to talk, people will be struggling with their decisions as to where to go' (FG 3, College A).

Focus group members discussed the timing of IAG and outreach support. Most considered this needed to be offered from the start of their level 3 programmes.

Such provision would ensure that they would be prepared for applying to HE at the start of their second year.

Recommendation 12.

Explore the opportunity - and benefits - of initiating a progressive programme of IAG and outreach support that commences soon after FE students have embarked on their advance level vocational courses, since at this stage many students remain uncertain about their post-college options.

8.5. A strategic approach to planning support

Interviewees

Finally, interviewees made suggestions for a strategic approach to the provision of next steps support and the enhanced role that Higher Horizons could play. This included engaging in a review process towards the end of the college year that would provide tutors and students with a chance to feedback on the impact of existing provision, identify areas of additional need, and plan support for the following year (Interviewee 2, College B).

Building on this, another interviewee with oversight of the three featured courses at their college, emphasised the need for more 'communication between the different institutions that learners become involved with, but,' it was added, 'it seems to be school, sixth form, FE and HE, and there is no interconnection' (Interviewee 3, College A). One of the consequences of this lack of cross-institutional collaboration, it was argued, are the number 'of dropouts at 17/18 who did A-levels and said it was not for me. They are more than capable of doing level 3 but wasted a year because they did not know these [college-based vocational] programmes are available.' Although not stated explicitly, the implication was that HH could play an important intermediary role in bringing the different stakeholders together.

Interviewees made suggestions for a strategic approach to the provision of next steps support and an enhanced role that Higher Horizons could play.

- This included engaging in a review process towards the end of the college year that would provide tutors and students with a chance to feedback on the impact of existing provision, identify areas of additional need, and plan a programme of support for the following year.

In addition, reference was made to the value of more communication between schools, sixth forms and colleges, and something which, potentially, could be facilitated by HH.

- It was considered that this support would help to reduce the number of students dropping out at 17/18, or changing their courses once school/college term had started.

Recommendations 13 and 14.

Explore ways in which HH can develop a calendar of support tailored to each partner FE college.

Consider also how HH could support more collaborative working between local schools, sixth forms and FE colleges, in terms of learner progression onto suitable advanced level programmes of study, including vocational courses.

9. Reflections on the focus group experience

Time was allocated at the end of each focus group meeting for participants to review their experience. This feedback offered a means of establishing whether they had felt comfortable in taking part in the discussion and providing candid responses. It also offered an opportunity to consider how any new studies involving student focus groups could be improved.

- ***Enjoyable***

The feedback from participants indicated that they had found the focus group experience 'good' (FG 1, College B), and enjoyable (FG 2, College A). One participant described feeling 'comfortable with speaking, because it's a small group with people I already know' (FG 1, College B). Another commented on how they had been engaged in the discussions. 'We're not the most straight forward people in the world and you got us hooked straight away' (FG 2, College A).

- ***Expressing views***

Participants also discussed how it had provided an environment in which they felt able to express their views. 'Personally I enjoyed it,' one focus group member noted, 'as it gave us a chance to express how we feel. [We] don't get to do that very often,' it was suggested. 'It's been good to talk about uni.' Other members of the same group expressed their agreement with this assessment (FG 2, College B). Those in another group commented that it had been 'really good as [we] got to express our opinions' (FG 3, College A).

- ***Learning from others and feeling valued***

One group observed that the discussion had provided them with an opportunity to 'learn things [by] hearing [from] other people,' which, it was added, has been 'helpful' (FG 3, College A). Similarly, another group talked about the chance provided 'to get our thoughts and opinions out there. It makes us feel valued,' it was added (FG 1, College A).

- ***Made us think and look ahead***

Whilst the principal aim of the focus groups had been to gather the insights and experiences of participants, their feedback also suggested that it had presented an opportunity to reflect and look ahead to their next steps. It has been 'helpful,' one member remarked, 'as it made us think more about what we want to do in the future.' A fellow participant added that it has helped us identify 'what more we need to figure out with what we want to do in the future' (FG 1, College B). A member of another focus group described enjoying the chance to consider their 'potential for the future. There's a lot to look forward to,' it was concluded. Another participant from the same group made a similar observation. It has been 'nice to be able to say my plans and not get laughed at because they're quite abstract,' it was observed (FG 2, College A).

- ***Preferred method of data gathering***

There was also a view that as a way of seeking the student perspective, focus group discussions had certain advantages over evidence gathered through written surveys. It is 'better than getting a piece of paper with questions, as you just put basic answers down. [Doing it like this means] you can talk to people about it,' observed one participant. It is 'better to talk,' added a second member of the same group (FG 3, College A).

No improvements were suggested by focus group members in how the discussion could be conducted (FG 2, College B). It 'was handled really well,' replied those in one group, whilst reference was also made to the suitability of the contents of the discussions. 'All of the questions have been really relevant to what we want to do' (FG 2, College A). Moreover, participants were happy with having discussions held on MS Teams, rather than in person, with one group judging that 'it would have been the same as online' (FG 1, College B).

Time was allocated at the end of discussions for participants to reflect on the focus group experience.

It also provided an opportunity to consider how any new studies involving student focus groups could be developed.

- The feedback indicated that participants had found the experience enjoyable and had felt comfortable to express their views.
- The discussion also provided them with an opportunity to hear and learn from some of their peers, and time to reflect on their next step options.
- Moreover, participants favoured focus group discussions over written methods of gathering their views and perspectives (such as questionnaires).

10. Conclusions

Aims and approach

This study set out to understand the next step options and ambitions being considered by college-based first year students on advanced level vocational (applied general) courses. This was set against the backdrop of concerns about HE progression rates amongst FE college students, notably those taking what have sometimes been described as alternative (to A-levels) courses, and consequent calls for more to be done in addressing progression rates that tend to be lower than those typically returned by schools and sixth form colleges. To do this a qualitative approach was adopted based on the evidence provided by tutors and students at two FE colleges within the HH region and across three subject areas in each college.

Findings

- ***Route into college and onto vocational programmes***

The findings, which derived from in-depth interviews with tutors and focus group discussions with students, revealed a considerable degree of consistency in the responses gathered. Whilst tutors and students offered different perspectives, these tended to be complementary, with the former providing insights into trends and tendencies amongst their students, and the latter drawing on their experiences and intentions. Consistent with the patterns reported by tutors, most student participants resided within a recognised catchment area for their respective college and had progressed onto their current course of study from a local school. Although in a number of instances the route taken had not been a direct one. Rather, it had involved embarking on A-levels or enrolling on a different level 3 programme.

- ***Positive experience***

Whilst this meant that the college was not always their first choice for post-16 study, there was a general consensus amongst students that it had been a positive one. It had provided them with a greater sense of independence than would be experienced in a school sixth form, and the opportunity to focus on a subject of particular interest and relevance, rather than taking three A-levels. There was also a general view that the experience was proving to be an enjoyable and engaging one.

- ***Next step plans***

In terms of next - post-level 3 and post-college - steps, tutors and students in both colleges discussed a range of options being contemplated. Whilst tutors observed that HE was a regularly taken route, and one that featured in a significant number of the plans described by focus group members, other options were also discussed. These comprised employment, including with the prospect of in-work training, as well as apprenticeships at various levels, alongside the option of taking time away from education, including through travelling. Although some students discussed a gap year following completion of their level 3 course, others were not so precise in describing a return to education at some point in the future. This finding underpins the idea that the non-linear progression route into HE is one considered and taken by those on vocational programmes in FECs.

- ***Next step uncertainties***

However, a number of focus group participants in both colleges, and across all six subject areas, described being undecided on their next step, including whether to progress onto some form of higher education and training, or not. This state of uncertainty was consistent with the claim made by tutors that a significant number of their first year students had yet to decide on their post-college destinations. Whilst representing a comparatively small proportion, tutors also reported that some students leave their course at the end of the first year. This option was also being considered by a few focus group members.

- ***Next step motivations***

Amongst the student participants who had a clearer idea about their post-level 3 destinations, the motivations of those considering HE, or a non-HE next step, were predominantly positive, and sometimes comparable, including in gaining knowledge and acquiring new experiences. Although the enduring consequences of the pandemic, and to a greater extent the current cost of living crisis, were impacting on the decision making process of some participants, especially for those exploring HE at universities some distance from their homes. This had led some to express an interest in what was judged to be the less expensive and more familiar HE in FE option, or in returning to the idea of securing employment after completing their current studies.

- ***The need for more support and what this should include***

Whilst tutors and students discussed the value of the next steps IAG and outreach support that had been provided, there was a consensus amongst both sets of participants that more support would be beneficial. Although the rationale for additional support varied between the two groups, many of the same ideas for what this should address, who should provide it, and how it should be delivered, emerged. Notably, the need for guidance on HE options that align with the level 3 courses being studied, and in the identification of suitable routeways, including those that had been taken by previous cohorts on the same advanced level programmes, as well as more information on higher and degree apprenticeships, and guidance on gap year options.

In addition, emphasis was placed on hearing from former college-based vocational students who were now in HE, on apprenticeship programmes, or in employment, including in graduate level posts. Moreover, it was judged important to not merely hear from these individuals but to gain a first-hand sense of what these options would be like through participating in HE experience events, and in visiting places of work and taking part in work-based activities. Whilst subject tutors in particular were considered to play a pivotal role, including in providing insights into HE study and supporting the acquisition of skills needed for post-college success, the evidence presented strongly indicates a key role for Higher Horizons. Accordingly, a number of the study's recommendations reflect this.

Limitations of the study and areas for new research

This said, it is important to recognise the limitations of this study. First, it is based on evidence gathered at one particular point in the learner journey. There would be considerable value in some form of comparative analysis that includes those in the second year of their level 3 studies on the same courses. Moreover, certain limitations arise from the breadth of the sample taken. Whilst views were gathered from students on six different courses at two different colleges, the range remains small. Both colleges offer a significant number of vocational programmes at advanced level. Indeed, whilst they varied, the progression rates reported by the tutors for the six featured courses, and the

plans discussed by focus group members, indicate that these return some of the highest comparative rates of HE progression. A similar approach involving tutors and students in vocational programmes with lower and medium rates of HE progression would provide a more complete set of insights.

Whilst this study was able to provide in-depth insights into the experiences of students on a range of level 3 vocational courses, as well as their tutors, it does have limitations. Notably in:

- Capturing the views of students at one particular point in their learner journeys
- Being based on a modest sample of participants.

Further research has the potential to address these limitations and establish the wider relevance of the study's findings.

Recommendations 15 and 16.

Consider new research that adopts a qualitative approach (comparable to that applied in this study) in seeking the views and perspectives of FE college staff and students in:

- Both the first and second years of their advanced level vocational programmes
- Level 3 vocational subject areas where progression rates are recognised as being significantly lower than those explored in the current study.

Consider also the potential of further qualitative research based on those who have taken the vocational route from partner FE colleges into higher level programmes of study and training (including HE in FE), and who can provide:

- Detailed insights into the progression experience
- Contextualised accounts of the challenges and enablers associated with progression
- Critical reflections on the support provided on their level 3 and HE programmes
- Relatable case studies of progression, and
- Examples of post-college destinations.

11. Acknowledgements

Thank you to the college staff and students who took part in this study for their time, insights and expertise. Thank you also to members of the Higher Horizons+ Steering Group for supporting this study and especially to Ant Sutcliffe, the Network's Head, Dr Hannah Merry, the Operations Manager, and Katie Coombe-Boxall, the Data and Research Manager, for all their guidance and patience.

12. References

Anon. 2023. *Guide for higher education institutions on the progression of BTEC level 3 students to higher education*, Pearson, https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/btec-generic/btec-guide-for-heis.pdf.

Anon (n.d.) 'What is a further education college and what courses do they offer,' *Career Pilot*, https://www.careerpilot.org.uk/parent-zone/all-questions/what-is-a-further- education-college-and-what-courses-do-they-offer#:~:text=The%20main%20 difference%20from%20school,be%20expected%20to%20be%20independent.

Archer, J. 2023. *What are the differences between a further education college and a sixth form* Make Happen Uni Connect partnership, https://www.makehappen.org/guide/what-are-the-differences-between-a-further-education-college-and-a-sixth-form/.

Atkin. L., and K. J. Flint. 2015. 'Nothing changes: perceptions of vocational education in England', *International Journal of Training Research*, 13 (1), 35-48.

Beech, D., and J. O'Neill. 2020. 'Behind the headlines: the complex picture behind the rise in future demand for higher education in London. *Higher Education Policy Institute blog post* (29 October), https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/10/29/behind-the-headlines-the-complex-picture-behind-the-rise-in-future-demand-for-higher-education-in-london/.

Bowl, M. 2012. *The Contribution of Further Education and Sixth-Form Colleges to Widening Participation. A Literature Synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive*. York: Higher Education Academy, https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/contribution-further-education-and-sixth-form-colleges-widening-participation.

Crawford, C., L. Macmillan, and A. Vignoles. 2014. *Progress made by high-attaining children from disadvantaged backgrounds*. Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d76d2e5274a676d53239b/High_attainers_progress_report_final.pdf.

Fox. N. J. 2004. *Qualitative data analysis: HAR6010*. (Taught unit from MSc in Health and Social Care Research). Sheffield: University of Sheffield.

GOV.UK. 2024. *Get information about schools*, https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/.

GOV.UK. 2023. *Progression to higher education or training. Academic Year 2020-21*, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training#dataBlock-b2c5565b-8f73-4e4c-a6d1-8ff9e74b6810-tables.

Guyan. K. 2018. *Analysing qualitative data. A guide for university and college practitioners*. Advance HE. [Online] Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/analysing-qualitative-data.

Kelly. S. 2017. *Reforming BTECs: applied general qualifications as a route to higher education, Higher Education Policy Institute, Report 94*, https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hepi_Reforming-BTECs-Report-94-09_02_17-Web.pdf.

Lewis. Z. 2022. 'Paths in education: how students make qualification choices at Level 3 and what influences these choices,' *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 74:4, 707-707, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2022.2.

Lisauskaite, E., S. McIntosh., S. Speckesser, and H. Espinoza. 2021. *Going Further: Further education, disadvantage and social mobility*. Sutton Trust, https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/going-further-education-disadvantage/.

Lynch, S., Sims, D. and Wespieser, K. 2015. *A literature review of the value of vocational qualifications. Final Report*, Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research, https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/42pn1fux/jcqr01.pdf.

Moogan, Y. J., Baron, S., and Harris, K. 2002. 'Decision-making behaviour of potential higher education students', *Higher Education Quarterly* 53, 3: 211-228.

Moogan, Y. J. and Baron, S. 2003. 'An analysis of student characteristics within the student decision making process', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27, 3: 271-287.

Nicholls. D. 2009. 'Qualitative research: part three - methods,' *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation,* 16 (12), 638-647, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234055158_Qualitative_Research_Part_Three_-_Methods.

Norris, E. and Francis, B. 2014. 'The Impact of Financial and Cultural Capital on FE Students' Education and Employment Progression', in A. Mann, J. Stanley and L. Archer (eds), *Understanding Employer Engagement in Education: Theories and Evidence*. London: Routledge.

Nowell. L. S., J. M. Norris , D. E. White, and N. J. Moules. 2017. 'Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16: 1-13, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406917733847.

Office for Students. 2022. *Uni Connect. Phase three guidance for 2021-22*, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/2a73c06c-a2ec-47dd-b0ab-ba8aeb94c0de/uni-connect-phase-3-guidance-updated-oct-2021.pdf.

Office for Students. 2021a. *A new approach to the Uni Connect programme from 2021-22 to 2024-25. Analysis of consultation responses*, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/56c18d7c-c7e6-4b7f-adda-0391f8925140/uni-connect-consultation-response.pdf.

Office for Students. 2021b. *Uni Connect phase three guidance for 2021-22*, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/2a73c06c-a2ec-47dd-b0ab-ba8aeb94c0de/uni-connect-phase-3-guidance-updated-oct-2021.pdf.

Raven. N. 2023a. 'Supporting HE progression from FE colleges: learning from the student voice', in N. Raven (ed). *One Voice: Fusing Diverse Perspectives for Collective Action*, Peterborough: Forum for Access and Continuing Education, 55-77.

Raven. N. 2023b. 'The impact of the pandemic on widening participation students: the teaching professionals' perspective', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 25 (1), 99-124.

Raven. N. 2023c. 'Insights into outreach: the research potential of online focus groups', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 25 (1), 51-71.

Raven. N. 2022. *Conversations with teaching professionals: Developing a better understanding of current and future IAG and outreach needs*. Unpublished research paper. Higher Horizons.

Raven, N. 2021a. 'Widening HE access from FE colleges: the key role played by subject tutors', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 26 (1), 3-7, DOI: 10.1080/13603108.2021.1961173.

Raven, N. 2021b. 'Making a difference: insights into effective HE progression practices in further education colleges', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 23 (1): 79-101.

Raven, N. 2021c. Teaching and transitions: understanding classroom practices that support higher education progression in England, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 26 (2), 189-211.

Raven, N. 2018. *'The higher education progression of BTEC learners: trends, challenges and tactics', in S. Broadhead, J. Butcher, M. Hill, A. Hudson, S. McKendry, N. Raven, D. Sims, and T. Ward (eds). Concepts of Value and Worth: National and International Perspectives on Widening Access and Participation, London: Forum for Access and Continuing Education,* 137-157.

Shield. R., and A. Masardo. 2018. *Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications, student support and outcomes in undergraduate degree programmes*, The Higher Education Academy, https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/4299/1/Shields%20and%20Masardo%20%282015%29%20Changing%20Patterns%20in%20Vocational%20Entry%20Qualifications%20-%20HEA.pdf.

Smith, S., H. Joslin, and J. Jameson. 2015. *Progression of College Students in England to Higher Education*, BIS research paper number 239, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/460394/BIS-15-531- progression-of-college-students-in-england-to-higher- education.pdf.

Tazzyman, S., L. Bowes, R. Moreton, M. Madriaga, and C. McCaig. 2018. *National Collaborative Outreach Programme. Year one report of the national formative and impact evaluation, including capacity building with NCOP consortia*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/*/http:/www.hefce.ac.uk/.

TASO. 2023. *Rapid review to support development of the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR)*, Report to the Office for Students, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/2c6a1cfc-cec3-4368-957f-8ea546238616/taso-rapid-review.pdf.

Tuckett, S., D. Robinson, and F. Bunting. 2021. *Measuring the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education*, Education Policy Institute, https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Measuring-the-16-19-disadvantage-attainment-gap_EPI-2021.pdf.

Vidal Rodeiro, C.L. and S. Vitello. 2020. *Vocational Qualifications at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5: who takes them and how they fit into students' programmes of study*. Cambridge Assessment Research Report. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment, https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/579348-vocational-qualifications-at-key-stage-4-and-key-stage-5-who-takes-them-and-how-they-fit-into-students-programmes-of-study.pdf.

Wilkins, S., F. Shams, and J. Huisman. 2013. 'The decision-making and changing behaviour dynamics of potential higher education students: the impact of increasing tuition fees in England', *Education Studies* 39, 2: 125-141.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. 2023. *Entry requirements and alternatives to A levels*, https://www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-teachers/help-your-students-get-uni/ entry-requirements-and-alternatives-levels.

UK Parliament. 2023. *The future of post-16 qualifications*. *Third report of session 2022-23*. House of Commons Committee Report, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/55/report.html.