

Paths in Education: how students make qualification choices at Level 3 and what influences these choices.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of  
Wolverhampton for the degree  
Professional Doctorate in Education Enquiry

December 2020

This work or any part thereof has not previously been presented in any form to the University or to any other body whether for the purposes of assessment, publication or for any other purpose (unless otherwise indicated). Save for any express acknowledgments, references and/or bibliographies cited in the work, I confirm that the intellectual content of the work is the result of my own efforts and of no other person.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis is dedicated to all the furry creatures that started this journey alongside me, but never finished it. Also, to my cat Vygotsky for her help along the way.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable help from my supervisors, without whom this thesis would have been impossible, the help and support of all the students who took part and above all my mentor and good friend Gerry. This is for you!

A final thank you as this research would not have been possible without the participants that have taken part. Thank you to all those students, parents, carers, teaching and academic staff who completed the questionnaires and interviews.

Thank you to the college that took part in the research and understood the importance of more research in this area. Without you all, this thesis would have been an impossible task.

## Abstract

This study is an investigation into how young people make choices between the ages of sixteen to eighteen about the qualifications they study at Level 3 and the impact these choices have on further progression. Often, the reasons for their choices tend to be obvious and straightforward and are career driven. However, what about those students who may not know about progression routes or how to make informed choices? Given the potential impact on students' lives, it seems vital that we understand how students make their choices, and whether any aspects of the current decision-making process could be improved. There is increasing interest in the provision of information, advice and guidance focussing on how students are making choices regarding careers and progression to higher education in the United Kingdom (Diamond *et al.*, 2014). However, to date, the majority of research into qualification choice has been focused instead on choice into Higher Education contexts or choices made about GCSE options, thus leaving a gap in literature surrounding Further Education. Since it is now compulsory for students to be in education to the age of eighteen, it is crucial to ask why research is still invisible on student choice into further education, whereas student choice into higher education has the lion's share of the research attention (Elliot, 2016).

This thesis explored the factors that influence the choices made by students who have decided to study on a Level 3 qualification, and to understand how students may go about making these choices. It has been argued that many students are poorly prepared when it comes to making the choices about the qualifications they study post-16 (Leatherwood, 2015). This study has found this is still true for young people today.

A mixed methods approach was used which combined a mixture of surveys and interviews. All the research took place in a single sixth form college. At the heart of the study were the stories that students disclosed of what influenced their own qualification choices. Seventeen semi-structured interviews and fifty questionnaires were used.

Five main influences and themes emerged from the research as being central to qualification choice. These were peer influence; career aspirations; parental or family influence; advice from careers advisors; media influences. In addition, an emerging theme was the potential role played by schools in shaping qualification choice. These factors played a significant role in the choice of qualifications for students, to the point where it was effectively a 'non-choice' for some of them. One implication from the study is that young people need both good impartial information but they also need good advice and guidance in how to use this information, rather than anything offered being seen as a 'token gesture'.

This research shows that students are making key decisions about future qualifications without seeking professional guidance. Instead, decisions are more likely to be based on hearsay from friends or social media. These decisions can be partially explained by examining the kind of career advice students receive in school: only eighteen per cent of students surveyed said that they received enough information to 'make an informed decision' (Palmer, 2016).

**Key terms:** student choice, career advice and guidance, choice and non-choice, post-16 education, careers

<b>Contents:</b>	<b>Pages</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	3 - 4
Glossary of key terms	8 - 9
<b>Chapter 1: Background and Rationale</b>	10 - 26
<b>Chapter 2: The Literature Review</b>	27 - 71
2.1 Choices at sixteen – academic or vocational futures	27 - 47
2.2 Difficulties with transitions and decision making at sixteen	47 - 48
2.3 Who influences the decision – what, where and when	48 - 63
2.4 The lost generation – NEET students	63 - 65
2.5 Implications for research planning	65 - 69
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology, Methods and Data Collection</b>	72 - 100
3.1 Methodology	73 - 77
3.2 Research positionality	77 - 80
3.3 Methods	80 - 83

3.4 The use of qualitative and quantitative methods	83 - 85
3.5 Boundaries and limitations of the methods	85 - 87
3.6 Pilot procedure application	87 - 90
3.7 Research procedure	90 – 94
3.8 Ethical considerations	95 - 99
<b>Chapter 4: Analysis of Major Themes: the real reasons behind the choices</b>	101 - 147
4.1 Interview data – general analysis	103 - 104
4.2 Tensions about ‘place’ and the preparation process	104 - 110
4.3 Parental and family influence	110 - 112
4.4 Careers lessons and work experience	112 - 116
4.5 External influences	116 -122
4.6 Lack of advice – will teachers tell the truth?	122 - 124
4.7 Thematic analysis of findings	124 - 143

4.8 Methodological issues 143 - 147

**Chapter 5: Conclusion** 148 - 180

5.1 What has the research told us? 151 - 165

5.2 Reflections on the research 165 - 167

5.3 Contribution to practice and own professional identity and knowledge 167 - 172

5.4 Suggestions for further research 172 - 180

**References** 181 -202

**Appendices**

1. Informed consent form 203 - 204

2. Student choice questionnaire 205 - 209

3. Debrief form 210

4. Ethics approval form 211 - 222

## Glossary

It is important to focus on having a clear understanding of definitions of terms that are inherent to this study and are often used prolifically throughout the U.K. education system. These terms are used every day within the field of education and it is often wrongly assumed that as everyone has been through education they will have an understanding of their true meaning. These terms will also be discussed more fully in chapter two.

**Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A Level:** These are the most well-known and widely available post-16 academic qualifications. AS courses were designed to be at A Level standard but covering only fifty per cent of the course and are the building blocks towards the full A Level. These are studied in Year 12 with the second component taken in Year 13.

**Apprenticeships:** The person is in a real job where you learn, gain experience and get paid, and attend college or a training provider on a day release basis.

**Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC):** these first appeared in 1974 and can now be studied covering anything from two modules (AS equivalent) to eighteen units (three A Level equivalent). They focus on one particular subject often including work experience in that particular field of study.

**General Certificate in Education (GCSE):** the main examinations taken in year 11, which are now graded from 9 down to 1.

**Diplomas:** These are qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds, offering a more practical, hands on ways of gaining the essential skills employers and universities look for.

**Foundation Learning Tier:** is the name given to provision for 14-19-year-old learners working predominantly at entry level or level 1 as well as 19-24-year olds with high level special needs.

**Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET):** refers to a person who is unemployed, not receiving an education or in vocational training. The subgroup of NEETs aged 16–18 is frequently of particular focus.

**Post-16 Education:** post-16 education and further education includes all post-16 learning, including vocational training and work-based learning. It can also include working with 14-year olds in schools or colleges, as part of the 14-19 vocational curriculum.



**T Levels:** these are courses, which are studied after GCSEs and are equivalent to 3 A Levels. These are 2-year courses developed in collaboration with employers and businesses. The intention is that the content meets the needs of industry and prepares students for work. T Levels also aim to offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience during an industry placement of at least forty-five days.

**Vocational Education:** education designed to prepare people for work in a particular occupation or groups of occupation.

**Year 11:** usually the final year of Key Stage 4 in English secondary schools where students take some kind of formal examinations or qualifications.

**Year 12:** is the first year of Key Stage 5, when the students are aged 16 to 17. Students in Year 12 in England can study A Level qualifications in sixth form college, or alternatively the more vocational qualifications.

## **Chapter 1. Background and Rationale**

In this thesis, I aimed to explore the factors that influence students' choice about how they selected their current Level 3 qualifications and to gain a better understanding of the educational implications of these choices on their future career paths. The study sought to question this selection process and to investigate the ways in which these choices are made.

Throughout this thesis key terms are used and these can be found in the glossary located after the contents page.

### **Background**

Changes in the fourteen to nineteen curriculum in recent years mean that students have to make decisions at this stage across four pathways (GCSEs and A Levels, Diplomas, Apprenticeships and the Foundation Learning Tier), as well as deciding on the specific subjects they wish to study. Most schools attempt to broaden the curriculum by offering an increasing range of courses to their students, and making fewer courses compulsory, such as modern foreign languages (Blenkinsop, 2019). Given the vast amount of choice that is now available, it is important that conversations on how to choose qualifications are not left until key decision points (like choosing GCSEs) or the end of school or college.

Three key transition points are now recommended during eleven to eighteen education (Hodgson, 2012). These are Year 8, Year 11 and Year 13. For the purpose of this current study, it is the advice that is given during Year 11 that will be focussed upon. This is a significant decision point in a student's academic career, as

they will be making choices about whether they continue studying, choose an apprenticeship, or seek employment. At this stage, they will need access to information on courses available in their own school, if it has a sixth form, and other local further education colleges or sixth forms, apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning or employment, for example job shadowing, internships and career mentoring. At each stage students, and their parents, need be given information on not only the courses and qualifications open to them, and the progression routes that follow, but also the institutions where they might be studying. Noel-Levitz (2018) defines student progression routes as the rate at which a student participates in any activity that an institution has determined to be correlated with moving onto a higher level of qualification. However, it may be the case that the implementation of a programme of study may or may not cater for the existence of frequently occurring alternative progression routes. Students' choices of careers, courses and universities do not always follow a completely rational process; they can be dependent upon intuitive and emotional responses and what feels right (Diamond *et al.*, 2014). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has carried out substantial research in recent years relating to the way students make choices (McCrone, 2015). These studies inform our understanding of how students make (and are helped to make) decisions in the context of a wide range of available options which have been created because of recent policy development. The Technical and Further Education Act (2017) requires all schools and academies to ensure that there is an opportunity for a range of education and training providers to be accessible to all pupils in Years 8 to 11. This is designed to ensure all pupils get access to information about technical education and apprenticeships. This is a formal legal requirement for schools. In addition, to ensure that providers have

access to schools, a statement has to be published on the school's website saying how this is being done. Schools also have to implement statutory guidance from the government, which is designed to help them to interpret what their legal obligations really mean in practice. The current statutory guidance (2017-2018) endorses the findings from the Gatsby Report (2014) and requires all schools and colleges to appoint an appropriately qualified 'careers leader'. This should theoretically mean that all students could access appropriate and unbiased advice and guidance about further qualification choice. This is further supported by The Education Act (2011). The Education Act 2011 inserts a new duty, section 42A, into Part VII of the Education Act 1997, requiring schools to secure access to independent careers guidance for pupils in years 9-11. A school or college must ensure that all registered learners are provided with independent guidance during the relevant phases of their education. Students should be supported to pursue their career aspirations. The school or college should not seek to shape these aspirations in its own interest or in the interests of a particular government policy. Information should be provided in different formats to allow for students' preferences in how to access it. Above all, advice on qualification choice must be impartial:

*Careers guidance must be presented in an impartial manner and promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given. Careers guidance must also include information on all options available in respect of 16-18 education or training, including apprenticeships and other work-based education and training options.*

*(Education Act 2011, Section 42A, Part V11).*

### **The research problem**

Within the field of post-compulsory education, current changes within the curriculum mean that learners can experience difficulties making fully informed choices and understanding the different routes available and the mixtures of qualifications. These

choices are made in schools, probably in year 10, but the changes are in post-compulsory technical and vocational education. The routes available to study in post-16 education are no longer as clear-cut as previously when students studied for either A Levels or a vocational Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) route. Many are now combining the qualifications. BTECs are the most common type of vocational study at Level 3 and data has shown there has been a marked increase in the number of students studying BTEC courses in recent years. Fewer than 50,000 students studied one or more Level 3 BTECs in 2006; this figure had risen to 150,000 in 2014. Analysis of UCAS data from 2018 looked at those who apply to, and are accepted into higher education, and examines whether they studied A Levels or BTECs. It shows that vocational qualifications now feature frequently among university applicants, with one in four of all applicants from England (26%) having studied at least one BTEC qualification at Level 3 (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). This is further demonstrated by the number of university acceptances of UK students holding BTEC qualifications having increased from 4.9% in 1999 to 21.4% of applications in 2018 who had a BTEC National Diploma combined with one A Level. It is possible that this is becoming a more popular end of course trajectory for those studying BTECs and that universities are more prepared to accept them. Nearly all universities accept BTECs in relevant subject areas, in much the same way as they would with equivalent A Level qualifications. BTEC students are often considered better prepared in terms of the independent studying that is required at degree level, due to the portfolio-based nature of BTEC courses. The time management and self-organisation that a student can learn on a BTEC qualification can also give an added edge (Heleo, 2014). This hopefully means that contemporary policy is helping to successfully address the parity of esteem between

vocational and academic qualifications. One of the objectives of 'Curriculum 2000' (McCrone, 2015) was to increase the breadth of the curriculum followed by 16-19-year olds. This new curriculum has had a major impact upon students' choice of subjects. Therefore, it is important to understand the choices being made and the reasons behind them. There is now a strong consensus in education that we need to do more to offer students a clear pathway to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to succeed at work or lifelong learning (Bristow, 2018).

The focus of this study is on who or what influences these decisions at the key transition point of sixteen. Although, this previous sentence could be implying that decisions are made only at 16, in reality the decisions are in fact made earlier at 14. An example of this is a student choosing their options in year 9 and deciding not to study a foreign language, then later regretting this as they need a foreign language as part of their L3 course in Business Studies. Recent policy developments in England, such as the development and introduction of the national and extended diplomas and T Levels and over eighty subjects now offered at A Level, provide a basis for renewed interest in the factors affecting the probability of students choosing one qualification rather than another to study at key stage 5. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to find out how students aged 16-19 made their decisions about subject choices and qualifications at Level 3 and what advice or support they are getting to help make these choices. Many of the qualifications offered at key stage 5 will be new to students so it is not always necessary, however, to have taken the subject at GCSE or equivalent. As McNeill (2004, p381) commented:

*'The speed of change at 16+ shows little sign of slowing down, whether in terms of organisation, funding and governance of colleges, or the structure and delivery of the curriculum both in colleges and sixth forms'.*

This highlights the issue generally, that even well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century education is still changing in England.

There are a plethora of resources and tools available for students to consult, to enable them to get basic information as a starting point to progress in their decision-making process. They can also participate in a virtual tour on line or to attend an educational institutional open day. However, on average, students access only two resources, with many not choosing to visit the institution until they are invited to attend for an interview, making them inadequately informed about opportunities available (Haynes, 2013). A substantial minority do not use any of the resources available but instead turn to friends, family, college prospectuses or web-based sources for advice (Andrews, 2017). The introduction of online and digital career guidance services has often been controversial. As with other human centred services, there has been some resistance to the use of online technologies to deliver career guidance (Hooley and Goss, 2015). Those resistant have raised concerns about the loss of human contact, trivialisation and over-simplification of complex problems, as well as concerns about automation and a resultant loss of professionalism, alongside problems with accessing digital provision (Hooley and Goss, 2015).

At the time of the design of my research study the area of Careers Advice and Guidance was facing significant changes and withdrawal of government funding, yet Ofsted is said to have become increasingly interested in career preparation in schools and colleges. Students should have access to more, not less, support to successfully move to post-16 education or the world of work. Students are being

confronted with more choice and the number of different courses can be daunting (Crowley, 2012). That is why access to high-quality impartial information, careers advice and guidance is important. Students should be supported to pursue their career aspirations. Support for students in making choices about their futures has been defined as careers education, information and guidance; intended to encourage young people to make suitable educational and career decisions (Nicoletti and Berthoud, 2010). Of the 2.71 million students who used the National Careers Service between August 2010 and February 2014, the findings indicated that the careers advice and support was used by males to a greater extent than females (Conlon, 2017). This indicates that use of the service is uneven and not comprehensive.

At the time of this study, careers services across the country are being scaled back or closed due to severe cuts to local authority budgets. A survey by the Institute of Career Guidance (2018), found that nearly a quarter of careers advisors had been made redundant as local authorities cut funding and replaced face-to face advice with an online service. The survey found that Essex was closing its entire careers service except for a website and telephone helplines. Instead, schools have been given responsibility to secure independent impartial advice. Funding for Connexions, the national advice service for young people, is being replaced by a requirement on schools that they organise independent careers advice for their students (Lee, 2018). Although, careers provision is not usually a major focus of Ofsted inspections, the Common Inspection Framework now contains several areas that overlap with careers. However, no extra funding to do this effectively has been allocated.



Entitlement funding, which is used by many schools and colleges to pay for information, is also being cut by seventy-five per cent (McIntosh, 2019).

It might be reasonable to assume that students at sixteen would base decisions on some sort of calculation by weighing up advantages and disadvantages and that decisions at this age involve both 'subjective and objective reasoning skills' (Payne, 2003 p14). This study explored the perceptions from students on the help and support available and also their reflections on the factors that influenced their decisions. A mixed methods approach of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was used with current students aged sixteen to nineteen studying at a large single sixth form college. Therefore, the essence of this research was to focus on how choices about qualifications are made and who or what influences these choices.

### **Positionality**

Within this study, it was my aim that the voice of the student should be at the forefront. MacDonald and Walker (1975) suggested that many aspects in education cannot be researched and answered by just using experimental methods or purely numerical or statistical analysis, especially if the research relates to the experience of the participants. This is particularly important to me when my own background is taken into consideration. The concept of entering the academic world from my own personal background seemed impossible. I am severely dyslexic, from a care background, and was often excluded from school due to being labelled as having challenging behaviour when I was younger. It is impossible for me to separate my personal journey from my research and my experiences inevitably form part of the

evidence of my enquiry. Outside my primary school education, I did virtually no reading for pleasure and nobody ever read to me. This has left me with a severely limited vocabulary. In the last two years, I have read a dozen quality books and this has been a very demanding experience for two reasons. Firstly, the text moves and when I come across a word which would be second nature to most people, I have difficulty with the construction of the word. I literally take longer to analyse it phonetically and then have to interpret the meaning, as numerous words are new to me.

My parents had both died when I was very young and very few people I knew had ever gone on to study at university, let alone progress into the world of research. This was an uncharted ocean to me, but it was one I wanted to navigate and to be accepted in. I knew the challenges and milestones I needed to reach would be massive on the journey ahead to become an academic researcher. My personal experiences assisted in the development of my academic concerns in educational inequalities and widening participation. The nature of these experiences resulted in a realisation of my interest in people's subjective experiences and stories. I would often question what predisposed people to make particular decisions, along with how specific socioeconomic factors influence these decisions. Merging this with my research interest in improving the quality of advice and guidance available and young people's future trajectories, helped form my personal motivation for wanting to pursue this research.

My background has directly influenced my choice of research topic as I wanted to try and ensure that students do not have to fight for things like I did and that they get impartial advice and appropriate choices. When I left school I never had any options explained to me or had the opportunity to discuss future careers. I was almost written off from studying past GCSE level and the only option I was told about was a BTEC course. I work with students aged sixteen to nineteen and would like to think things are changing and moving for the better. I hoped my study would ultimately help students to make appropriate choices regarding their future lives.

I am from a Further Education teaching background, and many of my colleagues saw completing a doctorate as having little relevance to improving my teaching and learning, or having any meaningful use to the classroom situation. This has made me determined to listen to the views of students and to demonstrate the need for a clear understanding of the best way to support their qualification selection. One sixth form student, when interviewed, commented she made her entire A Level subject choice on subjects she had enjoyed at GCSE:

*I chose Health and Social Care because I did it at GCSE. I enjoyed it, and I was good at it and got a good grade (Leah, Year 13 Sixth Form student).*

This view on making qualification choices at sixteen seemed to be a common trend and leads to a discussion of the aims of this study that there is a need for clear, unbiased and accessible support to be in place.

## **Rationale**

The transition from school to post-16 education is one of the most significant and confusing life events in our transition into early adulthood. It can have a long-lasting

effect on where a young person ends up in life. To me helping them know what to do and how to find a worthwhile route into either further education or employment is important and in my view is an area that is significantly overlooked or for which they are ill prepared. As a teacher, I have found that many students often take qualifications without seeking appropriate advice, or the qualifications do not match their future aspirations. Therefore, I felt that research in this area was crucial, because if we can ensure the advice and guidance is correct from an early age, it can give clearly identified progression routes and informed choice. Without access to the best possible careers support, students will miss out on the opportunities available (Milton, 2017).

A further justification for this research is the confusing and ever-changing nature of the education system, which without having a full understanding of it is impossible to provide impartial advice. Students will continue to be held back if they do not have the right advice, at the right time to make informed decisions about their future, or may not have access to broader experiences or role models/mentors who can guide them on the correct qualification pathway (Burke, 2018). The UK education system needs a structure which offers better routes and advice to those that do not follow a traditional academic route. This advice needs to make sense, be purposeful and be of high quality (McCrone, 2015).

### **Research Focus**

Twenty-four years ago, Elliott (1996) published research which investigated the scarcity of research in Further Education into understanding how students chose their current qualifications. Despite the passage of some considerable time this area is no less relevant today and is still lacking in research (Roberts, 2002). With a

perceived lack of guidance to students on options at sixteen impacting on their future, and the implications of making these wrong choices, this can lead to students dropping out of education and becoming Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) students. It is necessary to stop this carousel happening. It is important to understand the reasons for students opting onto courses, then dropping them or becoming disengaged. If the correct advice could be put in at the start preventative measures could be introduced.

### **Research Questions**

O'Leary argues that 'moving from a problem suitable to research, to a research question is an essential starting point' (2005, p.32). The aim of this research is to examine the factors that influence students' decisions to study their particular Level 3 qualifications. To address the title of the research there were three main research questions:

- What are the main reasons given as to why students choose to study their current qualifications?
- What or who are the main influences on choice of Level 3 qualifications amongst those aged 16-19 years?
- What are the implications of the choices that students make for education policy?

These questions focused on investigating how career aspirations, peer influence, parental aspirations and careers counselling advice, guidance and information could all play a part in helping students to make an informed choice in choosing a qualification. O'Leary argues that it is important to 'narrow and clarify until your

question is as concise and well-articulated as possible' (ibid, p.34). Furthermore, the answers from my three research questions would ultimately affect a student's progression on to a successful career as an adult. In order to address the research questions, the most appropriate approach had to be taken as the choice of using specific research methods is no longer an ideological matter, but rather a rational choice with respect to the subject of investigation, (Glaser-Zikuda and Jarvala, 2008).

This thesis will follow the format below and is presented in five chapters. A brief summary of each chapter is also provided below:

Chapter 2: a review of literature relating to previous research on student choice was undertaken looking at the issue of student choice in terms of external and internal factors. This chapter will conclude with a refinement of the research questions.

Chapter 3: this discusses the methodology, ethical considerations and approval, research methods and the reasons for their use, prompted by the research questions. The main research methods used were interviews and questionnaires.

Chapter 4: this chapter analyses and interprets the findings of the methods discussed in the previous chapter. It presents the findings of the questionnaires and interviews from all those who took part in the research. Within this chapter, the interview and questionnaire findings are discussed within the themes identified from the data. This will be linked to the relevant educational context and previous literature reviewed in chapter 2.

Chapter 5 – this concludes the thesis and discusses the implications that arise from it. In this chapter I will also discuss the responses to the research questions, how the research contributes to practice and to theory. In addition, a review of the research process will be considered and suggestions made on what could have been done differently along with suggestions for further research arising from the current research.

### **Research context and setting**

The methods used and the underlying methodological assumptions at the core of any research owe more to the structure of the research questions and the setting of the research than to the ideology of the researcher (Gorard and Taylor, 2004). This was relevant to my research, as I wanted to ensure I provided a secure, rigorous and ethical basis to generate findings regarding how students chose the qualifications at Level 3.

### **Research setting**

The research took place within a single sixth form setting attached to a general Further Education College based in the West Midlands. The college serves a very diverse borough. In 2016, the borough was ranked in the top fifteen of the most deprived local authorities in England out of 326. The sixth form college that is the focus for this research was established in 2012 to provide an A Level or Level 3 qualification offer to local school leavers in a college environment. There are currently 300 year 12 students and 290 year 13 students on the college roll.

The participants I have used in this study all attend a sixth form college. The sixth form offers a broad range of Advanced Level subjects across a range of subject sector areas. The sixth form offers 23 different subjects and six BTEC diploma routes across three subject areas: Business, Science and Health and Social Care. This means that students can be studying a mix of Advanced Levels and Btec diplomas. From September 2016 the sixth form expanded its provision with the introduction of Level 3 Diplomas (two A Level equivalents) in Business and Applied Science to complement the Advanced Level provision. This was in response to national and regional education and training priorities designed to raise the skill profile of the local area. Provision is almost exclusively full-time for those aged 16-18 years, although there are a number of year 14 students who are completing A Levels or diplomas as part of their third year in the sixth form, and these tend to be part-time students. The sample of participants represents a typical cross-section of students. Most of them were taking a mix of vocational courses (BTEC diplomas) and A Levels.

For many of the students who took part in this research they are the first generation in their family to progress into further and higher education. This could mean that they have no 'role models' at home to ask if they are unsure about their future qualifications (Bathmaker, 2001). This could be an important factor in deciding what qualifications to study as life experience is said to influence choices. However, this is assuming that students attend college to gain a qualification and not for the subject they wanted to study or learn about. This is especially important to first generation students and their families where choice is limited by necessity. A 'first-generation' college student is defined as the first person in your immediate family to



attend college. In other words, neither of their parents have completed their education past Level 2: GCSE, CSE or O Level (Pasero, 2020).

Toutkoushian (2020) analysed eight different versions of the term 'first generation'. This research concluded that, across a sample of 7300 students, the number of students who could be defined as first-generation ranged from 22 per cent to 77 per cent. Choices for more affluent communities are shaped and sustained by social reproduction and resources (Reay and Ball, 1998). While first generation students are often academically skilled, navigating college policies, procedures, jargon, and expectations can be a challenge when you have no immediate family experience to draw on.

Over the last few years, more students have been entering university as the first in their family. According to the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), thirty-four per cent of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2016-17 academic year. An additional twenty-eight per cent of undergraduates had parents with at least some college experience but not a bachelor's degree. If students do not have parental knowledge then they get less support and may make more mistakes. This makes it all the more important to ensure that students are offered the best advice possible when it comes to choosing future qualifications and the impact it can have on changing lives and setting directions for the future.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have given a brief overview of the context of each chapter. I have outlined the background to the study and the themes that are emerging as having

major impact on qualification choice. I have also explained the rationale for the study and indicated why I was interested in this field and the challenges I faced and overcome along the way. The choices students draw upon to make an informed decision about their future qualifications are complex. This is a complex choice because there are so many different dimensions that need prioritising. These could include location and travel to an institution, which combination of qualifications they offer and recommendations received from various sources, for example older students they might know. I have argued that more support and knowledge is needed to help understand the different qualifications and combinations available at Level 3. I have suggested that this need should be addressed earlier on in a students' academic career rather than being addressed in year eleven when often it is considered to be too late. An assumption that students will turn to alternative methods of advice was emerging from the key themes in the analysis. Before moving on to discuss the methodology I have used in more detail, the next chapter will evaluate the literature related to the field of study. I feel that there is a strong consensus in education that we need to do more to offer students a clear pathway to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to succeed at work and to enable access to choices about a future career. A young person should be helped to know where their talents and true potential lie and understand how this might translate into a fruitful and vibrant career (Russell, 2019). The crisis in information, advice and guidance across education provision should not be ignored any longer.

## **Chapter 2. The Literature Review**

The introductory part of this chapter highlights the decisions that students must make when they are at the end of Key Stage 4, for example, whether, or not, to continue in education and if they decide to continue, what their options are regarding studying at Level 3. Decision-making processes that students may employ when in this situation are then discussed based on the literature relevant to this topic. Part of the interpretive process of this research project involved determining which themes were 'key' in qualification selection. This will be followed up later, alongside my use of a mixed methods approach as I draw upon views from the data sampled. The aim of this literature review is not just to focus on the reasons for selecting the qualifications, but also how they are chosen, why the students chose them and what the implications for choosing certain qualifications might be. The current research is also drawing on the framework used by Helmsley-Brown (2019) who suggests that students, when making decisions, have a 'preliminary search' stage and a 'refined search' stage.

### **2.1 Choices at sixteen – academic or vocational futures**

This study includes research into common themes related to choice at sixteen including the options available, both traditionally and in the present. While a wide variety of qualifications are available after year 11, students are also required to narrow their focus to study a smaller number of areas, with some students purely focusing on one subject area. One example is Health and Social Care. Students' decisions about which qualifications to take will be influenced by the institution at which they decide to study. Each institution may offer a different range of

qualifications and students will have to decide to remain at their current school sixth form or change school, attend a further education college, find employment, take an apprenticeship or find an independent sixth form college.

It is important to understand what motivates students to choose certain qualifications as opposed to others. When students are expected to make choices about future qualifications they wish to study, it could be argued that it would be reasonable to expect that students would have all the relevant information needed to allow them to make an informed choice. The Oxford English Dictionary defines choice as 'preferential determination between things proposed'. Matthews and Hansen (2005, p71) summarise that 'real choice means that students have options and alternatives'. Therefore, the definition can be thought of as having two aspects to it. The first is the idea of having alternatives and the second is that of having a preference. Wright (2020) highlights the issue of the terminology due to the use of the term 'decisions' or 'choice'. While discussing why students choose particular educational trajectories, she highlights the problem as the 'concept of decision' is commonly used in research literature, and is often elided with the concept of choice. However, it is rejected in this thesis because the experience of many 16-19-year olds does not seem to tally with the degree of agency and rationality as implied by this term. This thesis uses the term 'choices' because this allows for the influence of external factors (structural, institutional, other individuals). However, a student may gather information and weigh up options, but 'fall' into what they end up doing due to circumstances beyond their control. To understand how a student makes a choice to study a particular qualification, the qualification choices available and the influences involved in choosing a qualification need to be examined. To achieve this, a useful starting point

for understanding the motivations and aspirations given by students making their choices are the reasons given by the students (their voice). This relates to the literature on voice or choices as research has shown that student contributions to matters around educational reform significantly improve the intended outcomes for students (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). However, giving any participants their voice in research can often be a contested concept. Instead, hearing their views and providing an opportunity to be listened to and heard is considered a better option.

The raising of the participation age in England means that students have to be in some form of study or training until at least the age of 18. The Nuffield Review has researched when students actually start making choices about different pathways. The review found that many students had already decided by the age of 14, and those who chose academic routes chose earlier than those who chose vocational routes (Wright, 2020). The main consideration when making post-16 choices is about finding the right fit for each student so they end up somewhere they will thrive (Payne, 2003). To achieve this guidance is crucial to support motivated, smart career-choices as this prevents early leaving from education (Atkins, 2008). Also, students can be identified and engaged with, especially the ones at risk of early leaving. It can be particularly useful in helping prepare students for transitions from school to further education, to continue successfully on their pathway or to find a new one (Atkins, 2016). By giving students choice it empowers them to become more involved in their education, and can reengage students who may have been previously disengaged.

The five main themes, which are at the core of my research, are parental expectations; peer influence; the role and use of social media; careers counselling, advice and guidance; and career aspirations. These became organised themes for the literature review arising from the iterative process of the research. Although broader literature was read, what is included in the literature review is based on the movement between reading, gathering data, re-reading, analysis and the final selection of what is included in this thesis. This means that the literature used in this literature review is selective but more directly related to the data.

In addition, I also examined how career aspirations can be influenced by teacher expectations and lack of understanding around the slippery concept of a 'career'. Our careers are the way that we build a pathway through our life. Krauss (2010) cites the importance of finding the right career early in life to achieve personal fulfilment at work. Learning and work are often the things we identify ourselves mostly by. The qualifications we choose to study at Key Stage 3 and 4 can have one of the biggest influences on our future career pathways and how we connect to the labour market. Recruiters often write job advertisements that specify that a certain qualification is needed or is desirable for a job (Main, 2020). Over the last few decades, the time it takes students to move from education to employment has steadily lengthened while the number of pathways has grown and become more complex (Mann, 2017). Because of this, it is more important than ever to provide students with education, information and other forms of support to help them make the transitions and correct qualification choices. It is important to consider which qualifications are available depending on local provision. Many institutions have streamlined or narrowed subject choices for a certain demographic of student. This has included the removal of A Levels and Arts courses from many FE providers, including sixth forms and sixth form colleges, which now predominantly offer the same vocational courses.

Our chosen careers are essential to our own wellbeing and to how effectively we can function in society. People usually underestimate the importance of their careers on their over-all health and well-being. People who are happy in their careers are twice as likely to thrive in other aspects of their lives as well (Rath, 2019). However, choosing a career can be an intimidating task (Knowles, 2019). Although, for many people, they may have fallen into their job by chance. Sometimes people fall into a job either out of desperation, or because of following a family member or, because it was the only thing someone offered after leaving college or university. Yet, given the importance of 'our careers', it seems strange that many people spend very little time thinking about them and choosing carefully the qualifications they need. Payne (2013) defines a career as 'the part of life that is concerned with employment'. However, more modern definitions argue that this definition does not fully capture the meaning of a career. Kelly (2019) argues that a more appropriate definition of the term 'career' as the sum total of decisions that direct your educational, social, economic, political, and spiritual endeavors and reflect your unique personality characteristics and basic life values. While some people seem to know what they want to do from an early age and end up in satisfying careers without giving it much thought, many people end up choosing careers or selecting them for the wrong reasons. People will often choose a career that seems secure or pays well, then ultimately become unhappy in their careers (Wilson, 2014). Therefore, it is important to have quality provision that provides choice, realistic job opportunities, career development and ultimately enables local economies to grow and individuals to progress (Moogan, 2016).

I have realised over my years in education that schools and colleges devote very little time to careers advice and explaining the different qualification routes available. However, it is important to be mindful of funding issues that often impact on services which can be offered in education. Watts (1996) suggests that the availability of career development services, and their nature, are strongly dependent on public policy. Most such services are funded, directly or indirectly, by governments, whether at national, regional or local level. In 2010, the government decided to terminate the annual £200 million funding allocation for the national network of Connexions centres (a dedicated careers guidance service for young people), shifting the statutory duty from local authorities to individual schools to secure independent careers guidance for all students in Years 8 through 13 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Watts (2013) argued that the Government's decision to wind up the Connexions career service, and replace it with a duty for schools to provide careers guidance, but without providing any funding, has left young people with completely inadequate careers advice. It could be suggested that the careers service declined after funding was slashed (and/or withdrawn). This has been argued by many as being the biggest change in policy in 40 years and was intensely debated (Career Development Institute, 2015). Since then, widespread concern has been voiced (e.g. from Ofsted, the National Careers Council and the Education Select Committee) regarding the consistency of provision, as schools have struggled to meet the new requirements without additional funding. In particular, concerns have focused on how the termination of careers funding and transfer of responsibility to schools and teachers to deliver careers guidance has led to a decline in the quantity and quality of career guidance for young people (Acquh,2016). A survey of 1,500 careers advisors in English secondary schools conducted in 2012 noted reduced



careers advice provision in 80% of schools, with one school dramatically switching from 65 days of careers advice to just 16 days following the closure of Connexions (Careers England, 2012).

Much of the evidence that will be discussed later in this chapter strongly suggests that careers education and guidance can make a difference, but that students often prefer to seek advice from non-conventional sources. The more you stop and question students on career issues, and why they wish to study the qualifications they have chosen, the more and more complexity and shades of grey you will find (Hughes, 2017).

Within this literature review the terms 'academic' and 'vocational' will be referred to so it is important to try to have a clear understanding of how these terms can be defined. The terms 'academic' and 'vocational' qualifications are now commonplace within further education and are used on a daily basis when it comes to looking at prospectuses or designing study programmes. However, if you ask any student what the actual difference is between the two they often have very little idea. Definitions of the term 'vocational' were largely focussed on 'practical' and 'skills', with many young people also using the term 'hands-on' (Bathmaker, 2001). Even today in 2020, defining vocational education is not easy or simple. Part of the issue according to Crossley (2019) stems from the attempts to articulate a distinction between 'academic' and 'vocational'. Bernard (2019) suggests that there is a difference in the way academic and vocational qualifications are viewed. Academic qualifications are often viewed as being more 'elite' compared to vocational qualifications. In this thesis the term 'academic' will be used to describe a qualification based on theory.

Whereas, 'vocational' is used to describe training in practical skills with the intention of using them to move into employment. However, there is no consensus around what vocational education is for and so definitions can vary widely. The term 'vocational education' is now used interchangeably with 'technical' or 'professional' education (Rampersaud, 2019). The language of 'vocational' and 'academic' is confusing because nowadays they are not distinct in a way previously thought.

Vocational qualifications generally serve one of two broad purposes. Some enable access to a specific job or occupation, whereas others are broader and enable access to a number of different occupations within a sector – either directly or via university (Stokes, 2019). Yet, many of the so-called 'academic' programmes can also be very practical (as in Sport A Level). Many 'non-academic' courses are extremely challenging in terms of memory, examinations and theory (for example, horticulture). Sport and Horticulture are both academic and vocational and both can lead to apprenticeships, vocational learning and employment. Therefore, I feel it is important, before going further into the actual reasons for choosing different qualifications, to have a clearer definition in mind of what the two terms mean and how they came about. Finding a definition of the terms 'academic' and 'vocational' education, which does not confuse both parents and children (and many teachers), has been a controversial issue within the British education system for many years. The words used to define the two terms often lead to preconceived ideas about the perceived 'worth' and 'value' of the qualifications.

The vocational qualifications landscape is complex. Firstly, due to the sheer volume of qualifications – because there are numerous different jobs, many of which overlap, and qualifications, as well as jobs, have evolved over many years (Atkins, 2016).

However, these choices have always been relative, as in the past few people had choices. One of the objectives of Curriculum 2000 was to increase the breadth of the curriculum followed by 16-19-year olds. This new curriculum has had a major impact upon students' choice of subjects. This affects both their futures and the supply of educated and trained people to society (Blenkinsop, 2006). Therefore, it is important to understand these choices and the reasons for them. Choices have ranged from purely academic qualifications, like traditional Advanced Levels (A Levels) to more modern vocational qualifications, which are often viewed as being lower in status. However, there is an overemphasis on academic routes, and other routes are seen as second-rate. Vocational education is valuable in its own right and 'right' for many young people in a way that traditional academic education might not be. There still remain significant barriers to overcome to ensure that vocational qualifications may not be seen as second rate (Silver, 2019). The issue of parity of esteem and equal standing between academic and vocational qualifications is long standing. There is still a common misconception that vocational education is only for students who cannot make it in academic education, are at risk of disengagement or are 'good with their hands' (Bathmaker, 2001). The work by Roberts (2004) is also key when discussing the possible reasons why vocational qualifications have not gained equal status to A Levels in the United Kingdom. Roberts compared the cultural and historical reasons for this between the UK and Germany and concluded that although the United Kingdom offered a variety of routes to vocational qualifications or competences, such qualifications were far less standardised than in Germany. This would lead to fewer numbers for each qualification and implications in terms of careers advice and guidance that could be given. This could mean there is a difference in the quality of advice and guidance being given leading to which

confusion for the young people involved. However, despite these findings by Roberts the number of students studying for vocational qualifications has increased in the last decade from 66,000 in 2013 to more than 700,000 students in 2016 studying full time (Edexcel, 2020).

In spite of a number of views over decades, little has changed and the qualification system for eighteen year-olds has continued to be dominated by the so-called 'gold standard' of 'GCSE Advanced' Levels (Stewart, 2014). The first A Level exams took place in 1951 and were described as an academic system of progression for a small, elite group, mainly from grammar schools, who would go on to a fairly small group of universities (McCulloch, 2015). A Levels are called the gold standard because they are regarded as being high quality and respectable. However, this is only a metaphor. Carlisle (2016) argued that A Levels do not meet the needs of modern sixth formers and are increasingly looking like a qualification from another era. A Levels are seen as outdated in today's education system and could be replaced with a European-style baccalaureate which includes 'softer skills' such as team work and time management. Education today ideally should be aiming for pathways that can reflect and cater for the true diversity of modern learners. Ideally moving from two routes to many pathways (Baker, 2013). A study commissioned by the publishers Pearson suggested that all qualifications should cover English, Mathematics, Languages, Science and Technology as well as other skills such as teamwork and a compulsory extended project. A-levels are 'too narrow', and are failing to properly reward pupils with flair and are promoting a system of 'learning to the test' (Paton, 2017). Sixth formers are specialising in subjects too early and it is suggested by Paton that a Baccalaureate-style qualification of five, rather than three

subjects would allow more breadth. The Wolf report concluded that students were making serious decisions on academic and vocational qualifications at too young an age. Wolf goes on further to conclude that at the age of 14, students are already making choices that will have an impact on the rest of their education, and their careers.

Compared to academic routes, vocational qualifications are often considered to be inferior within society (Atkins, 2019). These reforms have still not created a parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications or even possibly begun to neutralise the negative perceptions of vocational qualifications. The debates around the key issue of parity of esteem have a long history and can be dated back at least 150 years. For example, the Taunton Commission, 1868 (Whitehead, 1929). This debate has been well documented more recently: for example, Bailey (2013). Bailey (2010) suggests that the difference between vocational and academic provision owes its origins to the distinction between grammar school, which offered academic qualifications, and secondary technical schools/secondary modern schools which offered vocational qualifications. However, government initiatives in recent years have sought to address the issue of parity of esteem. It is possible to argue that the failure to address the issue of parity of esteem is, at least in part, due to a perception among policy-makers that it is vocational qualifications which are in need of change, and this leads to a particular policy approach. For example, the debate surrounding 'parity of esteem' formed the focus of the 2002 Green Paper 14-19: 'Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards'. This paper inferred that to have parity with one another, qualifications should have equal academic rigour. However, Robinson (2017) describes parity of esteem as a 'myth', suggesting that there can be no parity

of esteem in education because there is no parity of esteem in the labour market. Previously, McCulloch (2015) had argued that the issues surrounding parity of esteem are too deep rooted to be overcome. To try to overcome this issue of parity of esteem the 'Baker Clause' made it compulsory for schools and colleges to inform students about technical options post-16 (Association of School and College Leaders, 2017). The Baker Clause was introduced as an amendment to the Technical and Further Education Act, 2017, stipulating that schools must allow colleges and training providers access to every student in Years 8 to 13 to discuss vocational routes that are available to them. Many colleges have called for the clause to be better enforced.

Although there has been rapid growth in students studying for vocational qualifications, there are negative connotations about these from a previous era. There were sometimes strong class distinctions made between people who undertook academic study and those who followed the route of taking more practical skills (Irwin, 2012). These do not help the public perception of vocational qualifications. To improve perceptions of these qualifications new government initiatives were commended by politicians intending to combat the disparities between the academic and vocational education routes. New government policy has envisaged that raising the perceived quality of vocational education and training, particularly at Level 3, will help where comparisons are made with the 'gold standard' of A Level. The aim of this would result in a greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic education addressing the issues surrounding inequality. However, there was previously criticism by academics, for example Cohen et al., (2008) and Bowes (2015) who felt that the choice between academic and vocational

courses made the curriculum narrow and divisive. Bates (1984) criticised the new qualifications, for example, National Diplomas, as being forms of preparation for unemployment, rather than preparation for meaningful work. Although, this research is from the 1980s, it is important to still consider it. During this time, there were reforms and debates about the distinctions between academic and vocational qualifications, which are ongoing. This negative perception has deeply embedded cultural and historical roots as a result of the class structure (Payne, 2013). The argument about the distinctions between academic and vocational qualifications shows how deeply embedded the perceptions of class structure are.

Even when some vocational qualifications are seen as being of high status, craft and trade qualifications are perceived as low status. These are often achieved part time and result in lower earnings for the individual than academic qualifications, although, currently plumbers earn far more than lecturers do when the hourly rate of pay is taken into consideration. Robertson (2017) using data on an individual's highest qualification found that the financial returns from academic qualifications are higher than for vocational qualifications. Vocational qualifications are associated with programmes which impart valuable lifelong skills necessary for employment (Wolf, 2011). Despite the popularity of vocational qualifications, the majority of young people within this sector are often 'overlooked' when it comes to comparable earnings (Hodgson, 2018). Currently, the common features of vocational courses are associated with applied learning and reduced examinations. A recent study found that graduates could expect to earn £500,000 more over a lifetime in employment than a non-graduate (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Although this argument could be said to be about having a degree as opposed to not having one, it could be

used to suggest that all vocational work does not have degrees, and that degrees are only given for academic work. An example of this is nursing where you can only access the nursing profession if you hold a degree. Jobseekers without a degree could earn up to £12,000 less than their graduate peers entering the job market. Even when society places a higher status on some vocational occupations, for example nursing and teaching qualifications, these are not fully valued, recognised or well paid (Kotler, 2014). However, this is not always true because an Air Traffic Controller could earn £41,300 a year and the minimum requirement is five GCSEs. However, it is important not to confuse earnings with qualifications, as earnings relate to the market as well as professional practice. According to government statistics, graduates and postgraduates continue to have higher employment rates and are more likely to work in highly skilled jobs than non-graduates (Anderson, 2015). A problem with Anderson's research is that it is distinguishing between graduates and non-graduates and is not considering the fact that some graduates may have graduated in a vocational qualification like engineering.

A number of factors can be identified as having created this wide distinction, negative perception and attitude towards vocational qualifications. These include reputation, understanding and relevance (Ryrie, 2014). Wright (2020) had argued that subjective attitudes and perceptions play a very important role in student's decision-making. Wright goes on to argue that it is through these subjective attitudes that aspects of class, gender, ethnicity, education and labour market opportunities play a role in deciding which qualification to study. These social factors have an impact on the decision-making process and are considered especially important when choosing progression routes ((Diamond *et al.*, 2014)).



In addition, attitudes have sadly not kept up with the pace of change regarding vocational qualifications, and they remain the poor relation of academic attainment (Skills Commission, 2014). Vocational qualifications are still regarded by many to be a form of preparation for particular low-level roles in the workplace (Macrae, 2017). However, many educators often view the more modern applied vocational qualifications (T Levels and BTEC) as 'hard' or more difficult, as they combine both practical and academic examinations along with a high percentage of the course being based around work placements. The aim of these new qualifications is however to prepare students for careers, not just jobs, which will themselves change enormously during the lifetime of a career (Colley, 2013). The new qualifications offered from September 2016 were reformed by the Government to introduce units assessed by external examinations, which now account for up to fifty per cent of courses. These changes have resulted in 'incredibly hard' qualifications, which are focussing on exam skills rather than involving real-life vocational situations (Moyhian, 2017, p.12).

Vocational and academic qualifications were seen as separate within post-16 education and it is only in recent years that both vocational and academic pathways have been able to combine to form a mixed programme of study. Although BTEC style qualifications have been around since 1984, previously they were always studied as full eighteen-unit diplomas and could not be combined with other subjects. Changes in curricula, however, now mean there is a wider choice of courses for 16-18-year-olds, than there has ever been (Gove, 2017). This view by Gove is rather an over-generalisation. Bombarding students with numerous options is not always a good thing without providing high quality advice and guidance. Often, at sixteen, a

student will have no idea what they want to do for future career plans so they may well make a swift decision without understanding alternative choices. This can be detrimental for students because considering a career is an enormous decision. Many students do not know what career they want at the age of sixteen. Even as adults we often have no idea what we really want to do with the rest of our lives, let alone having to decide at fourteen when GCSE choices are made. Many teachers now feel the curriculum has become so narrow that there is in fact less choice. This view held by teachers contradicts Gove's generalised statement. We now have a curriculum so narrow that both pupils and teachers are disengaged from it (Harris, 2019).

One of the hardest (but possibly the most important) decisions facing a student aiming for university or employment is whether to apply for an 'academic' course, or a 'vocational' one. However, a common stereotype often expressed by parents and many students is the misconception that people who have academic qualifications will have more opportunities than those with vocational style qualifications.

'Academic' courses are thought to keep career options open much longer, including nearly all those accessible through the vocational route (Hufton, 2020). Many students also feel safer choosing a qualification, often A Levels, as the content bears some relation to their GCSEs, or to select a subject which is their 'best' (or at least favourite) subject, even when their grades do not suggest this. This may influence students to rule out choosing to study a vocational qualification as they have preconceived ideas about the value and societal attractiveness of such qualifications. Historically, there has been some concern over grade inflation and the level of preparedness for higher education among students from vocational

backgrounds (Powercube, 2018). In addition, research has found that students from vocational backgrounds are not always as well prepared as they could be for some university courses. There can be mismatch in terms of subject matter and the skills required, particularly when the course contains a scientific or mathematical component (Bathmaker, 2001). Undertaking vocational qualifications may lead to limited gains in terms of pay, and lead to low skill work with few or no opportunities for career progress (Keep, 2009). In addition, when it comes to finding work, vocational training is often valued more than academic qualifications. For example, employers constantly complain that academic qualifications have not prepared the student for the world of work. Part of being prepared for the modern world is being prepared for the modern workplace. The CBI Education and Skills annual report (2018) *Educating for the Modern World*, which represents 28,000 employers, found forty-four per cent felt young people leaving school, college or university were not work ready. Compared with A-levels or a degree, an apprenticeship, NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) or BTEC qualifications are seen as the route for the less able. This stereotype could be explained by students from vocational backgrounds as they are less likely to study at high tariff institutions, for example, red brick universities. This is likely to be explained by factors such as: higher tariff institutions offering a larger proportion of courses that are not suitable for students from a vocational background; and vocational students being reluctant to apply (Chalaman, 2018).

However, Bol and Werhorst using data from 29 countries including the United Kingdom, studied the impact of vocational qualifications on employment opportunities (Bol and Werhorst, 2013). They found that countries which enabled 16-

19-year olds to study for highly specific vocational qualifications while in post-16 education had much lower rates of youth employment than countries who encouraged solely academic qualifications. Employers who say that they would prefer someone who has skills that are more relevant and candidates who are 'employment-ready' also support this view. A report published by Pearson (2017) questioned 344 companies, focusing on graduate recruitment and the challenges related to school leavers, apprentices and recent graduates. The report found that three quarters of businesses were looking to increase the number of highly skilled jobs. However, sixty-one per cent feared they would not be able to fulfil these vacancies because graduates often had the academic skills but lacked other skills required for the business world. These skills included cultural and customer awareness, which cannot be learnt entirely from studying. Many business leaders were saying that too many school leavers and graduates are leaving education with lots of technical skills and academic knowledge, but absolutely no life or 'soft' skills (Chalaman, 2018). On-the-job vocational learning would fulfil the needs of both the employer and employee, but still seems less valued in the United Kingdom than the rest of Europe. However, less than a third of students aged 16-19 in the United Kingdom enrol on vocational courses. This is far below the fifty per cent for the rest of the European Union. This is due to how vocational qualifications are judged in the United Kingdom. Whilst the number of students attending universities with vocational qualifications has increased in recent years, these students still face obstacles when applying to university (Stokes, 2019). In 2019, the acceptance rate for students with A levels was 89 per cent compared to 83 per cent for students with BTECs (UCAS, 2019). One explanation argued for the lower acceptance rates of BTEC students could be the qualification itself (Bathmaker, 2001). In recent years, there has been

some criticism of BTECs, often centering on grade inflation. There has been a large increase in the proportion of BTEC students obtaining the top grades since 2005, whereas the proportion receiving top A level grades has remained consistent. In 2017/18, 38 per cent of students studying BTECs received top grades compared to less than 20 per cent of those studying A Levels. However, research by London Economics (2018) found that students who obtained a degree having previously studied a BTEC were more likely to be employed post-graduation than students who went down the more traditional route of A Level and degree. The research also suggested that, within certain industries and regions, there is a wage premium associated with the BTEC route of degree acquisition, showing the importance of this vocational route.

Academic qualifications can often be defined as being based around subjects that are more traditional. These include for example: Mathematics, Science, Geography, History, and English Literature. These are all subjects favoured by the Russell Group of universities and are often called 'facilitating subjects' as they are leading to further study within higher education rather than as an entry route for employment.

Admissions processes are already going through changes to widen participation, and in recent years there has been an increase in the number of universities using contextualised admissions. This is where the student's background and circumstances are considered alongside their applications (Gicheva, 2018). It is hoped in the future that Applied General and A Levels will both be within the academic route following the introduction of the post-16 skills plan and therefore, in the long-term, should be treated equally by admissions (Petrie, 2019). Admission

equality would mean that a student who meets the entry criteria for their chosen course is not assessed based on the type of qualification they have obtained. Sharpe (2016) observed that Russell Group universities have a focus on research and a reputation for high academic achievement. Gaining a top-class honours degree from a Russell Group university is suggested by Sharpe to open up some doors into competitive careers.

Academic qualifications normally take two years to complete within a school, college or sixth form environment. However, vocational qualifications are based on national standards for various occupations, and cover the practical, work-related tasks designed to help learners do a job effectively.

The Wolf Report (2011) used a relevant working definition of vocational education. First, the report states that it refers only to provision for 14-19-year olds, secondly, that such provision is highly regulated. Thirdly, it contains clear vocational content and referencing, and finally that it is about qualifications.

14-19 is a highly regulated phase of education dominated by formal qualifications; and regulators currently require that at these levels, qualifications other than GCSEs, A levels, iGCSEs and the IB incorporate clear vocational content and referencing. This rule usefully delineates the scope of this enquiry as involving, at a minimum, any such qualifications delivered to 14-19-year olds, and all young people on courses leading to them. (Wolf, 2011, p24).

However, it is important to remember that apprenticeships are not always about gaining an actual qualification; instead, they often focus on learning skills needed within certain employments. For example, research by The Business Skills and Innovation Council into the effectiveness of apprenticeships (2020) found that

in terms of some 'softer' impacts, there is clear evidence of the impact of apprenticeships in raising aspiration, with a large majority (82 per cent) of current and former apprentices agreeing that the apprenticeship had made them more enthusiastic about learning, and over three quarters (77 per cent) feeling that they had a better idea where they were going with their career. Wolf (2011) stated that the staple offer for between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort is a diet of low-level qualifications, most of which have little or no labour market value. In addition, another criticism of the Wolf report is that vocational qualifications are not just aimed at 14-19 years olds but also adult learners and can incorporate a wide range of provision with very different purposes and outcomes. We have never, in this country, adopted an official definition. In this study, I use a working definition of the term 'vocational education'. 'Vocational' means courses leading to qualifications, which are designed to give learners of any age the skills and knowledge to do a particular job, work in a particular industry, or acquire more general skills to do a variety of jobs. Or, simply defined, vocational education is used to describe non-academic paths, to avoid confusion over the terminology given to the introduction of 'T Levels' and the 'technical route'.

## **2.2 Difficulties with transitions and decision making at sixteen**

This section explores the individual difficulties of sixteen year olds in how they make extremely important life choices and start to focus on the support they need.

Students are often not engaged in thinking about different career options because the task appears to be difficult. They are confronted with lots of information and little way to make sense of it, which leads to choice overload. However, it is important not to take this as a generalisation as sometimes students get little information at school.

The perceptions of regular changes to qualifications and the choices offered to students becomes clearer when the Wolf Report notes that:

'Education reform of the last thirty years is littered with qualification reforms, of which perhaps two have been genuinely successful, and many others an expensive failure'. (Wolf, 2011, p145).

In the middle of these continuous reforms students have had to make choices about progression routes and qualifications, hoping that they make the appropriate choices that will lead them onto the desired educational or career route. For example, external assessments were introduced in 2016 to BTEC qualifications in a bid to drive up rigour and credibility and most BTEC subjects have at least one written examination. Given the changes occurring within the education system it is important to ensure that students are well informed of the options available to them. At the age of 14, students are already making choices that will have an impact on the rest of their education, and their careers. The Russell Group of universities has issued guidance on what subjects students should be choosing at GCSE if they plan to attend one of their universities. This shows that the Russell Group of universities is openly acknowledging that choices start at 14 and that students need to be better prepared and more knowledgeable about the options on offer to them (Russell Group, 2011).

### **2.3 Who influences the decision –what support is offered, where does it come from and when does it start?**

Students within the English education system are entitled to access a careers education programme. This is designed to help them become more aware of options available, provide better information about opportunities and how to evaluate



information, and to make decisions about further qualifications or employment opportunities.

Before the 2010 Election, the Skills Commission published a report into Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), and concluded that, 'IAG is not accessible and it is often not of high quality' (Skills Commission, 2008 p19). It was from this report that it was recommended that the Government should place a statutory duty upon all learning providers to ensure IAG support for all learners to 18. In December 2017 the Government published its new careers strategy, setting out a long-term plan to build a world class careers system that will help young people and adults choose the career or qualifications that are right for them. Our careers provision must be world class to help people understand the range of opportunities available to them in today's economy and acquire the skills and qualifications they need to succeed in the workplaces of the future (Milton, 2017). This statutory guidance has recently been updated to expand on the aim set out in the strategy to make sure that all young people in secondary school get a programme of advice and guidance that is stable, structured and delivered by individuals with the right skills and experience. To achieve this aim, the careers strategy sets out that every school and academy providing secondary education should use the Gatsby Charitable Foundation's Benchmarks to develop and improve their careers provision (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). The careers strategy states that every school needs a Careers Leader who has the skills and commitment, and backing from their senior leadership team, to deliver the careers programme across all eight Gatsby Benchmarks. Every school was expected to name this Careers Leader and publish contact details on their website from September 2018. Every student should have opportunities for

personal guidance interviews with a qualified careers adviser whenever significant study or career choices are being made. The Government's expectation is that every pupil should have at least one such interview by the age of 16, and the opportunity for a further interview by the age of 18. The institution should integrate this guidance within the pastoral system so that personal careers interviews can be followed up by the form tutors or their equivalent. This shows that there is a recognition that strong IAG is a critical part of enabling real choice for students.

The literature available suggests many factors which influence students. For example, advice from parents and teachers and careers advisors can be identified as influencing qualification choice. Research in education has typically explored the potential influence of reference groups such as parents, teachers and peers in terms of their influence on qualification choice. This idea suggests that 'significant others' strongly influence qualification choice (Middleton and Loughhead, 2017). In terms of parental or carer influence, research has indicated that socio-economic status and parental or carer educational background influences students' selection of a qualification (Pearson and Dellman-Jenkins, 2017). However, previous research suggests that the most significant influence on choice of qualification appears to be parental encouragement and various family structure variables, for example if a family has completed a similar qualification (Pearson and Dellman-Jenkins, 2017). A number of studies across a range of countries has shown that parental or carer influence has been significant in affecting a secondary school pupil's decision to pursue a certain qualification. For example, if a parent or carer was an accountant, the student was likely to pick A Level Accounting or Business and Accounting (McDowall *et al.*, 2012). This finding was supported by the earlier work of Auyeung

and Sands (1997) and more recently Philips and Sewell (2019). However, one question that has arisen as a matter of concern from these findings is whether reference groups (particularly parents or carers) are sufficiently well informed to provide specific career guidance to enable an informed choice about a qualification to be made.

This debate over who or what has the most impact on career choice includes the suggestion that young people are motivated to strive, whether consciously or not, towards a career goal (Adler, 1957). Although this was over sixty years ago much of the early research by Adler is still relevant today. Young people do have the ability to make autonomous decisions but their identity and career development are influenced by many sociological factors, for example, household income, which are out of their control. There is also significant research examining how students' personalities, thought processes and preferred problem-solving strategies can influence their career decision making and how their personality can affect these choices (Rahaman, 2014; Riaz, Riaz and Baton, 2012). Harren (1979) identified three decision-making styles in career decision-making: rational, avoidant and dependent. Students who have a rational mindset will take a more active and planned approach to decision making, often starting to think about which qualifications they wish to study from an early age. These students are said to take a systematic approach and to gather all the information before making a decision. Students with a more dependent personality style tend to transfer the responsibility for choice to external sources rather than make an informed decision on their own. Hodkinson's work (1998) suggests that much decision-making by young people is, in reality, based on a 'pragmatic rationality'. It can be opportunistic, partially intuitive,

based on incomplete information and very much influenced by local context. However, Gati and Amir (2010) argued that students today might be described more accurately as using a combination of approaches in qualification decision-making, partly as they are encouraged to question and evaluate things as part of their studies.

A second factor, which is identified in the literature as a key theme to qualification choice, is the 'snobbery' or 'stigma' which still surrounds how vocational qualifications are viewed, or the value placed upon them. Often the only qualifications a parent sometimes expects a young person to consider are 'A Levels' as these are viewed as 'better' courses (McInerney, 2014). She suggests that Britain's education system still treats vocational subjects as second best. However, the view that vocational qualifications are viewed as second best within the world of academia is not the view held by employers. When employers, for example, Business and Law firms were interviewed, more than a third valued vocational and academic qualifications equally. In addition, three-quarters of businesses either preferred young recruits to have both academic and vocational qualifications or valued both without a preference (CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey, 2015). However, this negative view identified by McInerney (2014) is reinforced by the British Government who recently downgraded the value of vocational diplomas at GCSE from five GCSEs to one. A typical example of this is the Level Two Engineering Diploma. Qualifications like the one mentioned used to allow students to gain the equivalent of a number of GCSEs – sometimes as many as six. This would then count towards a school's league table results. However, the government reforms mean that such courses will only count as one GCSE, despite the fact that

they occupy far more curriculum time than, for example, a History GCSE. Schools will be less likely to recommend qualifications that they cannot count in results tables, meaning that impartial advice may not always be given (Gilbert, 2015).

To encourage students to choose to study vocational courses teachers, parents and government officials need to see them as equal to academic education. McInerney (2014) says that we need to show as much respect for young people whose skills secure them an apprenticeship as those who win a place at university. Until the message is changed 'at the top' this stereotype will never be altered, meaning that those with the 'top' GCSE grades will always be made to feel that vocational courses are to be frowned upon.

To try to overcome this biased view the government has recently announced a new law which will stop schools telling pupils that only academic qualifications such as A Levels and university degrees are worth applying for. The Technical and Further Education Act (2017) came into force in January 2018. This new law requires the head teachers of all schools and academies to ensure that there is an opportunity for a range of education and training providers for all students to access this service in years 8 to 13. The purpose of this is to inform them about approved technical education qualifications or apprenticeships. This has mainly come about following concern that careers advisers in schools were not advising pupils correctly about the highly skilled and well-paid jobs in engineering and manufacturing industries. Instead, they are still recommending 'white collar' employment to the top ability sets. This was supported by Dunne (2017) who found that low attaining pupils were often provided with alternative curricular programmes either in specific subjects or through

a comprehensive vocational programme that included parts of the week outside the school in college or work-based placements. In research across three countries, Hufton (2020) noted that motivation to choose a future qualification was associated with vocational aspirations rather than academic performance, such that lower attaining groups can focus on areas of relative strength that might be better recognised by subsequent potential employers.

Evidence suggests that parents and carers are also reinforcing the view by influencing qualification choice based around the potential extrinsic rewards, for example potential salary, prestige and in some instances, opportunities for career progression, rather than encouraging qualifications to be chosen because of intrinsic interest (Jackling and Keneley, 2019). This view has been overlooked for too long. In some state schools, unless pupils are in the top sets, they have been discouraged from taking certain academic subjects at GCSE (Adams, 2015). This new law is an important step in encouraging more students to consider apprenticeships, which are vital for addressing the skills issues, which face the UK now (Fuller and Unwin, 2016). If schools give pupils the impression that technical and professional education and apprenticeships are 'second best' to academic study and university, this is not giving the young person a chance to make an unbiased decision. Young people must have the opportunity to develop a proper understanding of the choice process. This is crucial and will allow appropriate advice and guidance about the available qualification options to be given. The consequences of making wrong career choices need also to be considered. A decision made at sixteen, is not necessarily a career decision for life. The likelihood is that role and career decision-making for an adult in the twenty-first century will be a regular feature during an increasingly

unpredictable lifetime: 'a personal journey through an assortment of opportunities that includes learning, work and career breaks, both planned and unplanned' (Department for Education, 2014). However, in reality, many low-skilled people are trapped in those choices, particularly so because funding for adult education has been reduced. According to the Association of Colleges (AoC 2020), adult education and training provision could disappear completely if cuts continue at the same rate as they have in recent years, with courses in the health, public services and care sectors expected to be hit hardest by next year's cuts, with the loss of 40,000 course places expected in those areas alone (Whittaker, 2020). This shows, especially for those who do not select a 'traditional' pathway of GCSEs and A Levels, just how important impartial advice from schools and colleges is in making successful transitional pathways.

### **Peer Influence**

A third theme which is identified as playing a key role in how students choose their qualifications is peer influence. Previously, it was thought a major factor influencing subject choice was because of the strong influence parents or carers frequently held. It was thought that students turn to their parents for careers advice long before they seek the opinion of a teacher or careers adviser (Hooley, 2018). However, recent research says otherwise. Another factor, according to Harris (1977), is that an individual's peer group plays a significant influence in their choice of qualifications and young people will often select subjects just to be with their friends. However, research that is more recent has found that peer influence has little effect on subject choice. Instead, students were often influenced in their decision to study a subject by their own self-perceptions of their ability at a subject and how much they enjoyed it.

One of the emerging researchers in this field is Poldin (2015) who conducted large-scale research studies on undergraduates within British universities. Poldin observed that peer and friendship groups have little influence over subject choice after GCSE, as the main deciding factor for studying comes from external factors, such as courses offered by the institution. The choices of qualifications offered post-16 are not fixed and are influenced by the element of supply and demand (Eliza, 2006). Colleges are also often constrained in their ability to offer some courses and subjects, notably because of difficulties to recruit teachers in these subjects. They will also not wish to use funding offering courses only a few students would like to study.

Another external factor, which can influence qualification choice, is socio-economic status. It would be reasonable to assume that financial considerations can deter many young people in the lowest income brackets from staying on in education (Legard, Woodfield and White, 2001). The number of young people living in poverty in the UK has increased from 2.3 million for 2013/14 to around 3.9 million for 2016/17 (DWP, 2016) and Breslin (2016) highlights the importance of improving the attainment of disadvantaged students. Sammons, Toth and Sylva (2015) suggest that students who live in poor neighbourhoods are less likely to go on to Level 3 courses at a sixth form than those who live in areas that are more affluent. Hemsley-Brown (1999) described how a young person's choice of which qualifications to study post-16 was influenced by the social class of the students currently at a certain institution. Evidence suggests that pre-16 courses do influence post-16 decision-making (Golden, 2015). This also further emphasises the need for clear and accurate guidance relating to possible progression routes for students. Research by The Social Mobility Foundation (2018) found that this segregation of post-16



education by background has risen slightly since 2013. In 2016, young people who received free school meals, a measure of disadvantage, were 21.2 per cent more likely to attend a Further Education college than those not eligible for free school meals, up from 20.6 per cent in 2013. This shift is the result of more advantaged students concentrating in school sixth forms. This is an important point to consider as many Further Education colleges no longer offer traditional academic qualifications, for example Kidderminster College and Solihull College no longer offer A Levels. This can limit the choice of qualifications due to reduced breadth in the curriculum on offer.

Another impact is that many Further Education colleges have had funding reduced so have had to make cut backs in other areas. Reductions in extra-curricular activities such as sport, music and drama, and educational visits have implications for social mobility, particularly when it comes to university applications. A report published by The Sixth Form College Association (2017) found that two thirds of colleges and sixth forms had to cut extra-curricular activities and student support services due to funding cuts for 16-19-year olds. Disadvantaged students will be unlikely to get these opportunities outside school, and therefore cutting these provisions is likely to increase the gap in entry to selective universities between disadvantaged and more advantaged students. Disadvantaged students are also less likely to be able to access good careers advice and more likely to be leaving education at age 18, meaning this is a crucial age for quality advice and guidance to help shape students' future careers (Burke, 2018).

## **Gender influence**

Another theme that comes under the umbrella of peer influence on qualification choice is the gender of the student. Gender differences play a role in qualification choice, with perceived subject appropriateness or gender stereotypes affecting decisions. Despite attempts to break down gender barriers as a means of raising aspirations and widening participation, evidence suggests that gender divisions and perceptions of what is, or is not, appropriate work have remained relatively unchanged over time (Ainley, 2018). Recent studies have focused on how subject choice can be influenced by the gender balance with a peer group. Literature in the field of subject choice indicates that gender and ability biases exist in students' choices of subjects. Although Wikeley and Stables (1999) suggested that gender preconceptions have diminished, there is still evidence that they are present when students consider which subjects to study. There is also quite a substantial gender divide in some subjects, with Health and Social Care or Health Studies, Drama and Art being more popular among girls and Sports Science, Business and Science being more popular among boys. Brown (2015) suggested that gender differences in subject choice become more accentuated in post-16 education and these differences are greater at A Level than at GCSE. Girls' most popular qualification choices are English, Biology and Art, while boys choose to study Maths, Psychology, Design Technology, and Media, Film and Television Studies. However, DfES data (2019) states that still today boys are more likely to take a STEM subject at A Level, with the exception of Biology; 26 per cent of males compared to 34 per cent females.

. In 2013, girls were found to be more likely to base their decision on whether to study a subject based on the proportion of females studying that subject (Kiss, 2013). It is plausible to imagine that boys could choose subjects based on the

gender make-up of the group and may change course accordingly. Additionally, the different subject choices made by boys and girls may be more marked and have greater longer-term outcomes in terms of subsequent career choices than attainment differences. However, this qualification choice in post-16 education does not make sense in Higher Education as more women than men are in medical schools.

Lambert (2019) has observed that over the past 30 years the proportion of women attending medical schools has steadily risen. In 2002-3, all UK medical schools had more female students than male, with the percentage of women exceeding 65 per cent in some. This partly reflects the increasing number of women applying for medical courses and their increasing examination success in science.

The gender imbalance in various professions, for example nursing has long been a cause for concern. Part of the problem stems from the fact that girls and young women are more likely to choose to study some subjects at both school and university than boys and young men (Smith, 2018). However, with the advent of the National Curriculum and both males and females studying all subjects to age fourteen there should be no reason to still have subjects favoured by certain genders unless these have been influenced during primary socialisation. For example, boys wanting to do nursing but being told when they were younger by their parents or carers that this was not a 'job for a boy'. Despite years of progress on equal pay between men and women there is still a clear 'gender pay gap' and large areas of the labour market remain segregated into 'men's work' and 'women's work'. Students inevitably notice this and it helps to shape their career thinking and the qualifications they wish to study. Students who view male and female gender stereotypes in very traditional, class-based terms will not consider courses or careers that they perceive

to be inappropriate to their gender (Colley, 2013). This means a male may not consider choosing childcare as it could be seen as 'women's work'. This has significant implications for students' choices, as it is a powerful influencing factor in qualification decision making. This is further supported in statistics published by the leading examination boards. Exam board entries at Key Stage 4 for certain subjects show a clear gender divide. The percentage of A Level Physics students who are girls has stayed at around twenty per cent for the past 20 years (AQA, 2016). This has led many to believe that expectations of students are often gender stereotyped. Applying this to my own institution all the Science and Mathematics staff are male, with the exception of the Biology teacher. This can be applied across the teaching profession as a whole in the United Kingdom. Research by the Department for Education (2019) found that women made up 75.6 per cent of the teaching workforce, an increase from 73 per cent in 2017. Girls were less likely to study a subject if the teacher was male and more likely to take the subject if the teacher was female (Adey and Biddulph, 2011). This further suggests that an enjoyment of a subject does not always drive qualification subject choice. Research has shown that girls were almost two and a half times more likely to go on to do A Level Chemistry or Physics if they come from a Girls' School rather than a Co-Educational School (Murphy, 2015). Maybe the lack of female role models plays a bigger role in qualification choice than originally thought as the 'girls into science' debate has tried to show. To encourage this The Athena Swan Charter (2005) was established to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). According to a recent study seventy-three per cent of female university students did not plan to pursue a career in STEM. Just thirty-seven per cent were confident they would have the skills

needed for employers, compared to almost sixty-six per cent of male students. Females even at under graduate level still view STEM subjects as being a 'male domain' (Eaton-Cardone, 2017).

### **Household income**

In a supposedly unbiased education system, regardless of class and gender, it is important to consider if the lack of equal opportunities influences qualification choice. Household income affects education choices and is identified as one of the main factors which determines qualification choice and career pathways. There are large, statistically significant, differences in the parental education and household income levels between those that remain in school compared to those that drop out of education (Shea, 2017). Worryingly, the literature is showing that the more deprived a student's background, the more likely they are to opt for a vocational course over an academic one and have lower aspirations (Lahno and Serra-Garcia, 2015). Students are often aware of the influence that class plays in their career opportunities and the inequalities associated with this (Skeggs, 2017).

### **Family background**

Family background (class or economic background) has been identified as a predictor for academic progress and a strong association exists between income deprivation and achievement across all subjects from the age of eleven (Anders, 2012). The United Kingdom is one of the countries in the world where the socio-economic background of a student appears to have the largest influence on

students' performance and this is reflected in the United Kingdom's PISA test scores (OECD, 2018). The socio-economic background of a school also has a strong effect on whether students go on to study traditional academic subjects or vocational qualifications, as they think certain types of qualifications are not for 'the likes of them' (Kennedy Report, 1997, p2). The Kennedy report goes on further to suggest that it is further education which has invariably given second chances to those who were forced by necessity to make unfulfilling choices. It said 'try again' to those who were labelled as failures and who had decided education was not for the likes of them.

While some teachers appear to be attempting to change students, instead, it might be suggested that teachers should value and give voice to who students are. They could be more concerned to transform schooling; to provide educational opportunities that transform the life experiences and open up opportunities for all young people, especially those disadvantaged by poverty and marginalised by difference (Mills, 2008). Research into social class suggests that students at less prestigious schools or who are low achieving academically (both groups will largely consist of working-class students) will tend to be directed towards vocational education (Haywood, 2018). Thus, they do not really have a choice about which qualification to study. This goes back to the question of what makes something vocational, or does it relate to the person's intentions and what they are using the qualification for? For example, if a student is directed into vocational or academic study do they really have a choice of qualification or is it more dependent on how good they are and why they want to do it?

A student's choice of which college to attend after age sixteen is influenced by the social class of the students there (Helmsley-Brown, 2019). Independent schools are four times more likely to have students go on to study A Levels compared to schools with a high percentage of children on free school meals (Lord, 2016). However, this could be influenced by the fact that many independent schools have sixth forms attached which offer predominately A Level or IB (International Baccalaureate) subjects while many colleges of Further Education no longer offer A Levels, instead preferring to specialise in vocational courses. Although it could also be more likely that independent schools tend to be selective on earlier ability and wealth. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation (2014) argued that, there is no single 'magic bullet' for finding the answer to how to best advise students on their qualification choices; it is about doing a number of things and offering a range of choices to suit individual needs and preferences. The opportunity to meet with and talk to someone currently studying at Level 3 can often engage and inspire young people to study for a similar qualification. It can also have the reverse effect and put them off (Andrews, 2011). However, at least this helps students make a choice because choosing not to do something is still a choice after all. The lack of guidance available is certainly having a detrimental effect on young people.

#### **2.4 The lost generation – NEET students**

Not all young people make a successful transition into post-compulsory education, training or work, and so end up being labelled as NEET ('not in education, employment or training'). Well over a third of young people leave the education system altogether after the age of sixteen (National Audit Office, 2017). The use of the term 'post-compulsory' education may no longer be considered appropriate. This

is because of the raising of the 'Participant Age' in September 2013 to 17 and then 18 in 2015, where all 16-19-year-old students are expected to participate in at least part-time education even if they are in employment (National Audit Office, 2017).

From the Summer of 2013, all educational institutions, were required to inform the local authority if a young person had dropped out of learning. This is to ensure that the person can be contacted swiftly and offered support to reengage in education or training (Department for Education, 2019). Due to these changes, it could be argued that this is putting increased pressure on providers of post-16 education, to offer students courses that may not be suitable. However, the benefits to the economy of increasing the number of learners qualified at Level 3 include substantial returns to wages and tax revenues, and vocational qualifications also help to increase business productivity (Pember, 2019). Another issue faced in England, is the help that is available from guidance services, which has been significantly diminished by funding cuts to services and local government authorities (Watts, 2013). Watts goes on to suggest that the £200 million in funding for career guidance has not been transferred from Connexions to schools: it has been allowed to disappear. This means that once students are out of education they often become forgotten. In 2018, thirteen per cent of sixteen to eighteen-year olds were classed as NEET. This figure has not changed significantly since 2006. Even in 2013 when the school leaving age was increased from sixteen to eighteen, making it compulsory for students to be in full or part time education until the age of eighteen, this figure has not changed (Clarke *et al.*, 2015).

This might question that the days of when students aged 16-19 were at college because they wanted to be there are beginning to disappear.



For the purpose of this study 'post-compulsory' education will refer to any education over the age of 16. It is against this background that successive governments have acted to try to increase the number of students in post-16 education. There is a consensus that policy reform, which includes a combination of policies and interventions that follow students through their education, is more effective than reforms which target specific groups of students. If done effectively this strategy can promote equality of opportunity for individuals when it comes to choosing qualifications (Johnson and Kossykh, 2018). Since the early 1980s there has been the implementation of various policies and legislation that appear to be aimed at tackling youth unemployment, offering a greater variety of different types of qualifications, increasing attainment and the numbers who continue their education after the age of 16. A new report by a coalition of organisations specialising in youth unemployment and training, including the Institute of Employment Studies, the Association of Colleges and the Learning and Work Institute (2020), states that everyone leaving education this year should be guaranteed support to find work or a place in education or training. This should include intensive employment support for all unemployed young people. This report might be important (in advance of an FE White Paper promised for some time), and demonstrates how lobby groups like these are trying to influence choice making at sixteen. Therefore, it is important to help students make informed choices about progression routes that are available to them.

## **2.5 Implications for research planning**

This chapter has drawn on literature, for example, policy documents, government and committee reports, and articles on careers guidance. Academic ability is an

important determinant in qualification choice, given that most A Level courses generally require a high level of GCSE achievement as a prerequisite. However, this is not always the case because vocational courses do not always require such a high entrance level compared to academic courses. However, concerns associated with previous attainment are still an area for discussion. While students with vocational qualifications often meet the Level 3 entry requirements, there can be problems when looking at their performance at Level 2. Students from these backgrounds can fall short of the requirement to hold five A\*- C grades including Maths and English. This view supports previous Social Market Foundation research which found that not achieving five A\*- C grades at GCSE increases the likelihood that a student will take a BTEC by almost 200 per cent (Social Market Foundation, 2016). There are still students with strong examination results who choose to pursue a vocational route. For example, to study Level 3 Hospitality and Catering at a local sixth form requires five GCSE grades at grade 4 which must include Maths and English at grade 4. This is higher than the entry requirements if a student wishes to study A Levels in Sociology, Health and Social Care and Politics at the same college. It also demonstrates the confusion students have in selecting the qualifications they wish to study. The challenges about understanding the difference between whether a qualification is viewed as being academic or vocational could have an impact on what they choose to study. The confusions and challenges have identified the need for further research to explore the reasons students choose to study their qualifications post GCSE. This dilemma has highlighted the gaps in the literature which have so far been identified in this literature review. If students are clear about what they are choosing they may make fewer mistakes. This dilemma has arisen and shows a need for clear and transparent information about entry requirements

and opportunities available once Level 3 qualifications have been completed. Who you are as a person at the age of sixteen, is not who you will be in the future. The education and recruitment system needs to give young people space and time to make an informed decision about the right qualifications, which in turn will have a positive impact on career choices. This has become the main theme of my research.

My literature review suggests that students make choices in different ways depending on their individual characters, meaning that choice making is both individual and varied. Students' preferences when making their qualification selection shows that they make their choices depending on several different reasons. These choices are shaped by numerous factors (such as personal enjoyment and perceived usefulness of the subject) and structural factors (such as the school's provision and ethos, and teaching styles). I aimed, through my research, to demonstrate the importance of informed choice rather than just being given detailed information. This forms the argument that although policy makers keep talking about everyone having better information, it is not just about information but guidance and help to use it. This is a key point in my research and relates to the third research question, '*What are the main implications for the choices that students make for education policy?*'

Choices over which qualifications to study or career ambitions have become more complex due to rapid social and technological changes, economic uncertainty and instability (Giddens, 1991). The idea of 'risk of feeling' comes from a well-known study by Loewenstein (2001) which highlights the effects of particular feelings at the time of decision-making. In the presence of risks and uncertainties, Loewenstein

argued, decision-making is not purely a cognitive process of clearly thinking through options but is constrained by a person's current beliefs. Instead, feelings and emotions interact with the thought process of decision-making and result in irrational thought. This causes the choices available to individuals to be influenced by their emotional feeling at the time. This evidence has implications for students' subject choice. First, the emotional state of the student at the time of choosing subjects can influence the choices made. For example, how information is marketed to students may influence students' feelings and therefore their choices. Second, 'vivid outcomes' may influence the students' decision-making process. For example, the chance of becoming a top footballer or singer may make sport or drama seem more attractive. A career in science may seem less glamorous and appealing. This demonstrates the influence that social media and popular television programmes have on influencing qualification choice. Students are bombarded all the time by the internet and social media sites and this has the potential to influence their thinking. Sometimes this might help young people to realise the dreams that these programmes have inspired. At other times it might provide misinformation. Television is full of dramas and comedies about hospitals and various kinds of reality shows. However, the more students are exposed to this kind of television the more they are influenced unrealistically. Students should be advised to view these as, at best, as a very shallow source of careers information in a critical way. This is even truer of 'reality' shows which students are often inclined to trust more (Holland, 2009).

A report commissioned in the United Kingdom by UCAS (2016) interviewed one thousand 16-19-year olds and found many were using their favourite television shows to direct them down one career path or another. The most popular

programmes watched by 16-19-year olds focus on the personal and work lives of police officers, lawyers and medics. For example, *One Born Every Minute* or *Judge Rinder* (Anderson, 2015). Further research by Heritage (2017) found that fifty per cent of medical students chose their career after watching episodes of *Casualty*. This is also supported by university applications to study paramedic science, which has risen by forty-five per cent after an increase in programmes shown following the daily life of a paramedic (UCAS, 2016). This shows how important the media can be in influencing career choice rather than teachers or careers advisors. Individuals who watch these programmes were significantly more likely to choose career paths and courses based around the regular viewing of these programmes. This research highlights the key role television can have in inspiring young people with career choice and aspirations. Over three thousand students about to leave school were surveyed about their future career choice and who helped them to make a decision. Twenty per cent reported their choice of career was based on a television role model rather than any professional advice (Fletcher Report, 2017). However, the end result is that young people often have a worldview that may not lead them to make the best decisions about their future.

## **Summary**

This chapter has summarised the literature before and during the current research and has determined what questions are trying to be answered and therefore what methods are needed. I have attempted to make clear the broad array of qualifications on offer to students, and to describe the choices currently made in England by students. Given the changes occurring within the education system we need to ensure that students are well informed about the options available to them.

Well informed advice should involve more than just simply being given information, it should include advice, guidance and importantly discussions as well. The current provision of careers advice is often viewed as 'patchy' and this can be to the detriment of disadvantaged students. In December 2017, the Department for Education published its Careers Strategy. It could be suggested that when implemented this strategy might ensure that students are informed of all routes available. This informed advice could include guidance as well as realistic advice. It is important that the route from technical or vocational education to higher education is not ignored.

The above literature helps to support the view of this research about how important it is to assist students with understanding the decision-making process so they can ensure they have the opportunity to study the qualifications that will best help with their career progress. The aim of the literature was to discuss choice-making. In broader terms, I wanted to explore how students attending full time programmes of study chose their current Level 3 qualifications.

More particularly, I wanted to give a voice to the students and relate their opinions to improving the experience surrounding qualification choice. The idea that professional practices such as education should be based upon or at least be informed by evidence has become influential in education research for many years (Biesta, 2010).

Considering all the above, I proposed the following central research question:

**What are the main factors that influence students' decisions to study their current Level 3 qualifications?**

This central research question considers and is also based on the following sub-research questions:

**What are the main reasons given as to why students choose to study their current qualifications?**

**Who or what are the main influences on choice of Level 3 qualifications amongst those aged 16-19 years?**

**What are the implications for the choices that students make for education policy?**

The first section of the chapter organised the literature around the themes that emerged from the detailed analysis that took place after the data collection. The second part of the chapter reviewed the literature around the concept of why students turn to certain people for help, for example, teachers, parents, older siblings and careers advisors for help and support. In the next chapter this thesis will discuss methodology and the methods used for data collection and analysis.

## Chapter 3. Methodology, methods and data collection

### Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodology and research methods used in data collection within this research. Wellington (2000) defines methodology as the activity of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you are planning on using.

Firstly, the methodological approach will be described and then the research methods, and then move to discuss the research procedures for data collection and ethical issues. I also endeavoured to discuss my own subjectivity and how I overcame the notion of being an insider researcher. As Gill noted, knowing who you are is of far more lasting value than wondering what you are. What you are is what's left when you have cleared away everything else (Gill, 2016). In my view, this is important, as many students do not know what they fully want to do in their life. We cannot have young people ignorant of what is available or unable to make choices that are good for them (Anson, 2016). Throughout this whole process, when interviewing students, it is important to listen intently to what they are saying. They should feel they have 'a voice'. This is important to me and will be explored further in this chapter, for as Smith (2018) suggests, giving a 'voice' to students is a way of showing their views will be valued and they are not merely subjects of educational research but potential 'agents of change'. This will help them to feel they are participating in the decision-making process and can gain the right information to make a sensible informed choice, instead of often apparently being influenced by factors without good evidence to support them. Often, the most interesting and successful adults were frequently judged as the school failures, the weird ones, the



unconventional ones who chose a different path in their education and followed no-one (Gill, 2016).

### **3.1 Methodology**

Research is concerned with understanding the world, and how we understand the world is informed by how we perceive the world around us. However, Glaser (1978) suggested that researchers should not read the literature before entering a field of study. Glaser thought that researchers will 'contaminate' the data with their existing understandings. Research that takes place within educational settings often falls into one of three approaches. The first being based on scientific and positivistic methodologies. The second arising from naturalistic and interpretive methodologies. Thirdly, there are methodologies from critical theory (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Individuals have long tried to study and make sense of the world around them on a social and a physical level. Often the worlds of psychology, sociology and philosophy are drawn upon for inspiration and as a framework to seek answers and search for knowledge. However, it is important to remember 'these worlds' are really only ways of perceiving knowledge in a certain way. To clarify the answers in the search for 'truth', individuals draw upon their reasoning skills, prior experience and their own values and beliefs. In order to fully appreciate the underlying assumptions a researcher may make in seeking to gain 'truth', it is recommended to consider taking a controlled or systematic approach to explaining their chosen beliefs (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Taking a controlled or systematic approach will mean the research will produce credible information and robust knowledge about a topic. Yet, the issue of 'common sense' is often a concept in human behaviour that is overlooked. Common sense forms the underpinning framework in helping people to form an idea, justify a decision or make

links from one hypothesis to another in a causal manner. Common sense is a contentious issue meaning different things to different people (Pring, 2000). In other words, people's emotional reactions and judgements can influence their decisions. This is important in my view as a student may choose to study a subject based on how they feel about the teacher, or a subject on a particular day. It was common for students to state that they primarily based their decisions on whether or not they enjoyed, or thought they would enjoy certain subjects (Adley and Biddulph 2011).

In the final section of the chapter, I aimed to consider the ontological and epistemological assumptions I have that influenced my particular methodological approach. Crotty (1998) suggests that each of the different epistemological positions leads to a particular theoretical perspective for the researcher. This could be favouring the positivist, interpretivist or following critical theory. Ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these, in turn, give rise to methodological considerations; and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). To relate this to my own research, I selected a particular view of reality I wished to follow, selected an appropriate epistemological approach, which was beneficial for my research, and then used a logical methodological data collection technique.

In modern 'academic social science' research, two main purposes exist. First, to evaluate existing knowledge and theory and second, research which is aimed at improving or explaining social conditions by changing public policy or exploring it. In my research, I used the term 'academic research' to describe research that is not practical, but more theoretical. However, there is nothing as practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1943). Research should have value within the practitioner's

environment to enhance practice in some way (McCrone, 2015). I aimed to ensure that my research has a purpose. While research cannot predict the future, it can help us act more intelligently (Dewey, 1929). Pring argues that for quality to exist in educational research it must be relevant to practitioners and be capable of 'tentative generalisation' (2000, p120). I wanted my research to improve the guidance young people have when it comes to making qualification choices. Research should be done not for the sake of getting a publication or recognition; it should be done for the betterment of society and to show innovation in a particular field (Feduvol, 2016). Good research also adds knowledge to the world and theory and is useful in how we speculate about new phenomena. It is also important to make sure research is not just based on 'common sense'. While this may help to form links in a person's mind, causing them to make a general assumption based on a hunch or little evidence, it is not controlled or systematic in any way. Good research should aim to produce and collect evidence systematically and test findings empirically (Jarvis, 2003). Empirical research is based on observed phenomena and derives knowledge from actual experience rather than theory or belief. Empiricism combines experience and reasoning to help interpret everyday situations. I have applied this to my research as I have looked at the complex range of factors involved in experiences students have when it comes to choosing qualifications.

Another key area to consider was my ontological view. Having a clear identification of ontology at the start of any research is critically important as in my view it helps determine the choice and justification of my research design. Ontology is the way we understand ourselves and the assumptions we apply to our understanding of the phenomena that we observe. Ontology is a system of belief that reflects an interpretation by an individual about what constitutes a fact (Bryman, 2012).

Ontology is associated with central questions of whether social entities should be perceived as objective or subjective. Within my ontological viewpoint objectivism (or positivism) and subjectivism (also known as constructionism or interpretivism) needed to be considered. Objectivism portrays the position that social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence (Blaine, 2010). On the contrary, constructionism can be defined as an ontological position, which asserts that social actors are continually accomplishing social phenomena and their meanings (Saunders, 2014). This view is more relevant to my research as I was more concerned with young people having control over their situation and how they can be helped to accomplish the choices they make. Rather than as suggested by the objectivist view point that it is seen as independent of them and out of their control.

In explaining the different approaches used to make sense of the world, researchers have found it useful to identify ideologies which promote different beliefs about how reality is perceived and interpreted. The most widely referred to were Idealism, Realism, Naturalism and Pragmatism. Although, these are often seen as broad terms, it is possible to make smaller distinctions to allow them to be split into categories, thus meaning a multi-layered approach can be adopted (Scott, 2003). These categories then formed the building blocks for explaining specific traditions within research (Bailey, 2013). Although I have focused on many of the traditional concepts used in research, I felt these were outdated and did not support the real ethos behind my research. Aristotle believed that reality is shaped by the world around us and our perceptions are of little importance. However, we cannot separate reality from our own agency to make sense of the world and our subsequent choice (Shields, 2016). I wanted the young people to be at the centre of my research and

for their views to be heard. Also, the perceptions they had about why they had chosen a particular qualification to be considered, not ignored. For me, it was vital to understand the experience of my participants and 'the meaning they made of that experience' (Seidman, 1991, p3).

### **3.2 Researcher Positionality**

All researchers approach research with their own particular world view and opinions. In this section, I discuss the issues surrounding positionality, why it is considered important and the place it has within research, as well as the possible difficulties it creates, before reflecting on my own positionality in relation to this research topic. 'Positionality' is derived from experiences and events which impact upon an individual and it is difficult to consider their 'position' outside of this lived experience. Takacs (2002) challenges researchers to consider their own positionality, as well as to develop empathy for the position of others. He argues that the quest for social justice within research requires the opening of minds to the perspectives of others and to an understanding of how we are positioned in relation to others.

Historically, the quest for objective 'value-free' research was considered to be the role of the scientific researcher (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Wellington states that it is now generally accepted that the researcher in educational research is the key 'instrument' (2000, p.41). A researcher impacts on the social world and the position that the researcher adopts affects all aspects of the research process. It is vital that researchers consider and acknowledge their own positionality, reflecting before, during, and after research, on the possible impact on their work. Such a reflexive position, if not contained, however, runs the risk of becoming a self-indulgent confession (Wellington, 2000). I considered my positionality throughout my

research, presenting the elements I believe the reader requires to consider my standpoint. My background, current role in education and interests directly influenced the way that I conceived and conducted this study. My desire to make a difference to the lives of students I work with and to challenge unfairness wherever I come across it, means that I have to be careful that my own prejudices and beliefs regarding the choices students have do not go unchallenged. In considering the boundaries of my study, and to help with the desire for validity, I have tried to be clear about my role within this research, when arranging and conducting the interviews, and in the writing up of the analysis. Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

To manage any bias in my own research and to ensure it was authentic, trustworthy and credible, I kept a set of reflexive notes for my own personal use. These notes allowed me to record my thoughts, ideas and key experiences which I could use to reflect on my biases. This then allowed me to reflect on how my background, cultural environment and personal experiences may have influenced the way I conducted my research. This also allowed me to reflect on how and what I could do differently and what I had learnt from the research process, and the results that came from it.

Being a Psychology and Sociology graduate has a large bearing on my methodology and fundamental beliefs about the how the world is structured and organised and the most appropriate methods to attempt to capture and explain it. As argued by Sikes:

The way in which researchers are biographically situated, the consequent perspectives they hold and the assumptions which inform the sense they make of the world, inevitably have implications for their research related understandings, beliefs and values, for the research paradigms they feel most comfortable with, and thereby for their research practice (2004, p.18).

I approach educational research from a psychological and sociological position. I believe that psychological and sociological perspectives provide effective frameworks for insightful and critical discussion, exploration and challenge of key issues, and have the potential to provide answers and stimulate additional questions. I place a higher value on qualitative over quantitative research methods, believing that qualitative approaches can uncover and illuminate the social construction of situations and roles adopted by participants. I endeavour to reflect systematically and critically to produce a trustworthy and insightful exploration of the factors which influence qualification choice and suggestions for future policy and practice.

At the start of my research, I was sure I was going to follow the positivist paradigm. However, as my research progressed I became more open to interpretivism. I realised how important the participants' views of the world were as these were integral to how I conducted my research. It is possible that post-positivists think they can blend numerical and qualitative data. While positivists believe that the researcher and the researched person are independent of each other, post-positivists accept that theories, background, knowledge and values of the researcher can influence what is observed. Post-positivism, as Willis (2007) describes is a milder form of positivism that follows the same principles but allows more interaction between the researcher and their research participants. It uses additional methods such as survey research and qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant observation (Creswell, 2008).

I wanted detailed personal responses on the 'real' reasons students chose their qualifications, not merely a superficial reason. I felt this is important to have considered in my research as I was not an outside researcher, I am a lecturer and a personal tutor and I was investigating my own field of practice. I was working with students who knew me and I often taught, so it is important I was not influenced by personal feelings or prior knowledge about them. These factors would arguably enhance an insider-researcher's approach, as they can bring informal knowledge to the process that an objective positivist could not easily ascertain. Therefore, I also needed to ensure as an insider researcher that I stayed objective by being open and aware of any subjectivities. Loxley and Seery (2008) argued that great care must be taken with insider research to ensure that the researcher's position does not compromise either the researcher or the participants' dignity. If this can be achieved, they assert that:

'in order to generate sufficient trustworthy knowledge from a group, it is both necessary and sufficient that the producers of such accounts are also members of that community' (Loxley and Seery 2008, p22).

### **3.3 Methods**

Having discussed my methodology stance, this section will move on to discuss the research methods I have used. To try to ensure I had the minimum influence over my participants I used a mixed methods approach, combining the use of questionnaires with individual semi-structured interviews. My rationale for using this approach was based around the framework by Creswell and Clark (2006). They recommended that by using two different methods it would enable the researcher to



address the research questions and to place the experiences disclosed by the participants at the heart of the research.

Two rounds of data collection were completed, questionnaires and follow up interviews, which allowed for more depth, focus and clarity. These research methods I felt best satisfied the interests of my research questions and my preferences as a researcher. After critically considering the literature in chapter 2 the research questions were:

- What are the main reasons given as to why students choose to study their current qualifications?
- What or who are the main influences on choice of Level 3 qualifications amongst those aged 16-19 years?
- What can be done to make the process of choosing qualifications less confusing and daunting for students?

Using semi-structured interviews would also help reduce interviewer bias (Mitchell, 2007). By applying interpretive methods, this allowed me to collect narrative and personal views from my participants. This study sought to understand the reasons behind why young people have chosen to study for their current qualifications. The method that seemed most suitable was that of a questionnaire using both open and closed questions. To collect useful information from a sample group, the length, or size, of the questionnaire should be considered, as well as accurately aiming the questionnaire in terms of the questions asked, at the target group to encourage them to relay straightforward information, honest answers and produce standardised data (Denscombe, 2008). A questionnaire can serve as an indicative method with the aim to formulate new theory, especially, where open-ended questions are used to

explore a substantial area (Gill, 2016). As the questionnaire was completed anonymously and independently, this helped to reassure students, thus decreasing the chances of social desirability. Social desirability is a type of response bias that is the tendency of survey respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. By using a questionnaire, it was hoped that any findings would gather data about participant's attitudes, reasons, values and experiences (Bell, 2000). In addition, questionnaires can generate a lot of data in bounded parameters quite quickly. This allowed me to draw on how experiences from students influenced their qualification choice and the reasons behind these choices. However, Saunders (2014) describes the limitations of questionnaires as they fail to explain the underlying reasons for outcomes and also limit the 'voice' of the participants I aimed to hear. To overcome this, I decided not to use questionnaires alone, but to take a mixed methods approach and combine questionnaires with, for instance, interviews to further explore reasons for qualification choice. Researchers are now increasingly turning to mixed-methods techniques to expand the scope and improve the analytic power of their studies (Sandelowski, 2000).

Mixed methods is an approach that combines different research methods into one study in order to provide a broader perspective. The combined use of these techniques will inevitably be informed by the researcher's position, which shapes what techniques will be used. This will allow a researcher to combine 'stories or voices' with 'numbers', (Ford-Gilboe, 1995). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) noted that blending these methods allows the researcher to focus on the research question, rather than building an external theoretical framework first. Instead of focusing on one type of methodology, mixed methods researchers emphasised the research problem and used all approaches available in order to come to a better

understanding (Bergman, 2008). By using this approach in my research to data collection, the tools used would have complementary strengths and weaknesses when it comes to data interpretation, incorporating elements of both positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Interpretivism is a way of understanding the world but not changing it in any meaningful way (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). I felt I had achieved this by using a mixed approach. Researchers increasingly have used mixed methods techniques to expand the scope of, and deepen their insights from their studies (Sandelowski, 2000).

I will now move on towards how I justified my choice and selection of the methodological approach used in my research.

### **3.4 The use of qualitative or quantitative methods**

The methods I chose to use in my research to gather data consisted of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview as these allowed me to generate a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data. Interviews were seen as a method well suited to the qualitative approach, as they sought to allow the researcher to understand the reality of the interviewee, providing insight into their perspectives. However, as the sample size was small, it would be unrealistic to focus heavily on quantitative methods. These would not be robust enough to allow generalisations to be made to a wider college student population. I hoped by having more of a focus on a qualitative approach it would allow for the rich data from the personal views and perceptions of the students to be at the forefront of the research. Each interview would be used as an analytical tool and categorised to identify key themes. A good interviewer is by necessity also a participant observer (Denzin, 1978). This means the interviewer is participating in the life experiences of a given respondent.

A questionnaire used both qualitative and quantitative methods by using open and closed questions. Using quantitative analysis, I felt I would be able to identify common themes and complete a statistical analysis of trends which occurred, and applying qualitative analysis I was able to focus on feelings and attitudes

Open-ended questions prompted participants to answer with sentences, giving deeper and new insights. Closed-ended questions limited answers but allowed for interpretation using statistical analysis (Farrell, 2016). In order to categorise responses, I completed a frequency count.

I was aware of the bias that could occur if I made the data fit my interests rather than those of the students. In order to see if themes were emerging in the data it seemed that using numbers or looking for frequencies in the data alongside quotations, would be a useful way of avoiding any bias. For example, in doing this it became clear that students often talked to the person they trusted the most rather than the college careers adviser. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest using numbers is a useful strategy for engaging with the data, some, but not all, of the time and allows the researcher to see the general 'drift' of the data. This allowed me as a researcher to check my own assumptions I was gathering from the interviews and then to follow up on emerging themes. The analysis followed an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge, not connected to an existing theoretical framework. Emerging themes could be sought and connections made between them. The results can then be compared to their relationship with literature and the questionnaire and interview data (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Many of the themes I was identifying from the students' interviews were overlapping with the parents' and carers' interviews. Between the two groups, there were similarities in how qualifications were chosen but also

differences on what was viewed as important when choosing qualifications. Ball (2000) highlighted the potential influence of social networks as having a positive or negative impact on qualification choice. They suggested this 'grapevine effect' could be a powerful way in which parents and carers can present control over information and the resulting selective public reputation of an institution. However, it is important to remember that what can be in favour one day may be out of favour the next.

### **3.5 Boundaries and Limitations of the Methods**

There are a number of potential problems with semi-structured interviews, including the skill and confidence of the interviewer (Verma and Mallick, 1999), the possibility that researcher bias enters the interview, particularly with the more fluid nature of the interview schedule (Opie, 2004), and the issue of how to record and how much content to transcribe (Wellington 2000). My approach was to digitally record each interview (with full permission). Wellington provides a list of strengths and weaknesses of tape recording. This approach allowed me to 'concentrate, to maintain eye contact' and to give my attention to the conversation along with preserving the 'natural language', outweighing the potential issues of the amount of data generated and the possibility of the machine causing 'anxiety'. Cousin (2009) discusses the vital role that listening plays in any interview, arguing that the 'best kind of interviewer is said to know how to listen', (p.75). This is a skill I have developed through my professional role and previously interviewing students during their transition interviews from Year 11 to Year 12. The interview schedule allows the discussion to be planned and considered in advance and ensures that I cover a similar range of points within each interview.

The issues and challenges I faced using interviews had been raised during my pilot work. Due to the challenges I faced from my dyslexia and had learnt from my pilot study, I have recorded my interviews using a digital dictaphone and only transcribed parts of the interviews. I then treated my recordings as digital recordings, numbering them carefully.

Although this was a challenge to me, I decided to do interviews instead of questionnaires because I sought the depth that a questionnaire would not give. Transcribing interview data for a 30-minute interview takes at least 2.5 hours for a full transcript. Additionally, a lot of text would be generated – up to 20 pages per interview (Strauss, 1990). My dyslexia influenced me in such a way that I found it impossible to transcribe information and put it in to a meaningful format which would be useful for others to understand. I then used a selective transcription to provide evidence to support my arguments. I had to ensure that by making a selective transcription this did not risk making a judgement at an early stage about the significance of parts omitted (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Using a digital recorder made data transcription easier and prevented any loss. This also enabled me to put a number or mark so that I could locate the quotation again. Listening to the recordings of the interviews, these indicated that I was always prepared to repeat a question for clarification. My initial immersion in the collected data consisted of listening to the tapes as soon as I had completed each interview. This allowed me to check the tapes; note any initial aspects I wished to incorporate into future interviews; identify key points, and reflect on each interview. I intended to produce only partial transcripts of the interviews. Bathmaker (2004) supports this approach, arguing that full transcripts may not always be necessary. In some interviews, I also repeated questions to check the students or parents and carers' understanding of what they

had said. It was also recognised that young people require sufficient time in which to respond to particular questions (Arskey and Knight, 1999).

I did keep notes while conducting the interview, but these were solely for my own purpose and would make no sense to anyone else, because of my dyslexia, and so have not been included in the appendix section. I noted points immediately after completing the interview where the participant made significant pauses in their responses or showed reactions through their body language or facial expressions. This was recommended by Drake *et al.* (2008) and Gibson and Brown (2009) to help me capture the 'big picture' of each interview. My notes included particular parts of the interview I felt would be worth following up and as signposts to indicate where my research was heading next. These were also useful to remind me and allowed me to reflect on any particular issues that had arisen. Regehr (2010) and Mennin (2009) proposed that reflective thinking after interviews could be a powerful tool in educational research as it helps the researcher avoid becoming fixated with any preconceived outcomes. High quality analysis of qualitative data depends on the skill, vision and integrity of the researcher (Pope, 2000).

Having explored the underlying characteristics of qualitative and quantitative research, the following section outlines how the selected methodology was implemented and addressed potential limitations.

### **3.6 Pilot Procedure Application**

The preliminary reading and research that I had carried out already identified some of the areas for investigation I wanted to tackle with my pilot study. One of the main areas I wanted to ensure was that my questionnaire was accurate. To make certain

of this the questionnaire went through two phases of revision in two-stage piloting. In the first phase, the questionnaire was given to a group of five students to evaluate as an exercise in questionnaire design and research methods. These students were all studying Social Science subjects and had been taught research methods as part of their course. This enabled them to look over my questionnaire and to highlight any design faults or misleading, presumptuous or ambiguous questions. The suggestions were included in the second draft of the questionnaire, which was then piloted. The sample consisted of ten students all studying across a range of Level 3 qualifications in Year 12. It was not possible to pilot the questionnaire on Year 13 students as they were on study leave at the time. The participants were given a brief introduction to the purpose of the research and were then asked to complete the questionnaire and ensure they had read the instructions clearly. Once the participants had completed the questionnaire, they were then asked to complete a further feedback form, which I used to rectify any remaining gaps. On the feedback form, the participants were asked:

1. How long did it take you to complete?
2. Were the instructions clear?
3. Were any of the questions unclear or ambiguous? If so, will you say which and why?
4. Did you object to answering any of the questions?
5. In your opinion, has any major topic been omitted?
6. Was the layout of the questionnaire clear and attractive?



Most of the participants took less than ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. Feedback concluded that the layout and structure of the questionnaire was clear and attractive. Van Laerhoven (2004) raised the issue of 'position bias' as the way that information, questions and possible responses are orientated in relation to each other within a questionnaire and how they can influence the responses given.

The only change I made following the pilot study was in the section on why the participants had chosen their current course (which is the most important part of the questionnaire). Instead of writing their 'main reason', some respondents wrote all their reasons for choosing courses. They then went on to state further reasons in response to the question asking for 'other reasons' for what influenced their choice. Subsequently, I made an alteration to the questionnaire which helped respondents to give a more detailed explanation of why they chose to study for their current qualification, by asking them to rank their reasons for choosing.

The other important area, which I considered during my pilot study, were my interview questions, and how I would interpret the responses. It soon became apparent that this would be an impossible task for me and I would need to find other ways to interpret the transcripts or only part transcribe them. The preliminary analysis indicated from completing a pilot study identified a number of potential themes that were emerging:

- Career aspirations
- Peer influence
- Careers, counselling advice, guidance and information
- Parental, carer or family advice
- Media influence

Although these were key themes that emerged, there were differences in emphasis between how reliable and useful these were and how they can affect future provision. Alternatively, as Postmodernists would suggest, the text and the teller of the text, are all entwined. As a researcher I cannot claim to be describing what I have observed. Instead, I have intertwined the themes from the data I have identified (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Completing the pilot study demonstrated the effectiveness of the research tools I would be using. The pilot study also identified the flaws in my questionnaire and interview questions. After appropriate amendments were made they were used in the final research. The pilot study had also provided me with a better understanding of how I would interpret the data and the challenges I faced transcribing interviews. I also felt the practice of conducting pilot interviews would be beneficial to developing my own research skills as I was still lacking in experience and confidence using qualitative methods. This was particularly useful for me, as another benefit for novice researchers is that piloting qualitative approaches can also be carried out if the researcher 'lacks confidence or is a novice, particularly when using the interview technique' (Holloway, 1997, p. 121).

### **3.7 Research procedures**

This section will discuss the research procedures and refer to the ethical considerations that are part of this study. The methods used were selected based on my pilot study findings, which suggested that the combination and interaction of using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (See Appendix 2) could yield

valuable data on students' choices and reasons for studying their current qualifications. Interviews allowed participants to offer their own perceptions and interpretations of the world (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). In total three groups were interviewed. Interviews with the College Vice Principal and a Careers Adviser were also conducted to explore students' reasons for choosing their qualifications and to get their perceptions on post-16 opportunities. This was important in my research, as I wanted to fully understand the logic behind how qualification choice was influenced. Structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are often used in mixed methods studies to generate confirmatory results despite differences in methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Waitman, 2008). This would allow a comprehensive interpretation of the research problem from many perspectives and offered a more complete picture when analysing the results (Cresswell, 2016). Researchers often find that by using triangulation in their research it enhances the validity and reliability of the evidence obtained from the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). To me triangulation referred to my thought process of approaching a problem from a variety of directions.

This allowed me to use research methods to assist me to deal with the challenges I faced when it came to interpreting the data that was collected due to my dyslexia. However, to fully ensure validity and reliability the results depend upon the honest responses and the depth and richness of the data collected. The data itself cannot be valid or invalid. It was the inferences, which were drawn from the data by the researcher and how they were, interpreted which could have the most impact (Hammersley, 1983). The approach to data collection for this research was mainly qualitative, with two main methods, questionnaires and interviews (a total of three sets of interviews) being used. Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006 p49) argue that a

primary focus for qualitative research is for researchers to capture authentically the lived experiences of people. I aimed to achieve this by drawing on the findings I have achieved and formed conclusions on how best to use my research to inform the advice and guidance procedures within my current employment.

Digitally recorded interviews, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, were arranged with:

- One Careers Adviser employed full time within a large Further Education College mainly with students aged 16-19
- Ten students aged 16-19 who were studying for a Level 3 qualification on a full-time basis. The reason only Level 3 students were asked was because in the sixth form college this research was based on the college only offered Level 3 courses, apart from the opportunity to resit GCSE Mathematics. Each student who participated in the interview was given a letter for their parents, which invited them to take part. Five parents replied saying they were willing to take part in the research.
- Five parents or guardians of students studying for Level 3 qualifications. These interviews were conducted so I could explore the importance of parental influence on the decision-making process and so I could triangulate the views of the students with those of their parents or guardians and staff.
- One Vice Principle of the Sixth Form who also taught five hours a week. This was conducted in order to investigate how changes in policy and practice within Further Education could have an impact on the decision-making process.

At the end of the interview, participants had the opportunity if they desired to listen to the digital recording and could have a copy sent to them electronically. The purpose of this was to allow the participants to amend or change anything. However, the only participant who asked to listen to their digital recording was the Careers Advisor because they wanted to clarify a point made about entry requirements for a certain qualification.

The semi-structured interviews allowed me to have greater richness and depth in my findings than purely using questionnaires. For example, by asking open-ended questions it allowed me to get the respondents to elaborate more on their answers and find out why and how they have made their choices regarding the current qualifications they are studying.

The interviewees did have freedom in their responses, but the interviewer can retain some form of control (Drever, 1995). This allowed me to have some control over the questions and the direction the responses were going. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to have freedom in the sequencing and wording of the questions while controlling the direction of the conversation (Robson, 2005). In semi-structured interviews, there is also an expectation that the views of the interviewees would be more freely expressed when the format of the interview is more flexible and open-ended than when the style is regulated and confined to a standard set of questions (Flick, 2002). Although this view is widely known about semi-structured interviews, I aimed in my research to consider themes, which were identified from my pilot study and patterns potentially identified in the questionnaires. Although I had pre-set questions I ensured they were open-ended and were used as a guide to help me keep the interview on track. A good interview should not be without structure (Babbie, 2005).

Another research method used was the survey method of a self-completing questionnaire. This was designed to be completed by students independently and returned to a designated box located within the sixth form common room. My initial thoughts were that the use of an online version of the questionnaire might prove

easier in terms of access and distribution rather than paper copies. However, I discounted this idea due to issues relating to data protection and problems with uploading the questionnaire onto the college's intranet system.

I also ensured, as the questionnaire was to be completed independently, that it was important the questionnaire should look attractive, be easy to answer and appear spacious and interesting (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). I also made sure the questionnaire could be completed via email to allow students with additional learning needs to be able to access the questionnaire using different software programmes. I recognised that the use of self-completion questionnaires would produce problems and these would have to be taken into consideration. One of the main strengths of using questionnaires is practicality. Each individual respondent answers precisely the same questions in the same order; they are all responding to the same stimuli. Any differences in response should, in theory, reflect real differences between respondents. Although, designing questionnaires and completing pilot studies can be time consuming, once in use questionnaires can be used to collect large quantities of data from considerable numbers of people over a relatively short period of time. Although, as this study is only using a small sample, it is important that any research tool is trustworthy and reliable as it may not be possible to make generalisations from such a small sample. Cresswell (2016) argues that all too often researchers are eager to identify usability problems and quickly throw together a questionnaire or interview that when analysed, produces very little of interest. What is often lacking is an understanding of how the research design fits with the research questions.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

To ensure the safety and well-being of all participants, ethical issues were addressed. The research was conducted in line with the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018). This was used as a working framework and shared with the participants. All real names and other identifying features, e.g. the name of the sixth form college, were removed from any documents. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

In order for this research to be conducted permission was sought and fully granted from the college senior management team along with ethics approval from the University of Wolverhampton (October, 2018). In research, it is important to consider:

the personal integrity of the researcher, the interaction with the community studied (students), and the relation to their ethical values is essential (Kvale, 1996, p122).

The issue of confidentiality is highly relevant in research, especially with young people. Protecting interviewees from any repercussions from their comments should be a concern for researchers (Robson, 2005). All participants were asked for their full agreement to participate (involvement was voluntary). Parental permission was also sought for participants under the age of 18 (see appendix section 1 for letters of consent which were sent out). Prior to participation, all participants were told that interviews would be conducted confidentially and reported anonymously. To ensure confidentiality, participants' full names and other identifying factors were removed from any documents. Reporting of participants has been made anonymous and where names have been used, these have been fictitious, in order to protect the confidentiality of all the data collected at an individual level. A factor that had to be considered was presenting findings anonymously, although, this does not guarantee unrecognisability (Pring, 2000). Each participant was given a copy of the informed

consent form (See Appendix 1) at the start of their participation in the study and a copy of the debrief form (See Appendix 3) at the end to retain for their records.

BERA Ethical Guidelines (2011, p5) defines voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which the participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway. Each participant was also given a full verbal explanation of the aims of the study at the start of each interview and before they completed a questionnaire. Golby and Parrot (1999) suggest that the fundamentals of good educational research is 'openness and honesty', with careful monitoring of participant well-being. Golby and Parrott also recommend that researchers make their intentions clear to all participants, including making the results available. All participants who took part were volunteers who gave informed consent at the start of the study and were aware they could withdraw at any time.

Pring (2000) refers to respect for participants and their confidentiality, as well as the pursuit of truth as being an important consideration in all research. However, Pring accepts that these principles may conflict and suggests it is important that participants are aware of these conflicts. Conflicting principles can be mitigated to some extent by ensuring all participants are informed as fully as possible about the potential consequences of the research in which they are involved. Some participants requested more information about the types of question I was likely to ask before the interviews. I was able to provide further information verbally or via email. I recognised this because as I was known to the students; it was a desire for some individuals to have time to think about possible answers to my questions, rather than suspicion or concern about the research study. I was after all their teacher in many cases. Both the careers adviser and principal received a copy of a



report of the initial findings before I completed a detailed analysis of their interviews. No additional comments were raised in response to this.

It is also important that I was aware of any conflict of interest that could occur when using my own students as participants, because I identified myself as an 'insider researcher'. I did not want them to feel they had been coerced to participate. Being an insider researcher was one of the main ethical challenges I faced. This was because I was both a member of teaching staff and a researcher. Smyth and Holian (2009) noted that one of the risks can be participants telling the researcher personal information that they would be unlikely to divulge to an unknown, external researcher. The pre-existing relationship with the researcher results in participants feeling comfortable in disclosing personal information that, given the chance to reflect, they might not have disclosed to an 'outsider' researcher. I had to be aware of the fact that the relationship of authority of the teacher over the students may make it difficult for students to give un-coerced informed consent to participate (Comer, 2009). Even though I clarified the voluntary nature of participation by using an informed consent form, students may nevertheless have felt pressured to participate in order to remain in good standing with me, simply because of the position of authority I occupied as their teacher. When a teacher engages their own students as participants in research studies, they assume double agency (Edwards and Chalmers, 2002) or divided loyalties (Bell, 2000). Students might experience conflicts of interest and threats to ethical principles in the relationship (Lemmens and Singer, 1998). Students, if they refuse to participate, might anticipate possible risks to future relationships with their teacher and fear repercussions, for example, lower

grades. Student motivation to participate might be related to a desire to please their teacher with whom they have positive relationships (Bowman and Whaite, 2003).

Although some researchers might suggest that this situation is inherently unethical, others have asserted that the research process can be managed ethically if the pressure on students to participate can be moderated in some way (Bell and Nutt, 1999; Edwards and Chalmers, 2002) Therefore, I needed to be constantly aware that students may always feel compelled to participate. In spite of reassurances, they may perceive some intangible benefit to participation that does not exist. Students might not feel free to refuse participation despite their concern that such participation is onerous or demanding and might affect their learning (Ferrari and McGowan, 2002). To ensure this, a means of allowing students to withdraw from the study without harm or loss of dignity must be devised and communicated to all students (Burns and Grove, 2001). To mitigate the challenges of researching with my own students I made sure I used a neutral room; had consent forms; allowed opportunities to withdraw; shared the BERA Ethical Guidelines and made the aims of the study clear and transparent.

The interviews took place in a neutral room in the Learning Resource Centre to ensure participants did not feel intimidated by the interviewing being conducted in my own classroom. In addition, the room was set out in a less formal way compared to a traditional classroom and students were used to having mock interviews and attending parental meetings in this room. The room was also less intimidating for parents or guardians as it is more of a traditional meeting room than an academic environment. By conducting the interviews within college premises, the setting would

be familiar to all participants so this would help reduce any undue harm and distress by being in an unfamiliar environment. All interviews were recorded with full consent from the interviewee. Participants in the research were informed that information they provided would be securely stored digitally to prevent access by persons other than the researcher. Paper copies of the questionnaire will be shredded after six months.

## **Summary**

This chapter has considered the methodology, methods and procedures that were used in the study as part of the data collection. I have looked at the challenges I have faced between using quantitative and qualitative methods by using a mixed methods approach. In addition, the strategies I used to overcome my dyslexia during my research journey have been discussed. Pring (2000) refers to the researcher's personal characteristics as honesty, humility, concern for those who participate in the research, as well as intellectual rigor and bravery in their work. Finally, I described the research procedures and referred to ethical considerations and how I overcame difficulties I faced being an 'insider' researcher within my research. The next chapter will describe how the data was analysed and interpreted. Knowledge is provisional and open to revision; and uncertainty is to be explored (Biesta, 2010). The protocols for data collection and analysis developed for questionnaires and interviews may have evolved from differing ways of viewing the world. This makes it my preferred method for data interpretation based on a mixed methods approach (Bernard, 2019). This allowed me to interpret my data so I can get a set of results which will provide me with meaningful findings. These themes will now be analysed in the following

chapters where they will be related to the previous literature, the research questions and the chosen methodology.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis of major themes: the real reasons behind the choices**

In this chapter, I aim to discuss the main themes that have emerged during data analysis. Other sub themes also emerged that were important for a small number of students, in how they decided upon their current qualifications. First, I will discuss how I analysed the data. Then I will move on to how I reached the themes. I will then move on to the main findings before discussing the implications of the findings.

Demonstrating that my findings have applicability in other contexts to other sixth form institutions refers to the transferability of my research. My findings are a small-scale piece of research capturing key issues relating to factors that influence qualification choice in one sixth form institution at a given moment in time. I have used the concept of Bassey's (1998) 'fuzzy generalisations' in order to highlight key aspects from my sample which may have wider resonance with other sixth form institutions in similar positions. I believe that such resonance allows my findings to have transferability across a range of sixth form settings. Bassey uses the term *fuzzy generalisations* to describe the type of generalisations that can be made by case study in terms of the knowledge produced. All of this will be supported with samples of the data to explain the process and evidence of the decision-making.

Themes that were considered as being very important by parents and carers were to some extent in contrast with what was important in influencing qualification choices when compared to students' views. The process of coding, counting, reading, recoding, recounting and rereading of each interview transcript should reach a point where the process supports the emerging major themes (Ezzy, 2002). I then describe the framework, which I devised to analyse the results after the data

collection. At the start of the chapter, I will present some general information about the data I have collected from the interviews. This chapter will end by outlining the major themes and findings before drawing conclusions about the impact these can have on students regarding how they choose their current qualifications.

Throughout this research, it has become clear that students often do not have a clear career pathway or qualification route in mind when choosing the qualifications, they wish to study post-16. It was also interesting to note from both the questionnaires and the interviews that many of the students who took part in the research were 'first generation' students to be attending university and for some the 'first generation' to be attending a college or sixth form centre, although for most going to college had always been their aim. Choices vary depending on life experience, which is dependent on specific individual circumstances. This is especially important to first generation students and their families where choice is limited by necessity (Reay and Ball, 1998).

The results were interpreted using a mixed methods framework, but with more of a focus on using qualitative methods. These methods produce data that can be made into a narrative. Using a mixed methods approach can broaden the conceptual and analytical framework of a study and allows a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods at different stages of the research cycle (Plowright, 2011). I wanted the participants to give their views freely and be able to feel they were telling more of a story than answering narrow structured interview questions as it gives them a voice within the research. I also used quantitative methods to extend my findings.

#### **4.1 Interview data – general analysis**

Seventeen interviews were conducted, ten with students studying at the sixth form college and seven with members of staff. The completed sample potentially gave a sample size which would allow statistical analysis of some aspects of the questionnaire data if appropriate (Cohen *et al*, 2008). An equal proportion of male and female students took part. A cross section of different ethnic groups was represented. Due to the demographic area the study was conducted in, the largest minority ethnic groups represented across the whole sample were Black Caribbean, Black African, White, and Black Caribbean Mixed Race. Choppin (1974) argues that all relevant variations among the population must be reflected in a sample. Normally to be a sample it has to be a proportional reflection, but Choppin, uses the word 'sample' in an everyday way rather than in a 'proper' research way. However, it is worth clarifying that this research cannot claim that the sample is statistically representative.

The mean duration of the interviews was 35.50 minutes (range 40.20 – 25.30) and the total amount of interview data collected was 9 hours 51 minutes. To some extent, different interviews provided opportunities to develop different aspects or themes that were emerging. During the interviews, I was also able to 'fine tune' the questions as I went along to allow for more in depth answers, explanations, or themes that were emerging. This allowed me to nuance the questions so they fitted the students but kept the same semi-structured questions so it did not raise any ethical or methodology issues. It is important to be clear that I did not change the questions as I went along as this could raise questions about the consistency of the data collection. Having described the basic details about my interview data, I shall now move on to consider my findings in more depth.

The next step in my analysis was to gain a better understanding of the fine detail of my data by focussing on each interview in greater depth and trying to create a global picture of what influences students' qualification choice. It is paramount at each stage of my analysis to have my research aim clearly in my mind, namely, 'who or what are the main influencing factors on qualification choice at Level 3?'

After some consideration, I decided the clearest way of giving my participants a voice was to present the interview findings as a narrative (story) and run these throughout. I decided to use verbatim quotations from participants as I felt this allowed me to represent their real lives and feelings. Quotations give an illustrative richness to the text (Geertz, 1973). I wanted to ensure that the individual voice of each student did not disappear or become de-contextualised (Gill, 2016). These narratives will focus on key themes that became central in helping to explain how students are influenced when they make a choice about which qualification to study at Level 3.

#### **4.2 Tensions about 'place' and the preparation process**

Interviews with students were already demonstrating that choosing subjects at Year 12 was a lot harder and more stressful than in Year 9. Students were finding there was a tension between staying in a familiar place compared to the course they wished (possibly in a different location) to study which they did not have to consider in Year 9:

*I have had the same teachers for 5 years, you have support from them, and they know me. Suddenly changing to a new place and atmosphere is a big thing. The local college offered the course I want but my school didn't. I had to decide whether I wanted the safety of a place, I knew or the course I wanted.*

(AS Level student, Kate, 16)



Many were viewing this opportunity as their first real experience of making important decisions, which could have a major influence over the rest of their lives and career opportunities. This was a recurring code or label from the interview transcriptions.

Analysis of the findings in Table 1 indicated that students first started to think seriously about post-16 qualification options during Year 11 and once they have received their GCSE results. This shows that students' views of the future clearly influence their subject choices. Those who believed from an early age (year 9) that they were likely to get in to university were more likely to have a clear career path and to know what qualifications they wanted to take. This is also supported by Helmsley-Brown and Foskett (2001) who point out that choosing a qualification should not occur at one discreet point in a student's life but should be a process that continues over a period of time in which in depth research is carried out. This in itself, has implications for post-16 institutions in terms of when best to supply information for potential new students.

**Table 1: When participants first started thinking seriously about the qualifications, they wanted to study post-16**

Year	%
Primary School	6
Year 7 – 8	18
Year 9 (Options)	12
Year 11	42
When received GCSE results	22
N = 50	100

Earlier on in their school life interviews showed that students selected their options based around subjects they liked or had little choice due to limited options pathways, or their choices were logistically impractical. McCrone (2015) concurred that both individual factors, school provision and context play a part in the choice making process at age fourteen. Some factors, such as the enjoyment of a subject or the value given to particular subjects, appeared to have only emerged in a limited amount of research.

*When I was in Year 8 deciding on my GCSE subjects I just sort of made them without thinking or asking anyone. I just picked the subjects I thought I might like.*

(Performing Arts student, Alexander<sup>1</sup>, 17)

However, when it came to making decisions about study, post-16 students appeared to be taking the process more seriously and choosing qualifications based on what they hoped to study at university rather than on subjects they liked:

*When it came to choosing my subjects for 6<sup>th</sup> form, I took it a lot more seriously as knew the subjects I studied at A Level could have an impact on what I could study at university. I ordered prospectuses and went to visit an Open Day.*

(A Level student, Tia, 18)

Results from the questionnaires found that seventy-three per cent of students gave the major motive for staying in education after age 16 was the wish to go to university. From the above interviews and questionnaires, it could be suggested that students who already knew they wanted to go to university 'took the process more seriously'.

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<sup>1</sup> No real names of participants were used in this research: all the names are pseudonyms.

Students also appeared to be learning from their mistakes and moving away from choosing the subjects they liked and thinking more about how the qualifications would allow them to progress in the future:

*I just made my choices about my GCSEs, as I didn't really care what I took when I was younger. I wanted to study Sports Science at university but when I applied to college, I did not have the correct entry qualifications of GCSE PE. I wish now I had spoke[n] to someone, rather than just picking Art because I liked it as my fifth option instead of GCSE PE.*

(BTEC Sports student, Mohammed 17)

The above three quotations show an emerging theme of students drawing upon prior experience to assist with how they choose qualifications as they progress through their education journey.

### **Initial themes and analysis**

My aim was to draw themes out of my questionnaire and interview data gathered from the digital recordings. This was an attempt to understand the experiences and explanations that were being given as to why qualifications had been chosen. In this section of the chapter, I aim to address how I developed a coding system and then illustrate the themes that emerged.

I needed to code and analyse the data from my interview recordings in a way that allowed me to identify common trends as to why students had chosen their current qualifications. I could then analyse these and draw out significant or recurrent themes in my analysis. Gibson and Brown (2009) term the process 'empirical coding'. Analytical codes are generated by coming to understand the data through repeated listening to the recordings. I ensured this was a rigorous systematic process by keeping a coding log while I carried out this stage of the analysis. These

codes come directly from reading and thinking about your data. Hesse-Biber (2017) referred to this method of coding as Inductive Grounded Analysis. After coding the data into initial broad themes, it is then broken down further to form connections to the data. This coding was completed with the intention of gathering the data into manageable pieces. The generation of these new codes and categories for the data was based upon the principle of 'constant comparison', (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This allowed the emerging data to be linked back to research that had previously been discussed in the Literature Review Chapter. I then drew on this coding log to help to explain the coding procedures used to interpret my findings.

### **Finding themes in the data**

I went back to listening to each individual recording and produced a summary card for each participant, noting coded items talked about with the greatest frequency. This going back to the recordings occurred a number of times during the detailed analysis in order to understand the interviews in greater depth. I moved from using general headings as a way of identifying tentative themes. This allowed me to identify quotes from each participant connected to the major themes. I found these themes by listening to the recordings and noting down the terms or words most often used by the participants. This iterative process allowed me to then produce a tally chart of the strongest number of mentions, which was transferred to my coding spreadsheet, and helped to provide a visual format to identify the themes.

Whilst listening to the recordings of the interviews with the students, I noted a number of themes emerging as the four main reasons for choosing their current qualifications. The next step in my analysis was to better understand these themes by exploring each recording in greater depth. Kvale considers transcription a

translation, both from spoken to written language, and from living and personal conversation to a 'frozen' text, which is to be read analytically (Kvale, 1996, p.165). My initial approach to coding was based around those themes that I thought were developing and that had emerged from my literature review. I was able to devise my own way of recoding my codes, and book marked digitally where I found useful and interesting quotations in the recordings. I could then record the location of the quotations I used to illustrate my coding. The procedures for my thematic analysis were based around 'empirical analysis' principles which advised to base codes upon repetitions and emphasis (Gibson and Brown, 2009). This would then allow broader themes to emerge during each stage of the analysis. Although, this was inevitably my own interpretation of the emerging key themes, I was able to compare these with results from the questionnaires. I repeated my coding of the first interview and found that many common themes were beginning to emerge from the data, with four being dominant. When new themes emerged (fixed long-term destinations, choice was logistically practical and course chosen randomly), I transferred them to my coding spreadsheet along with the digital location where they could be found in the interview. This has not been included as it was to help structure my own thought process and would appear jumbled to other readers. At several points during the thematic analysis, I returned to listening to individual interviews to check exactly what was being said, or how the student was responding, to ensure the validity of my analysis. It became clear that the data from the questionnaires gave the participants' perceptions of why they had chosen their current qualifications. However, the responses from the individual interviews provided me with greater clarity and reasons for their qualification choices. I listened to the interview responses, then noted down key ideas and then developed key themes from that point.

I was able to rank order the themes, and support with quotations from my interviews and questionnaires depending how often they were referred to.

### **4.3 Parental and family influence**

Parental influence was the most common reason given. This was followed in order by: media and social media; teacher influence finally recommended as a good subject for university or employment. Students were not mentioning help from careers advice and guidance advisers as this appeared to be not readily available.

During interviews, family members emerged as having a significant impact on qualification choice. Some students commented that their parents said going to college 'would open up more opportunities and better job prospects'. Three students who were interviewed said they felt pressured to go to sixth form college, when they wanted a full-time job, rather than having to continue studying:

*My dad's a college lecturer, so I spoke to him quite a lot about different college qualifications and options.*

(Year 12 A Level student, Taqia 18)

*My older brother has just finished sixth form and is off to university, I spoke to him a lot about qualifications and the help you could get. He told me not to study a certain subject as everyone failed it.*

(Year 13 combined A Level and BTEC student, Matthew 19)

The quotations above by Taqia and Matthew might be coded as their answers being about 'ad hoc guidance' i.e. fairly random advice. This raises questions about the reliability of it, certainly by considering Matthew's comments.

Further analysis of the interviews with Taqia and Matthew found that they wanted to be in full-time employment but they felt pressured into going to college from their parents or other family members. Taqia in particular said his family from an early age had expected him to go to college and also apply for university.

It was also becoming evident the role other family members played in influencing qualification choices. In particular, older siblings and cousins who had already graduated or were studying certain qualifications. However, Timmermans (1993) suggested a student may overestimate their chances of having the same positive experience as an older sibling, and as a result choose options not appropriate for themselves. This shows the importance of allowing students to make decisions based on their own abilities and preferences rather than being influenced by other people. This has become a kind of 'choice architecture'. Choice architecture describes the way in which decisions are presented to people other than by significant people in their lives. Choice architecture is a method typically associated with business and consumer choice (the right to choose), but nudging consumers to make certain choices. The idea of choice architecture originated from research by Thaler and Sunstein (2008). More restricted sets of choices or information are sometimes regarded as being less neutral since the editing of choice sets and information requires certain value judgements to be made. However, the provision of wider choice sets, with more complete provision of information, can result in more people disengaging or making poor choices. This can be through lack of ability to interpret information or by over or under estimating their own abilities (Connor, 2019).

Students commented that when they felt their parents and carers were lacking in knowledge or information other family members played a significant role in providing

encouragement or advice. This is particularly true within the new and wider landscape of choice. In some cases, parents and carers' knowledge in relation to the new style of qualifications and on non-traditional courses (such as vocational qualifications) is lacking. This may lead them to put pressure on their children to study more familiar courses such as A Levels, which might not always be appropriate, or what the student wants to do (Blenkinsop, 2006):

*Having my 3 cousins at university made me think it was a good thing to aim for. They told me to study for A Levels, as these would enable me to go to a good university.*

(Year 13 Media student, Bethany 18)

*My older sister never went to uni. I saw how hard she had to work and this made me want to go. I don't want to work in a shop like she does. My sister always says she wished she had taken subjects at college that were useful instead of Art and Media. That was why I chose the subjects of Business, Economics and Accounting.*

(Year 12 student Business and AAT, Pauline 17)

#### **4.4 Careers lessons and work experience**

Other prominent categories were careers education lessons. It was noted during the interviews these were particularly useful when outside speakers were invited in. This is supported by Stokes (2019) who commented that it is important for young people to engage actively in and manage their own learning and development:

*I found it really useful to talk to current students who came into our school for our World of Work Week. I could actually ask them how they were finding the course and the combination of subjects they took. Things like that.*

(AS Level student, Leo 17)

In addition, surprisingly, adverts or television programmes they have seen about a certain career influenced their choices.



However, not all students found careers advice or careers fairs helpful in their previous schools. Educational institutions have held careers fairs for years; while these are useful for offering wide coverage of lots of occupations, alone they are not necessarily going to embed the kind of high-quality career learning that is recommended in the Gatsby Benchmark 5: Encounters with employers and Employees. There was a feeling from some students that the careers lessons or careers fairs were more focussed on students who did not know what they wanted to do at the end of year 11. The Department for Education (2014) suggested that many careers lessons and school libraries are ineffective. The role of the careers coordinator is often not a priority for the head teacher and they often lack expertise. Students do not rate careers lessons and prefer more experiential lessons which include college visits, enterprise education days and company visits. This demonstrates that little has changed regarding the way careers lessons are taught, as they still tend to be very didactic in their approach causing students to find them as unhelpful as their counterparts did over thirteen years ago when the Department for Education did their study.

This could explain why many are turning to alternative sources of information, for example, Charlie said:

*The careers advice was ok from my teachers, but I like to make my own mind up about things and decisions, not be told I can't do something. I preferred the advice from Mr Grey who came in to talk to us as he was really studying the course I wanted to do.*

(A Level student, Charlie, 18)

Even though Charlie liked to think his school teachers did not influence him, he may have been influenced in other ways he did not realise. It is important though to

remember that teachers are not specifically trained to offer advice about future careers or other qualifications and they cannot be expected to understand every qualification available or specific entry route into higher level qualifications. As mentioned in Chapter 2 since April 2012, schools have been required to provide information, advice and guidance on future careers. As the recent Ofsted report made clear, this is not yet working:

‘many learners are leaving school at 16 lacking in knowledge about future qualifications that translate to worthwhile employment goals’ (Ofsted, 2019, p32).

This is particularly relevant to my third research question about the impact on Government policy and the need to ensure that adequate professional development is available and possibly included in all Initial Teacher Training courses for Key Stage 3 and above. Another consideration is also who trains the careers advisers themselves, ensuring that they stay up to date with all the current changes in education so they can offer the best possible advice. Many writers since the 1970s have referred to what has been called the 'competence cycle of learning'. For example, Benner (1982) developed a skills acquisition model to describe levels of professional competence. She describes five stages: from novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, to expert. She acknowledged that these stages do not come through the passage of time or longevity in the job, but through consideration and the assessment of theories and attitudes gained through exposure to different practical situations. She suggests that the novice practitioner can be anxious, insecure about their role and their ability to fulfill it, may lack insight into their abilities but be highly motivated. The issue of how the careers advisers are trained and continue to keep their skills and knowledge up to date could be an area for suggested further research. It is my view that the trainers should have the highest

levels of professional competence, in order to secure professional careers advice going forward. Professional career guidance practitioners are trained and keep up-to-date via continuing professional development and accredited professional courses. For example, the Career Development Institute (CDI) which is the single UK-wide professional body for everyone working in the fields of career education; career information, advice and guidance; career coaching, career consultancy and career management, recommends that career development professionals join the Register to show that they are qualified to at least QCF level 6 or above/SCQF Level 11, abide by the CDI Code of Ethics, and maintain and develop their competence by undertaking, reflecting upon and recording on the CDI site a minimum of 25 hours' CPD each year.

The above quotations from Charlie, Leo, Pauline and Bethany identify a variety of influences: parents, siblings, wider family, media, and previous students who all have an impact on qualification choice. Parents were the most sought-after source of advice and help when decisions about subject choice had to be made (thirty-two per cent of the students acknowledged seeking advice from their parents). Other family members, in particular brothers and sisters, were also useful sources of information. Some students mentioned on their questionnaire that older siblings' recent experience of studying a certain subject or qualification was a valuable source of information. Students also acknowledged that advice from teachers was a valuable source of information. In some cases, students indicated they were cautious of asking their teachers because they felt the teachers were promoting their own subjects, so they used a variety of sources to gain a balanced view. Many of the students interviewed came from schools that had sixth forms and as students equate

to funding (income) for the school, this could explain why teachers were keen to promote their own subjects. Analysis of the student interviews and questionnaires showed that students thought that teachers might be biased in favour of keeping their own students. Helmsley-Brown and Fosketts (2001) concluded that there is institutional pressure for teachers to push students towards decisions that are primarily in the school or college's interest because of its own competitive needs. However, it should be the job of a school to academically and socially prepare a student to have the right perceptions and knowledge about various qualification options by using an unbiased approach (Nunez and Bowers, 2011).

#### **4.5 External influences**

Students spoke with enthusiasm about meeting inspirational speakers in school or college and attending careers events as being a deciding factor in whether or not to study a certain qualification. In many instances, students who completed the questionnaires indicated they had attended careers events and had come into contact with 'inspirational speakers' and both of these had contributed to their wider understanding of post-16 options and their decision making. However, further in-depth analysis during the student interviews found there was a clear preference for this to begin earlier than in year 11.

**Table 2: Sources of information**

Source of advice used.	% students
Parents	32

Teachers	20
Other students/peers	11
Siblings	10
Interview at 6 <sup>th</sup> form or college	9
Internet/websites	8
Open Events	5
Careers guidance meeting/appointment	3
Employers	2
N = 50	100

When the results were compared, formal careers advice and guidance appeared to be less an influence on qualification choice than advice from family members. It might be worth considering how widespread and available 'formal CAG' was though. This finding is opposed to research by Blenkinsop (2006) who found that students were less reliant on family and friends for advice and more influenced by advice from careers advisers. A reason for the findings by Blenkinsop could be due to the fact he was working at a time when there were more careers advisers in post. In this study, not all students viewed the advice from family and friends as being helpful. There is evidence from the interviews that for some, access to impartial and independent careers advice is limited and, in the end, many students are turning to their subject

teachers. This is having an impact as staff may have limited knowledge and not be aware of the full range of qualifications or options available:

*The careers adviser in school was not helpful; I think he used to be the French teacher. He had no idea when I asked him about studying for a course in drama. He just told me about A Level Drama. It was my teacher who told me about a Performing Arts course at the local sixth form.*

(BTEC L3 Performing Arts student, Helen, 16)

The above quotation from Helen suggests that she was given ‘advice and guidance,’ not from a professionally trained careers adviser, but from a teacher who had moved into the role without the proper training.

The majority of those interviewed said they were aware of careers advice in school but were sometimes unclear about what to ask, or got frustrated waiting for a reply, then felt more confused when they got an answer. This view reinforces some of the literature mentioned in previous chapters in that young people appear to have a limited understanding or unrealistic plans for their future and high-quality impartial advice remains elusive (Haynes, 2013):

*My support came from my subject teacher. She told me how to apply and how to find a course. I tried asking the careers adviser in school but they said I couldn't do A Levels, as I was not in the top sets. She said I should do a vocational course and only gave me a leaflet on vocational qualifications.*

(Year 13 A Level student, Isla, 19).

Further on in the interview Isla commented that she did go on to study A Levels despite being advised to study a vocational route. However, the question about teacher influence did not specify which teachers, either current or in Year 11, have had any influence but some indication was made through the additional comments made on the questionnaire, such as ‘talking to my Geography teacher’, ‘the first day I came into college Mr Tibbs [spoke to me]’.

On the other hand, it is essential that students should be adequately advised post-GCSE about the implications of the different routes open to them. In particular, that taking some vocational courses will effectively close off certain options in the future. It is also essential, if they have the ability, that they are given the opportunity to take A Levels, and are not forced to take alternative qualifications because of a lack of choice or appropriate guidance (Vickers, 2017). For example, some institutions (particularly red brick universities) will count a BTEC towards the overall grade requirement, but will want the student to have one of two A Levels as well, even if they studied an 18-unit course, which is a full Level 3 qualification. More detailed questioning during the interview found that Isla had sought further advice from a college open evening about the entry requirements needed to study for her current A Levels. Isla's systematic approach to finding, researching and selecting qualifications was clearly influenced by the fact she also appeared to be highly motivated and, perhaps most importantly, she had interacted with college staff and her teachers in ways that ensured she reaped maximum benefit from the college environment.

Results from the questionnaires completed by the students also found that they were undertaking a variety of additional activities, which contributed to their decision making. Over two-thirds (68 per cent) indicated that work experience or work shadowing had informed their decision about what career they wanted, thus helping them to decide on the qualifications they wanted to study. (For example, quotations mentioned earlier from Grace and Nisha). This suggests a value in facilitating work experience to inform the choice of qualifications. Students who explored personal values, interests and passions, and had early work experiences, showed clearer

career development (Di Palmer and Reid, 2021). This in addition supports research mentioned in the literature chapter about how beneficial work experience is in helping to make qualification choice.

Students said they had considered which career path they might take but had evidently not considered the availability of jobs in that pathway. Many students based their comments on either their part-time or Saturday jobs, when asked about their thoughts on the current employment situations. However, although work experience placements are helpful, they can create unrealistic ideas of what certain combinations of qualifications could lead to in the future (Lepper, 2000). Other students (29 per cent) cited a careers event run by their school and just over one-fifth, (22 per cent) commented that media, tv, film and books had influenced their decision. Banks (1992) suggests that choice at sixteen should be a rational process that is constrained by a realistic perception of opportunities and shaped by individual personality. This shows that enabling real choice, and making sure that students see clear pathways of progression to employment, would come through careers advice and work experience, with engagement from employers.

Another significant finding was the marked difference in the parents, carers, and students' interviews regarding who would make the final decision. Interestingly, the role of friends was not always considered beneficial by family and teachers. Further analysis of this view found it was a possible fear that the student could be led to study a qualification that was considered unsuitable for them by those who 'might know better', or 'had seen the same mistakes being made before'. Students wanted to make their own mind up about choices, yet parents and carers wanted to be told directly and almost not have a choice about future qualification options for their children. Wright (2005) suggested that students are often being persuaded to choose



a particular qualification or option during discussions with a teacher or a careers adviser. The core principle of professional training for CAG advisers is impartiality. Often there is a need to question who the title is being applied to. In 2016 the CDI published the blueprint of Learning Outcomes for Professional Roles in the Career Development Sector. This is used to inform professional qualifications across the sector and to raise awareness amongst politicians, government officials, employers and other stakeholders, of the breadth and depth of skills and knowledge required for these roles. In other words, they are trained CAG advisers rather than just 'doing the role', as suggested by Helen in her comments on page 119. This would suggest that many of the students may be being actively guided towards certain qualifications, raising questions about the extent to which they have 'meaningful choice' in their decision-making. As a student grows older, they will generally start to have more influence over their own life and want to readjust and reflect upon their own ideas and directions. The student will eventually reach a point where they want to become the dominant person in their decision-making process and not be told by others what they should do or study (Sutherland and Purdy, 2006).

One parent when interviewed admitted she did not know what the 'new' Diplomas were or T levels and thought they were referring to the long established BTEC Diploma qualifications. Often it is mistakenly assumed that all students have had the support and understanding to make informed rational choice, when in fact the people they are most likely to turn to (parents) can be the most ill-informed of the lot (Wright, 2005). However, it might be assumed that any advice provided to a student by a teacher would be from a professional perspective and might be biased around one subject, whereas it would usually be assumed that a parent or carer's influence

would not be from this perspective. This was something I came across on different occasions when interviewing parents and carers, thus illustrating potential problems when it came to students turning to their parents for advice. Interview responses from a College Principal also confirmed these views that students did not have open choices as often parents counselled or guided their children on to qualifications they were familiar with or had studied themselves. For qualifications to be successful, and seen as equivalent to the traditional A Level route, they must have the support not only of universities and employers but more importantly parents as well (Gaskell, 2009). This research has found that parents and carers may care about the choices being made, but are not always fully or well informed.

#### **4.6 Lack of advice: Will teachers tell the truth?**

A further theme which emerged from the participants was the worrying notion that teachers in schools were not telling them about all education routes available and were withholding information about apprenticeships or the local further education college. This act of 'persuading' students to study certain subjects and not others was emerging as a common theme from student interviews. Students' comments identified that there seemed to be an emphasis on only explaining qualifications which were offered within their current school sixth form rather than explaining wider qualifications offered by neighbouring education providers. This emphasis could be interpreted as a value judgement on the worth of certain knowledge.

Students claimed that they had not received enough information to make informed decisions. This is implying that some education institutions are not following the Gatsby Benchmark principles, in particular Benchmark 7: Encounters with Further

and Higher Education. This benchmark is underpinned by a piece of legislation known as 'The Baker Clause', which maintains that all authority-maintained schools and academies must give education and apprenticeship training providers the opportunity to talk to students in Years 8-13 (Association of School and College Leaders, 2017). Schools with their own sixth forms might understandably be concerned about losing their students by doing this. However, by not offering this, students may not have the benefit of structured guidance to help them decide which option is best for them.

In this research, it was found that, students were not told by their teachers that taking certain subjects at GCSE, for example, triple science instead of combined science, could put them at a disadvantage if they wanted to study science at A Level. This was also similar to findings by The Sutton Trust (2007) who observed that advice covering choice of subjects, future career options, and guidance varied across different schools. This is one of the most intriguing yet alarming aspects from the research that teachers were not giving impartial advice. However, there could be several explanations for this. For example, teachers may feel they do not have the knowledge, time or expertise to effectively support students' progression into post-16 education. Even though teachers can act as role models because they have progressed through the education system themselves, teachers could be unsure of a student's ability in subjects they are not themselves familiar with or students are unclear about their teachers' views on qualifications. However, further investigation would be needed to see if this is the underlying reason. Students sometimes felt their teachers only wanted to discuss options relating to the sixth form attached to the school. This should not be happening as schools in England have a responsibility to provide information about careers options and qualification routes, to all students in

years 9-11. The responsibility came in to force in 2012 after a review by Ofsted found that three quarters of schools did not provide effective and impartial careers guidance. Sir Michael Wilshaw recommended that students were not aware of the breadth of qualifications available and that schools did not have up to date information. Wilshaw also suggested that some schools are failing their duty to provide impartial advice by promoting their own A Level provision rather than other qualifications (Ofsted, 2013, p.4). This is a common theme I have found coming out in the interviews with students and parents:

*I had to wait ages for an appointment as someone only came in once a month. Then you only got 5 minutes with them and I felt rushed.*

(AS student, Poppy, 16).

*It was so rushed and I thought the appointment would be with someone from the local college. Not the Head of Year from my daughter's sixth form. He only wanted to tell my daughter courses on offer in the school sixth form sixth form.*

(Ms Kelin, Mother of a student who attended a career's interview)

From the quotations by Poppy and Ms Kelin, it is interesting to see both use the word 'rushed'. This guidance can potentially affect the rest of a young person's life, and they rush through it. This questions the importance of how the quality of guidance is an important subject, which has arisen from the interviews.

#### **4.7 Thematic analysis of my findings**

Findings from the interviews conducted with the students showed that in preparation for making decisions about post-16 qualifications, most had embarked on some career learning and development. Students were more likely to turn to individuals whom they trust, are known to them, and who they perceive have knowledge and or experience of the qualifications they are interested in studying. Findings from both the student questionnaires and interviews found on average only three individuals

out of twenty consulted with others to help them make the decision about future qualifications. Further in-depth questioning found these were typically family members, teachers, family friends who were employed in careers of interest, and friends they knew in the year above studying a certain qualification. Although the method of assessment for a qualification was not directly referred to in the questionnaire or the interviews, some of the students did comment about the assessment method, often from the perspective of 'I prefer coursework to exams' which influenced the type of qualification they chose to study. For example, in one interview Lucy commented that she '*hated exams*' and this influenced her decision to do a BTEC National Diploma in Forensic and Medical Science:

*I absolutely hate exams and I panic and I did at GCSE. I wanted to do science but I knew I wouldn't cope with the exams so I decided to study for a BTEC. My dad was not happy with this choice but I knew this was the best qualification for me.*

Lucy aged 17 Studying for BTEC in Forensic and Medical Science.

This also shows that Lucy disagreed with her father's perspective about what qualification she should study. Further on in the interview Lucy revealed her father had a degree in medicine and her sister was studying for a degree in veterinary science so they were unfamiliar with BTEC style qualifications and 'look down on them'. She thought if she had followed her parents' advice she would have failed. It also became apparent from the interviews that a large majority of students who chose to study a Level 3 BTEC were doing so because they had not met the requirements to follow other qualifications. This would usually be due to failing an examination section of a qualification, so it could be suggested that the students equate examinations with failure, so chose a more coursework-based qualification.

**Table 3: Number of individuals young people spoke to in order to help make decisions about what to do after Year 11.**

Number of individuals consulted	%
0	5
1	14
2	21
3	25
4	20
5	11
6+	4 <b>N=50</b>

Interviews revealed that students were aware of how to access a range of sources but not of the strengths and limitations of each resource. This was especially true when it came to identifying how accurate a source was. This lack of understanding demonstrates why students are likely to access more than one tool or resource:

*I used The Student Rooms and other online resources. I like these as you can ask current students about their experiences, without getting biased accounts. It was just another way to find people's opinions in the specific subjects I was looking at*

(Max, age 16, BTEC L3 Games Development)

Max's quotation demonstrates a distrust of information provided directly by the institution, expressing that a friend would avoid 'sugar coating' their experiences, which in his mind makes them more trustworthy. Max actively sought out the guidance of a peer studying at the institution that he was considering and received information to aid him in his decision. Friends were not only used as a source of knowledge by some participants, but also acted as a 'sounding board' for ideas (Greenbank, 2011).

Any understanding of subject and course choices must clearly begin with a detailed understanding of the courses currently on offer to young people in England (Archer,

2003). Further analysis found that those who had prepared themselves by researching thoroughly about qualification opportunities tended to study traditional academic courses rather than vocational courses. Although students valued the impartial advice received from professional careers advisers or careers teachers, students preferred the support they got from their teachers who they felt often knew them better:

*The careers teacher had been helpful, pointing me in the right direction, but Mr Grey really knew that I struggled with exams and suggested a more practical course.*

(Year 13 CACHE Student, Sophie.)

The quotation below from Grace also supports the point made by Sophie about people who did not know her giving her less useful advice:

*I have been with my form teacher since Year 7; she knew me from when I started High School and the problems I had. She told me about the support I could get at college and gave me advice on qualifications that would be suitable for me. When I saw Mr X who came in from Y he didn't know me and just talked about qualifications I could do without even knowing about my health problems.*

(BTEC Performing Arts students, Grace, 16)

Although only twenty-five per cent said that they had spoken to an employer, the extent to which they had accessed careers information varied greatly. Fifty per cent of those interviewed reported visiting their school's careers office or library. Thirty-three per cent had written away for careers information from external organisations. However, an interesting theme that emerged was that ninety per cent of those interviewed felt they had more opportunities for advice and guidance in Year 11 (or had been more active in taking advantage of such opportunities) than when making option choices in Year 9. Seventy-five per cent of students interviewed said they had spoken to their parents and carers about post-16 options, with sixty-three per cent finding this to be helpful. Fifty-five per cent said

they had spoken to older siblings who were already studying or had studied in post-16 education. They felt this was more useful and helpful than advice from parents or teachers. In conclusion, the findings from the interviews showed that discussions with family members were regarded as being as important and in most cases more useful than having access to careers support in school.

However, the complexity of family and parental involvement in decision-making is clearly evident in the literature (as mentioned in chapter 2); it is not simply a case that family members with the necessary experience are able to offer valuable assistance to their children, and those without are unable to do so. Family support and guidance can manifest in many forms, whether this be practical and informed guidance from their own or their social network's experiences, or emotional support and encouragement.

In order to explore the influence parents and carers had on qualification choice and to support with the views of students, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with parents and carers. The interviews identified that most parents and carers viewed A Levels as being the qualification they knew most about. Many viewed vocational qualifications with suspicion and felt these were often studied by students who were considered less able and had no value for future careers and adult life. This shows that the issue of 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational qualifications is still an on-going problem for teachers, parents, and carers and is something that needs to be addressed. Hopefully, this will change soon with the government's plans to not only improve, but also yet again transform vocational education in England (Sainsbury, 2017). The government accepted the recommendations, in the Post-16 Skills Plan, that students should be given a choice



at 16 between two equally high-quality options: academic and technical, much as they were when grammar schools which did not lead to parity of esteem, were created. However, attempts to do this in the United Kingdom have been 'ongoing' for the last 20-30 years and have still not worked. This situation was identified by Roberts (2002) and mentioned earlier in the thesis in chapter one.

Parents and carers still have a lack of knowledge of vocational qualifications and their equivalents. Many students are highly influenced by the parents and carers and if they feel they do not approve of the course they are studying, they may choose traditional academic qualifications even if they are better suited to alternative provisions. This is supported by previous research by Keep (2014) who observed that vocational education continues to be held in low esteem by a small majority of parents. If these negative stereotypes were challenged earlier on in their child's school life, it could help parents and carers to understand other pathways with more of an open mind. Ultimately, parents or carers might be happier and more supportive with their child's chosen qualification pathway. This shows that more work is needed to raise awareness and acceptance of qualifications other than traditional academic qualifications (A Levels) both for parents and carers but all wider communities:

*My older son studied Motor Repair at college; he was never there half the time. His dad could have taught him half of the things at home. My younger son was in the top groups at school he is not wasting his time on something like this.*

(Mrs Sable, Mother of 16-year-old Jack)

*What use is studying Games Design or Health and Social Care? They are 16 and are not going to get a job at the end of 2 years. My friend's daughter did hairdressing and all she did was sweep up.*

(Ms Holt, Mother of 17-year-old Jessie)

The quotation from Mrs Sable, demonstrates that a student's choice might not be their real desire, but reflects the wishes and desires of the people advising them

including possibly overambitious parents or carers. This issue of convincing parents or carers to accept new initiatives and qualifications is something that could help students have a wider choice and not be constrained by stereotypes:

*My son is studying A Levels in Maths, Physics and Chemistry. You see children on other qualifications and they always seem less bright or my son said were the naughty ones from school. He was always in the top set at school and Head Boy, we expect him to study 'proper subjects'.*

(Mr Hews, Father of 18-year-old Gurth)

This view is showing how influential parent or carer approval can be on influencing or actively persuading qualification choice. However, a number of researchers have suggested that parental views on subjects may be outdated or misconceived (Wikeley and Stables 1999; McCrone, 2015).

Surprisingly, a common theme that kept occurring in the parent and carer interviews, but not in the interviews with the students was the reputation or status of an institution in the local community. It did not seem to matter to parents and carers if a certain institution did not offer the qualification their child wanted to study, or have the required facilities, so long as it had a good reputation. This view was reflected by over half the parents and carers who were interviewed who felt the reputation for choosing a college or sixth form should be considered as carefully as choosing a secondary school:

*The reputation of a college within the local community is important, you hear things from other parents and if their child failed there, you don't want to send your child there.*

(Ms Dew, Mother of Daisy Year 11 and Freya Year 13)

Parents form an integral part of the decision-making process, in terms of career choice. There is quantitative evidence to suggest that parents have a greater influence than teachers (Kniveton, 2004). This causes additional pressure on

students from their parents to make certain choices and study qualifications when they are best suited to an alternative pathway. Andrew (Careers Adviser) commented this was a common issue he experienced when students came to discuss the reasons they wanted to change courses:

*The issue of qualification equivalency can be a minefield for students, especially if they are considering applying to university. The impression that all qualifications at a particular level are equal should be true. The reality however, appears to be that some qualifications are more equal than others.*

(Andrew, Careers Adviser for Sixth Form College)

The head of a local sixth form also reflected this view:

*The pressure that some students are put under from their parents to study A Levels, particularly certain cultures [Asian] who want their children to study Sciences means at the end of two years they often leave with very low grades or at worse fail. They would be better suited on a BTEC style course but parents don't think this is good enough.*

(David, Head of Sixth Form)

Students tended to choose a course then look for a local institution that provided it. Sometimes students had to choose subjects not based on their preferred course, but on whether or not their school or college offered it. In a few cases, students had to compromise on their choices in order to stay on in the same school. Given that, schools can only offer a limited number of courses it is particularly important that 16-year olds are fully informed of the opportunities available and receive top quality advice about the significant benefits of studying one subject or another. (Vidal Rodeiro, 2005). This is a key point as it refers to the Gatsby Benchmark 8: Personal Guidance. This benchmark suggests it is critical that students are helped to assimilate and make sense of what they have learned about the options available to them. Sometimes students said they chose a qualification not based on the most appropriate course or the preferred course, but on whether or not the school offered

it. This demonstrated that schools play an integral part of the decision-making, whether deciding on curriculum options, subject grids or the information, advice and guidance they provide (Thompson, 2019). In a few cases, findings from the questionnaires revealed that students were prepared to compromise on their choices in order to go to the institution they really wanted to:

*I wanted to do Computer Science, however, at the time my college did not provide it*

(Leo, aged 17, A Level student)

*I was unable to study Further Mathematics at my sixth form so had to come to Greenfell to study*

(Charlie, aged 18, A Level Student)

This may result in what Helmsley-Brown and Foskett (2001) see as students' choices as sometimes being considered second best options, or are simply a default residual after other options have been rejected or have simply not been acted upon:

*I wanted to stay at my school but they didn't do Psychology so I had no choice but to leave*

(Tim, aged 16)

*Not having the qualifications available at St. Lucy meant I altered my choices*

(Johl, aged 17)

The interpretation from the above quotation by Tim found that he had no real alternatives open up to him and therefore 'had no choice' but to do a different qualification. If there are no alternatives available then, as Tim found, he 'fell' into what he ended up doing. Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security could be applied as a way of providing an explanation as to why some students want to study

where their peers are going or because the institution is familiar to them in some way. Ontological security, as Giddens explains, is supported by routine in our everyday lives.

In other cases, students changed colleges or schools in order to study a particular subject. This was a common theme I noticed occurring when I was interviewing Year 11 students for the qualifications they wish to apply for within my own sixth form, when responding to the question, 'why do you wish to study at Green Meadow?'

*The course I want to do is over an hour away from where I live. There is a nearer college but it doesn't do the course I want to study. My mom thinks I am daft travelling all that way when the college near me is supposed to be really good. I don't want to go there though as [they] don't offer the course I want.*

(Florence, Year 11 GCSE student during her college interview)

Around 26 per cent of the students that completed the questionnaire reported that they attended a different institution in order to have access to their preferred subjects, which was not their first choice of college or sixth form:

*My parents want me to go to Hayfield Sixth Form, [but] they don't do A Level PE or Sports Science. My mom says it doesn't matter as I can do something else and should study somewhere with a good reputation and just pick something else.*

(Edward, Year 11 GCSE student during his college interview)

Edward's experience supports earlier work by Atkins (2008; 2016), which argued that students make choices that are not their own. Although it seemed that Hayfield Sixth Form would have been the most appropriate for Edward according to his parents, he decided to study at a sixth form where he could take A Level Sports Science. The majority of parents and carers wanted their child to go to a certain institution no matter what qualifications they offered. A possible explanation for this could be it is

the last time a parent or carer has the chance to make a choice for their child, similar to when they did so about selecting a secondary school which they chose using their criteria. In other words, the parents chose the school using their own criteria rather than the child's views. This has become known as 'The Framing' effect, where students might be influenced or nudged (Thaler *et al.*, 2013) towards certain qualifications. Data from the questionnaires and interviews found that sometimes students had to choose subjects not based on their preferred course, but on whether or not the institution they wanted to study at offered it. In a few cases, students had to compromise on their choices in order to stay on in their current school sixth form. In other cases, students changed institutions in order to study a particular subject or qualification, for example a BTEC in Engineering. Around sixteen per cent of the students in this research reported that they attended a different institution, which was not their first choice, in order to have access to their preferred subject. This demonstrates that two separate aspects are present in qualification choice. Students may choose somewhere they do not want to go in order to follow their subject or qualification. Alternatively, students are persuaded to go somewhere they do not want to go by their parents because they do not understand that the subject their son or daughter wishes to study matters a lot to them.

Given the range of options available to students based on qualifications lists in prospectuses provided by post-16 institutions, it could be assumed they would have a wide range of choice open to them. However, students, for whatever reasons, tend to believe they have a 'restricted choice', even when they have an apparent open choice (Atherton, 2009). An example of this from the interviews were students who reported that although their first choice of college did offer the subjects they wanted, they were limited through the blocks and combinations they were offered in. One

student wanted to be a nurse but was unable to study A Level Biology due to a timetable clash. She decided to study Sociology instead and had to change her career aspirations, as without an A Level in Science she would not be able to gain access to her chosen degree course. Structural factors as described by Blenkinsop (2006) steered the student down this route. Additionally, some students found that opting for a course in a particular career had led them to reject this career area as they had found that they did not enjoy it (Spielhofer, 2008).

Researchers in psychology and behavioural economics have documented anomalies that suggest that human decision-making is far from rational, and that individuals use a range of 'rules of thumb', as well as being subject to a variety of cognitive and emotional issues when they make decisions (Koellinger *et al.*, 2007). When thinking about their futures, experimental and real-world evidence shows that students may overlook the long-term implications of short-term considerations. For example, finding another similar type of qualification, instead of A Level Biology choosing a BTEC Science course, when long term considerations such as career prospects might be preferable.

Parents and carers said they often only had their own experiences to draw on, or word of mouth, from other people they knew. Newman (1986) suggests that ultimately the students' choice is not their real 'desire', but really reflects those of the people advising them, including 'inconsiderate or overambitious parents'. Many also drew on the experiences from close friends or work colleagues who had older children:

*I wanted my son to go to Hillfield. They set out all their expectations clearly, the teachers were dressed smartly and it is conveniently located, he could also carry on with his music to gain Grade 8 as they had a well-known brass band.*

(Ms Daisy, Mother of 16-year-old)

*The Local FE college had a very poor reputation, my grandson was not going there, the sixth form offers lots of other things he can study. Parents are always saying the teachers don't turn up and I often see the police outside of the building. It has advertised 100% pass rates in all Year 2 subjects.*

(Mrs York, Grandmother of 17-year-old Sienna)

*I really had to persuade my daughters not to stay at her local school, but to travel to another sixth form as it had a much better pass rate and reputation. She wanted to stay at her school sixth as it would mean another hour in bed.*

(Father of 16-year-old Ivy and Elsie)

Another important theme that emerged from the parents and carers interviews was that they did not get the information about forthcoming events (especially Open Days). Letters did not arrive home, or when they asked their child if they should attend, they said there was no point as they had already made their choices:

*We got a text message about an Open Day at Shipview Sixth Form College. I wanted to go but Willow said no point as she had already applied. She said she wasn't bothered about going to look.*

(Ms. Vein, Mother of 16-year student Willow)

Parents and carers wanted information sessions from when their child started in Year 7 not just in Year 11:

*I decided to join The Army as a PT instructor half way through Year 11. I regretted then choosing such narrow subjects in Year 9 as they were so different to the job I wanted.*

(Public Services student, Arlo 18)

Studies in particular by Atkins (2008; 2016) have shown that if students are not provided with accurate advice and guidance about their career choices and qualification pathways, they can end up with a gap between their aspirations and their actual achievements. This could mean that a student has to retrain after choosing a degree or qualifications that have relevance to their ambitions or career goals:



*I chose Law at GCSE and A Level because in Year 7 we had a careers day. I had never known about some of the jobs and I think this is really important to make kids aware when they are little.*

(A Level student, Molly 17)

Having a careers fair at school should give students the opportunity to expand their effective personal networks, allowing them access to larger numbers of people with more varied types of experience than just their teachers or parents (Stanley, 2014). Although, it could be inferred that if students become too narrow-minded in their choices because they are set on a goal, they can either ignore alternatives or not consider information for all options.

Events should also provide students with the chance to access up to date, trusted information about the availability of certain careers and the skills they need for a potential future career (Granovetter, 1985). However, results from both the interviews and the questionnaires showed that although students valued careers fairs at their school, the perception regarding Open Days, which gave them the opportunity to look around post-16 providers and talk about future qualifications, was viewed differently. Parents and carers tended to find them ‘*very helpful*’ and a ‘*worthwhile experience*’:

*We attended five Open Days; my son only came with us for two and said it was a waste of time as all they were doing was trying to sell him a course. The taster sessions were the same.*

(Mother Mrs Crope of 17-year-old Darcie)

The fact that Darcie had not attended any open days or taster sessions regarding his method of selecting his qualifications suggests that his choice of qualifications was very last minute. Yet Darcie’s parents went to five of the open days suggesting that he clearly did not value his parents’ opinions.

Many of the students saw Open Days as being a marketing exercise used to try to encourage them to study for their qualifications:

*I only went to an Open Day because my dad made me. They are not going to say how many people fail or how bad things are; they want to promote their course. I would rather ask my friends who study there as they tell me what it's really like. My dad didn't understand this.*

(Performing Arts student, Maryam, 18)

Both Darcie and Maryam felt that Open Days had no influence on their choices of which qualifications they ended up studying. However, the issue with this is that this relies on the student's perceptions and may not match the reality of what happened. Hollis (2018) argues that for advertising to succeed, it does so by leaving positive impressions and memories that will influence behaviour at a later date, and that direct advertising rarely succeeds. It could be possible that Maryam and Darcie had unconsciously seen advertising from local colleges which may have had an influence on them that they did not realise. This raises questions regarding the effectiveness of the marketing strategies used by organisations for post-16 courses. Newman (1986) questioned how much real choice students actually have. He questioned the notion that while the idea of students participating in the decision-making process is an admirable one, the selections do not always reflect their real desires, but more the wishes and desires of the persons advising and marketing the qualifications. Both the student interviews and questionnaires found that open days and evenings appeared to have little influence over the students' decision-making process as many appeared to pay no real attention to them. Slack *et al.* (2014) investigated the way in which students view and use different information sources in their Higher Education decision-making. Slack *et al.* found that although many used friends as a source of information, this was not deemed as useful in comparison to other sources, such as university websites, prospectuses and open day visits. Friends and family

were, however, regarded as more trustworthy sources, as students were aware that university made materials were likely to show selective and thus biased information. Although this research is applied to choices in Higher Education it could also be relevant to choices being about Level 3 qualifications within this research.

The findings above raise a serious issue regarding the marketing of courses, but it has to be remembered that advertising works in subtle ways. Advertisers have long known that the way in which a choice is presented can be just as important as the content of the choice itself (Madrian and Shea, 2001). Maryam commented (see p124) that although she had attended an Open Day she had not heard of the course she is now studying until it was offered as an alternative when she attended a college interview.

Differences in the resources and tools being used and valued were becoming a key theme throughout the data interpretation and were often having different influences on how qualification choices were being made. According to Hooley (2015) new technologies offer major opportunities for the delivery of career guidance.

Students reported preferring to use on line resources, for example, 'Kudos', and 'Fast Tomato', compared to parents and carers who would rather talk face to face with someone. One of the best things about on-line resources is the flexibility. Students can now get the information they need quickly and without having to answer the questions if they do not need to (Denolt, 2017). However, this does not always mean they make better decisions. Many of the new software packages give prospective students the ability to be able to receive instant feedback and these could potentially have an influence on a student's choice to study a particular qualification. However, if the students do not have the necessary skills or are unable

to successfully navigate the online resources, they will not get the information they require or the course they need (Goldthorpe, 2007). Hooley (2011) has urged caution about celebrating the availability of online careers information without also recognising the skills and literacies that underpin the effective use of these. Empirical studies (such as Hooley, 2012) also questioned the usefulness of information-based careers websites without a strong supportive infrastructure for learning and development.

### **Summary of the findings**

During the interpretation of my findings it became clear to me how easy as an insider researcher it is to miss the obvious reasons for qualification choice. There is a risk with insider research which Smyth and Holian (2009) term 'pre-understanding'. For example, it was only after listening to an interview for a third time that I realised the student was pausing very carefully before giving certain answers; almost, as if she was hesitant about giving me the wrong answer. This I found justified the use of questionnaires in my research as they provided an anonymous more impersonal method and complemented the more personal face-to-face technique of the interview. Student's decision-making styles, processes and strategies, varied tremendously. Some preferred to use a search engine or database to find the information they needed, and others preferred a combination of more formal face-to-face and online careers support.

Although many students had made informed decisions about which future qualifications they wanted to study the majority did not seem to have the necessary skills or confidence to make effective decisions. Ecclestone (2002) supports this view, suggesting that many students have arrived on their current programme of

study more by serendipity and contingent events than by making apparently rational choices. For example, Maryam or Darcie appeared to ‘just wander’ into their chosen qualifications by accident. Neither of the two students attended any open events or visited their current institution before their interview. There also seemed to be no fixed point at which the students started the decision-making process that led to their choice of current study. Applying to institutions prior to visiting them first hand meant that knowledge had to be relied upon in the form of institutional websites, which are viewed as less trustworthy (Hutchings, 2003; Slack *et al.*, 2014). However, for students who repeatedly visited institutions or spoke to other people it might have given them a sense of familiarity and belonging.

For some students, like Molly and Arlo, they started to think about future courses when choosing their GCSE options, or possibly earlier linked to their academic performance in the end of Year 9 exams. For others it was as late as the start of Year 12 after they got their final GCSE results. Occasionally, the decision was out of the hands of the students and was due to academic subject requirements or even timetable clashes. This means that many students do not have a choice about future qualifications at all but have been steered onto qualifications due to institutional mechanisms that exist and the choices that have been made for them. The possibility of a choice has been removed and it has become a ‘non-decision’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

The majority of students (sixty per cent) who were interviewed and the majority of parents and carers (seventy-five per cent) suggested that would have been far easier to make a decision if all the information had been in one place. To help

achieve this the Government has made available information on the full range of education and training opportunities at colleges via a national course directory on the National Careers Service website. This can be presented on careers information websites and apps to help young people make choices effectively. However, although this information is clearly supposedly easily accessible, findings from the interviews show that not everyone is aware of this. Even if the information was in one place students, parents and carers would still need the relevant skills to access and successfully engage with the material.

Parents and carers wanted the source of the information to be clear. Often it was difficult to tell whether the information online was from a United Kingdom based source. This is further supported by eighty-three per cent of parents and seventy-six per cent of students agreeing with the statement that they did not always know what source of information to trust, and how accurate the information was. For example, Grace or Poppy who were not sure which information to trust and did not want advertising from colleges or sixth forms because they preferred talking to current students.

The students who had made informed choices appeared to have a fixed career goal from an early age rather than just drifting in to choosing a qualification to study. This was supported by findings from the questionnaires, as there were differences as to students' reasons for choosing particular subjects at A Level. For example, students tended to choose Mathematics and Science subjects in terms of their usefulness for a future job or career. On the other hand, in subjects such as Psychology, Media

Studies, Music, History or Design and Technology, reasons relating to interest and enjoyment outnumbered those relating to usefulness for the future.

Surprisingly, an area that was not mentioned as influencing choice was gender or gender stereotypes. As mentioned in Chapter 2, previous research has found that there are strong gender differences in how students chose a particular qualification, and it is often suggested that these result from gender stereotyping. For example, students are more inclined to choose qualifications that previous students similar to themselves had chosen. During the interviews with students, I was surprised by the lack of consideration or even acknowledgement of potential issues of social class, gender and ethnicity. Not one student mentioned at any point in the interviews or the questionnaires that a qualification was suggested to them because they were either male or female, or they felt compelled to study a subject because of their gender, background or ethnicity. This argues against the work by Angus (2012) and Lingard (2010) (as mentioned in Chapter Two) both of whom concluded that external factors, like gender, still exert the most influence over a student's choice of qualification. However, it does not mean the work by Angus and Lingard is not influential, but rather that they do not recognise the influence of childhood and cultural socialisation.

#### **4.8 Methodological Issues**

There are three areas, which are addressed within this section: the validity of the study, questions about generalisability and whether this study can be used to assist putting theory into practice to improve the current situation regarding advice and guidance around qualifications at sixteen.

## Validity of this study

Regehr (2010) writes:

‘the education and academic community, perhaps unthinkingly, adopts specialist terminology and standards in its education work and research’.

I have no doubt that after over twenty years of teaching that my background has influenced me significantly. To illustrate this point further, from my psychology background, quantitative research was portrayed as being about numbers, and this made things more scientific and of ‘higher status’. Whereas, qualitative research was described as being about whether something was present or not. In my professional career, it was not possible to combine the two, as I was a staunch believer in the quantitative perspective. It was only when I started with my pilot research study that I realised that if I wanted to gain a far more subtle and complex understanding of participants’ personal views, on why they had selected to study their chosen qualifications, I would need to become less rigid in my approach. There are several questions within the questionnaire where the bias I have for favouring the quantitative approach shows through, even though I had tried to use open questions. If a researcher wants to know the ‘why’ of something or to get a feel for what the experiences of the participants are, a more personal approach is a better option. For as Stecher and Borko (2002) suggest participants ‘voices’ will explain in detail what a number cannot. However, whatever approach I have taken, this research clearly shows that students need a much clearer and more realistic approach or access to high quality impartial advice and guidance, which is currently lacking in order to help the transition from Year 11 to Year 12 and 13.



The Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit was created because of the Government's Careers Strategy (2017). The strategy sets out a plan for building a high-quality careers system that will help students have the best start in their working lives. The Government's Career Strategy report focused on students in sixth forms and further education colleges. The aim of the Government's Career Strategy was to support students in making well-informed decisions and successful transitions, helping them to choose career opportunities that are right for them. However, as my research shows, the strategy has not yet been fully implemented or has not yet impacted on the students I interviewed. Students need to be clear about the different routes available to them and not feel that certain qualifications will restrict the choice of careers pathways open to them. This view supports the above argument that students need agency to choose for themselves. Even when students do have the information needed, they still need help and support in what to do with the information and know how to develop the skills necessary to interpret it. In my view more support and emphasis is needed, not on the outcome of which qualification is chosen and why, but the actual process of what is involved in making the choice in the first place. In an ideal world, the Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit would be considered a most appropriate strategy to apply to Key Stage 3 students. This supports my current research, as one of my main findings was that careers advice and guidance needed to start much earlier.

When students are unsure, this research has shown they are likely to turn to parents and carers, friends and social media for advice. All of these sources often have limited information and are drawing on their own experiences rather than giving a full

range of trustworthy options. This begs the questions as to what is meant by 'trustworthy' and how would a student or parent and carer know it was trustworthy?

Raising awareness of the full range of opportunities available from an earlier age will allow both formal and informal support to be more beneficial and could address potential barriers when it comes to accessing information and advice and guidance. Formal and informal support networks can work together, and both are often needed to help a person thrive. Formal support includes the services provided by trained professionals and employers. Informal support is advice provided by your social network, for example peer groups or family members

### Generalisability

This research has told a story about what and how students are influenced in their decision-making process, but it is important to remember that the exact details and findings of this process only apply to the students in this study, which is based around one sixth form college. Although some very tentative generalisations may be able to be claimed, these have to be considered with caution when applying to the wider population. Generalisations also need to be treated with caution, as it has to be remembered that each education establishment has their own entry requirements and range of qualifications on offer. My sample may not be fully representative of every 16-19 institution therefore it cannot be fully generalised. Although, I believe that the challenges students face in choosing their qualifications in my study can allow others to find resonance in other similar contexts.

In the next chapter of this thesis, the general conclusions will be introduced and areas of future research will be reflected upon. A number of questions will also be

posed to consider the relevance of the work for my own role as an academic and a researcher.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In previous chapters in this thesis, I have sought to describe the reasons qualifications are currently being chosen by students and to investigate how students make their qualification choice. This included how they are shaped in this decision-making process. The simple answer to the question, 'How do students choose their current qualifications?' would therefore be that they choose within parameters determined by what they know at the start of the process. This was reflected in the research by students who said they did not even attend open days or events or research different qualifications but relied on recommendations by family and peers. Like family, friendships may not only serve as a way of accessing information, but also as a means of receiving support. Greenbank (2011) found that friends were used as a 'sounding board' to share their ideas, as well as a means of emotional support. This demonstrates that possibly students did not understand that comparative research might be necessary.

This final chapter reflects on the findings and considers areas for further research. It will also reflect on how this research will influence my own role as a teacher and my positionality as a researcher. Issues which have arisen from the literature review will be brought forward and inform the conclusions and the final reflections. Although, based on evidence from carefully selected literature, there are some limitations to the conclusions which can be drawn from a small-scale research project. The chapter will conclude with a final reflection on the use of my methodology, findings from the study and implications for professional practice. Due to this research using only a small sample it does not seek to claim definitive findings. Instead, it aims to

utilise the students' stories and make tentative suggestions that could help with understanding students' choice.

There is little specific literature and research on how students choose their post-16 qualifications at the age of sixteen, because the majority of research has focussed on the experience of students in Year 10 and Year 13. Roberts (2000) argues that there is a systematic lack of good quality research on this topic. In addition, I have found little work on the significance and implications of decision-making at post-16 has been undertaken since that led by Hodkinson (1998). Previous research focused on the difficulties faced by students when choosing vocational over academic courses (Hughes, 2017). Hughes' research sought to identify any differences in the perceptions and experiences of students following technical and academic routes, rather than how they made their choice to study at Level 3 in general. There has also been increasing recognition that students require more understanding and support when making decisions about qualification selection. One of the central beliefs underpinning a number of recent reforms is the view that students begin to make choices earlier in their school life. In 2014, in recognition of this need to provide students with timely advice and support, the then Department for Education extended the duty on maintained schools in England and Wales to deliver a curriculum-based programme of careers education to students in Years 7 and 8. This initiative enabled students to develop career management skills earlier, so they are better prepared to take their first set of decisions during Year 9 (Key Stage 4 options). This however, was still not focussing on the choices available after sixteen.

Much of the earlier research focussed, around the decision-making process in Year 9 and Year 10 (Newman, 1986). This current study has illuminated the complexities of the decision-making process. Despite research by Newman being over twenty years old his argument that people often find it hard to make decisions is still relevant today. Some people put off making decisions by endlessly searching for more information or getting other people to offer them recommendations. Much of the research on subject choice at sixteen in England pre-dates some of the policy changes, such as Curriculum 2000 (Bell, 2000) and, at present, policy decisions are informed by relatively modest evidence concerning the reasons for choice. What was striking from the interviews with both parents and carers and students was the contradiction that became apparent when examining the reasons why students chose their current qualifications. The entry requirements for an A Level programme often requires a Grade 5 in the subject at GCSE or a certain number of Grade 5s, while the BTEC qualifications often require Grade 4s thus, implying that A Levels are more highly regarded than the BTEC courses. When interviewed all of the students, apart from two, were on BTEC courses, either due to failing to meet the entry requirements, or failing a subject at the end of Year 12 and having to start again. This implies that BTEC courses are a fall-back option for students who are seen as failing in some respect, reinforcing Newman's (1986) view. This would suggest that students' choices vary according to ability rather than a free choice based around a well thought through decision-making process.

Research on the experience of students in Years 10 and 13 has been undertaken to examine the factors that seem to influence students' qualification choice and career choices and decisions, particularly at the end of Key Stage 5. For example, Stables

(1996) investigated students' approaches to degree choices and Payne (2003) summarised the impact of student attainment, background characteristics (such as gender and ethnicity), home circumstances or guidance on the choices that students made at ages ten to sixteen. How students chose the qualifications to study in Year 12 and 13 is still an area of limited research. There has been increasing interest in how students are making their choices about progression to Higher Education in the last ten years, but progression to post-16 education is limited (Diamond *et al.*, 2014).

This thesis has attempted to find answers to help inform professional practice concerning the difficult decisions students have to make at a crucial time in their lives. These are driven by circumstances, experiences and events in the years preceding them. There is research which looks at similar themes and while it makes some contribution to helping to understand what influences qualification choice, there is a significant gap. Although, this research is different, as it focusses on explaining why students choose the current qualifications and career choices which they intend to study in either sixth form or college.

### **5.1 What has the research told us?**

This research has explored how students, for my purposes those aged between sixteen and nineteen, chose their qualifications, and the main influences on helping them to make this decision. Students who decide to stay in education after the age of sixteen potentially face an extremely broad range of courses and subjects from which they can choose, though their options may be substantially limited depending on the type of institution they attend.

Previous research, for example Keys and Ormerod's study of choices for boys and girls in the light of pupils' own expressed subject preference (1976), suggested that students choose to do a particular A Level because they enjoyed the subject or had a liking or interest. The qualifications they end up studying come as standard. However, in 21<sup>st</sup> century education students have the opportunity to study a wide range of new subjects that they often have not studied before at GCSE Level.

Findings from both the interviews and questionnaires have demonstrated that students are choosing qualifications in a more sophisticated way, other than whether they like the subject. However, sometimes the choice is out of their control. They are considering the usefulness of the subject for a preferred future job or career:

*Having Maths or History is so much more useful than Drama or Art. They show you can think critically and also are required for teaching. I went to a primary school for a week and realise you need a national curriculum subject to become a teacher.*

(Year 12, Richard who is hoping to become a Primary Teacher).

Interview data from students found they were drawing on work experience in facilitating which careers they were interested in, then matching these to qualifications, which could lead to these potential careers:

*I attended a vet's for 2 weeks in the summer. I knew after this I wanted to work with animals so I would need science subjects or Maths. I spoke to Miss at school and she advised me what A Level subjects I would need.*  
(Jasdeep, who has now been offered a place to study Veterinarian Science at university).

This demonstrates that undertaking work experience might inform future qualification choice, especially if combined with objective and comprehensive careers advice and aiming for a specific career. The above finding could also suggest examples of 'best practice' in the way in which employers engage with learning providers. This could



involve providing 'worthwhile' work experience placements, to engaging directly with schools to provide curriculum content. This would allow employers to feel they are having the opportunity to become involved in training the future workforce and to focus on the skills they think are lacking, as mentioned previously in the literature review.

Young people actively participating in 'worthwhile' work experience will be helped to consider different options and qualifications needed for future study (Pring, 2009). However, for many students the work experience they undertake at school was often structured around choices that have been made for them. To overcome this, the government's proposed Youth Charter was announced in April 2019 which aims to bring together the often-overlapping initiatives, support, and funding from various departments and government bodies in a more joined up manner to make it easier for the employer to understand how they can support the education system and give young people the best start in life:

*My work experience was in admin at a Law Firm. It was chosen by my teachers as I was taking Business Studies and Law at GCSE. I knew after this I wanted a job that was not sitting at a desk all day, so I chose more practical qualifications to study.*

(Year 13 student, Nisha, who has accepted a place to study Nursing).

Nisha had written on her questionnaire that her family had been supportive as well and unlike some parents she comments they had not said '*nursing, it's not a good job, don't do it*'. This is quite a career change for Nisha from wanting to be a solicitor to applying for child nursing. This change of direction from Nisha shows how work experience can help a student to know what not to do. Again, Nisha's experience illustrates how work experience can help students with their choices. Often teachers

in the students' schools have only life experience within education. These findings support research by Ball (2000) which was discussed in chapter two, about the importance of different types of choice, for example 'contingent choosers'.

Contingent choosers are often first-generation students characterised by a working-class upbringing, low income and no family tradition of further education and often having parents educated outside the UK. This may mean that first generation students are disadvantaged, as they may not know where to look for information.

This also supports choice linked to agency theory as it relates to how students make choices and the influences on them in helping them to make their decisions. For some students choice is more limited than for others, depending upon race, class, ethnicity, gender or the way we are conditioned. Agency theory is how we act at the present moment and is shaped by both what is actually possible given existing resources, as well as constraints and judgements about what is possible. (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Interview and questionnaire data from students suggest that they recognised, and valued, the industrial experience of their teachers (where this exists), which made a positive contribution to their understanding of qualifications and the industries they related to:

*My maths teacher was a former engineer. He spoke about it a lot in lessons as a way of applying Maths. I wanted to study Maths, but it was what Sir said about using Maths in Engineering that made me decide to study for Engineering.*

(Year 12 A Level Physics and Engineering student, Phil).

Phil's comment was also supported by views from other students who described the experience their teachers had with local companies helped them consider specific qualifications. The above findings can be supported by Bell (2000) suggesting, that

there are two types of educational choosers, the 'contingent' and the 'embedded'. Contingent choosers rely more on official information to make their choices, while embedded choosers are less likely to accept official information as the truth, relying more on unofficial information. The unofficial included family and friends and 'hearsay' stories that operate within their home or social environments. Students' own personal experiences, such as attending work experience or an open event, will also help guide their final choices.

Conclusions about who students are most likely to turn to when it comes to seeking advice about what qualifications to study post-16 have been considered. Although a small percentage of students do start thinking about their post-16 choices at an early age, this research has found it is most common for them to begin this important process during Year 11. The subjects and courses young people choose to take from age fourteen onwards can have profound implications for their later life, education and economic opportunities (Chowdry, 2011). A wide curriculum of choice on offer is only valuable if students are aware of which part of it is important for them, which means that there is a need for impartial, personalised information, advice and guidance (O'Donnell, 2009). However, having a wider curriculum choice to study post-16 is only valuable if students are fully aware of the options available, and whether the qualification suits their needs and the entry requirements needed.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter some institutions can only offer a limited number of courses. It is particularly important that 16-year olds be fully informed of all the opportunities available and have the guidance to go with the information. However, the findings from this current study suggest that often they are not. Students need to

have all the possible options explained and be aware that any decisions they make will have implications for their future career or employment.

Students participating in this research mentioned that it was not the lack of information they received, but the timing that was wrong. Students are not being given careers advice at a sufficiently early age to allow them to make informed choices and they do not receive a full picture of the consequences of their subject choices. For example, Nisha in her interview said that her teachers chose her work experience and she was not consulted about the choice. This could possibly be due to a mismatch between what teachers think and what students want to study. Advice on subject choice and on the alternatives open to students could begin earlier in secondary school. My findings have demonstrated that the decision-making process was different for each individual, although all the students who participated knew that they wanted, at an early age, to go to university. A substantial proportion of students in the sample had already made up their minds that they wanted to apply to go to further education then study in higher education without too much agonising, but fully expected to be offered impartial advice and guidance to help them make a final decision. These findings also correlate with Bowes (2015) who suggested young people needed to be supported with effective information, advice and guidance in order to support their choices. A finding from this thesis is that it is important to distinguish between information, advice and guidance because a student might be given all the required information, but not have the advice and guidance needed on how to use or understand it. For example, a student might receive all the information on the entry requirements for Applied Criminology or Biomedical Science, but not the relevant advice and guidance on career opportunities or progression into this

competitive field. This is a relevant example because the context of this choice has been led by television and the field is a very narrow and competitive one with few job vacancies.

Several of the students altered their career focus when they found out they could not study the qualifications they had originally planned. The ever-changing range of qualifications on offer to students in England has undergone a dramatic change in recent years. This mainly involved an increase in the available range of qualifications on offer, with vocational qualifications showing the greatest increase. While the government has several clear priorities in terms of qualifications, Years 10 and 11 students have to study core subjects (notably Science, English and Maths). There are currently gaps in knowledge of how post-16 providers choose the courses they offer to students, and how students then weigh up their choices to reach a final decision. These can largely be explained by the wishes of what the Senior Leadership Teams want, the local labour market, what teachers wish to teach, and what qualifications students vote for (the rate of applications) in numbers. If these courses are not valued by employers or universities these courses can be detrimental to students (Spiegler, 2006). Students need to understand the importance of not restricting opportunities for studying certain courses later on (see chapter 4). In addition, given the developments of new routes through the 14-19 qualification system, including the development of national diplomas, there is a need to ensure that students not only have the advice they need, but also the necessary skills to make use of it.

My research has shown that students who make well thought out qualification or career choices have all received trustworthy and factual up to date information about courses or routes from their teachers or by combining a variety of different resources. This is important as it means they will be less likely to become disenchanted and drop out. The lack of information available when a small majority of students started their qualifications was one of the reasons why some students' parents were unhappy with their children being on the course. This shows that the influence of their current educational institution is dominant in the decision-making process. The 'non-choice' that some of the students have results in them being detached from the decision-making process risks them becoming disengaged. This detachment from the decision-making process could be avoided to some degree if the students were fully informed of different courses in Years 10 and 11. This information could be targeted at individual students and take place during tutorial sessions. This also demonstrates the importance of careers advice taking a holistic approach and making students aware of alternative qualifications available to them as circumstances change, for example through maturity and confidence, in their two years of schooling. While students may accept this 'nonchoice' they may become disillusioned with the choice of qualifications as they realise the limitations of the course and therefore have a poor perception of it. Although, at face value students do appear to have more choice over the qualifications that are available, the actual choice in reality is quite restricted. This finding supports data collected from The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) 2004-2005. Despite this research being fifteen years old, it demonstrates that even with all the radical reforms in the curriculum and introduction of new qualifications, students are still facing the same issues today as those that were reported in 2004-2005. The report

found nineteen per cent of students were unable to study the qualifications they wanted post-16 due to timetable clashes and sixteen per cent were unable to combine certain subjects. These findings demonstrate that, even today, post-16 institutions are clearly offering a wide range of qualifications for students to choose to study, but factors such as school organisation and resources appear to be binding constraints, preventing them from pursuing some of the qualifications they wish to study. This shows that students do not have the choice of qualification as is widely thought.

Many institutions are presenting qualification choices in 'option blocks' rather than simply open lists from which students are free to choose. This thesis comes with recommendations for practice by institutions, for example, to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to ensure students, who find themselves in a similar position have interventions put in place so they do not become disengaged or see their course in an unfavourable light.

There have also been questions raised regarding the effectiveness of the marketing strategies used by sixth form providers and the role of information, advice and guidance in helping students make their decisions. Open days and evenings appeared to be useful but not fully trusted by students because they sensed it was more to do with college marketing than for the benefit of students. Students paid little attention to radio and TV adverts, while websites and chat rooms were more influential.

Students who made informed choices often based this around their own perceptions of whether they believed they were good or poor at a subject. Students who saw themselves as poor at Maths at school tended to opt for more written-based courses. The self-perception a student has about their own academic ability and skills is a key influencing factor in determining how they choose their future qualifications. Bandura (1977) referred to this as 'self-efficacy'. This is where an individual's belief in their own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task can play a major role in how the person approaches goals, tasks and challenges. An *outcome* expectancy is 'a person's estimate that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes'. An *efficacy* expectation is 'the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes' (Bandura, 1977, p.193). Although a person may expect a certain activity (in my case students choosing a certain qualification) to lead to a particular outcome, they may lack the motivation to perform the action, doubting their ability to do so. This view was also reinforced by media influences and stereotypes seen on social media and television.

Careers advice should also focus on the provision which is available in the local area and the current trends within the local employment market. This was also referred to in Chapter 2, focussing on how colleges choose the qualifications and courses they offer as it is a combination of what they are paid for and what teachers want to teach and where the demand is for a certain qualification. Individual choices can be subject to significant influence by, and interaction with, local job market opportunities (Ball, 2000). This demonstrates how important institutions are in shaping students' qualification choice. Students may potentially choose from a wide array of qualifications, but the type of institution they attend may substantially limit these



choices, resulting in the 'non-choice' as mentioned previously. There is a strong degree of differentiation between post-16 providers, with some offering a large range of academic and vocational qualification, while others focus solely on academic qualifications (Adey and Biddulph 2011). This indicates how important it is to involve local employers and companies in the decision-making process about students' choices, so it can become collaborative. In addition, this illustrates the need to provide good quality work experience and or mentoring to allow students to explore different pathways. Mentoring systems help promote and encourage enrichment, especially where there is the risk of a deficit in support (Rogers, 2009). However, with students of this age, having to make all kinds of life decisions and take important assessments, it is worth considering whether there would be enough scope for meaningful work experience. A further suggestion would be to give students a wider experience of the working world by encouraging more visits, talks, and variety in short intense work placements or earlier work placements than in Year 10.

This research has identified a common theme which is the lack of trustworthy information, advice and guidance available for students in this age group. The need for good quality advice, not necessarily face-to-face advice, from a range of different people would be a recommendation for good practice in all education settings. Recommended good practice from the United States of America in the field of educational, vocational and personal counselling shows that students chose the counsellor themselves without regard to the specialism they offer. A similar example in the United Kingdom occurred when new young Home Economics teachers were constantly approached for advice in the informal setting of their kitchen classroom.

This was because the teachers were more likely to walk around and talk to the students because of the practical nature of the subject. This demonstrates that students tend to differ in who they seek advice from, and whose advice they value most. While many students appreciate the impartial advice that they receive from careers advisers, others value the support they get from teachers who know them well (Blenkinsop, 2006). Therefore, it is important that all students are able to access diverse, effective information, advice and guidance in relation to the decisions they are making, and that the people to whom they turn are supported in order that they are able to provide effective careers education and guidance, no matter what their role in the school is. This research would suggest that good careers guidance does not need to come from a Careers Guidance expert but can be from someone the students trust, like and admire; although it is important to ensure this person has the relevant up to date training and the ability to discuss choices openly. However, this thesis is not suggesting that anyone can offer careers advice and in September 2019 the Department for Education recognised this by making £4 million available to The Careers and Enterprise Company to enable every school and college to nominate a Career Leader. Although a recommendation could be that instead of selecting a member of the senior leadership team, a member of staff is chosen for this role who is already informally offering this and is also trusted by students. Although this is an important step it cannot bring the careers advice and guidance up to the professional level of the past.

In my study, even when appropriately qualified staff were available, students still preferred to approach the teacher they felt an affinity towards. For example, Charlie who spoke to his teacher Mr Grey or Helen who spoke to her drama teacher for

advice. However, students consulting their teachers might risk teachers not always knowing what advice to offer. The role of careers teachers was to support and train staff who found themselves being approached by students. The Gatsby Benchmark Strategy recognised the importance of a structure being put in place from the Senior Leadership Team down to classroom teachers, all being trained in the ability to offer appropriate careers support to students. This must be applied on both a one to one and a group basis. A further recommendation, which relates back to the third research question, 'What are the implications of the choices that students make for education policy', relates to ensuring that the training of all new teachers could include a proportion of their course to equip them with the skills needed to offer impartial careers advice. This could be integrated into all initial teacher training courses and also become a mandatory part of continuing professional development in schools. At present this is particularly important with the uncertainty faced by many students due to the impact Covid-19 has had on their education and career aspirations. This thesis would recommend that as a minimum all graduates embarking on a teacher training qualification could be introduced at the earliest practicable moment to careers training. This should then continue throughout their professional development. To allow this to happen, a recommendation from this thesis would be that teacher training could be reviewed and that all teacher training courses are staffed and equipped to meet the demands of offering an element on careers learning and development. This would allow for the personal development of the student alongside learning about their pedagogical studies. A further recommendation would be that for qualified teachers this is built into the appraisal process.

Another finding that emerged was how, although students appeared to be receiving information, advice and guidance interviews, many thought it was rushed or more of a 'token gesture', for example Poppy and her mother. It is important that information, advice and guidance interviews are properly structured and target the individual needs of students rather than being completed as a 'tick box' exercise so institutions can say they have offered this service. We are in a situation where the IAG for adults is more available than it has ever been, yet the provision for 14-19-year olds remains inadequate (the National Careers Service, 2020). This requires urgent attention so the whole process can be seen as valued and worthwhile. A further suggestion emerges in support of the third research question. It could be that government policy would allow local education authorities to begin an experimental programme to accelerate careers advisers back into schools and to help remedy the existing functional deficiencies that have been identified by students, parents and careers staff throughout the interviews that were conducted. Also, government policy could allow time in the curriculum to facilitate the development of the personal and social development of students by encouraging links to be formed with youth employment services, further education providers and local employers so as to strengthen career progression and knowledge of what is required in the local community. This could also help with social mobility and provide up to date information about the local labour market.

Offering high-quality careers guidance can contribute to raising aspirations and improving motivation which could ultimately help to improve retention and achievement on qualifications. Recruiting and enrolling students on to the correct qualifications by providing unbiased advice will enable students to achieve more

from their given starting points. Having an identified and trained Careers Leader available to all students might help achieve this.

## **5.2 Reflections on this research**

A central aim and feature of this research was the importance of hearing the voices of those aged between sixteen and nineteen on why they had chosen their current qualifications.

Whitty *et al.* (2015, p. 58) suggests that 'academic research, both qualitative and quantitative, should not be confined to describing the problems but should start contributing to solutions'. The age group researched was a substantive part of the original contribution to this research; up until now, the voices of sixteen to nineteen-year olds have been relatively neglected in this field of research on qualification choice. However, there are several limitations to this research in respect of the methodology, depth of study, and underpinning framework. Issues relate to the sampling frame as this consisted of only one sixth form college. Those aged 16 to 19 who attended post-16 education in other forms other than studying at Level 3 were not part of this research. However, future research could consider different types of institutions and courses other than Level 3 provision, for example, apprentices, young people in employment

In terms of triangulation of the data, I could have used more than one post-16 institution. This would have allowed me to reach a wider geographical area for the study, especially as it would enable me to reach out to a wider number of participants. In particular, I would be able to interview career guidance advisers other than those working in my chosen sixth form college. This would also have allowed

me to extend the data and would have added further depth to the findings, thus reducing any possible bias. Bias can occur at any phase of research, including study design or data collection, as well as in the process of data analysis and publication (Ultee, 2019). However, as some degree of bias is nearly always present in a research study, the researcher must also consider how bias might influence a study's conclusions (Gerhard, 2018). As I was limited with time I had to reduce the scope of my research project to one that was manageable. Nevertheless, the findings from this research sought to illuminate the research questions through 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey, 1988).

However, as this study is based on a small sample using mainly qualitative research it is important to remember not to over claim or make wide generalisations.

The small sample size involved in my research may be open to criticisms concerning both representativeness and generalisability. Yet, establishing a high degree of representativeness and generalisability was not my intention. I employed a voluntary sampling method, meaning no selection of participants took place. Knapp (1997) emphasised that large-sample research is needed to provide both breadth and depth before generalisations can be fully made. As this research focuses on one sixth form college in the West Midlands, the sample is too limited to extrapolate any findings to all students in England who are making their qualification choices, however, 'naturalistic generalisations' may be applied with caution. Often, it is not possible, or desirable, to demonstrate that findings or conclusions from small scale research are applicable to other situations or populations (Shenton, 2004; Drury *et al.*, 2011). For example, in this research just because some of the students found their careers

interviews to be rushed, like Poppy, it does not mean this will be the case across other colleges or sixth forms.

### **5.3 Contribution to practice and my own professional identity and knowledge**

The opportunity to complete this study has helped develop the interview process and tutorial programme within my own institution. We are currently in the process of developing a two-week induction programme, which will be for all Year 12 students studying at the sixth form level.

This will include a compulsory support meeting with the college's careers adviser and a meeting for parents and carers, to explain different career pathways and qualifications. This is designed to ensure students are on the correct and most appropriate pathway and allowing time for changes to be made early on. In addition, this will hopefully improve retention and success rates. All students will be shown in their tutorial sessions how to effectively use careers technology software, Also an icon will be placed on all computers to allow easy access. I am also currently meeting with the Senior Leadership Team and School Liaison Officers. This is to discuss how we can encourage students to attend college open events and how best to support Year 11 students on their transition from school to college. Findings from this research have resulted in an online interactive virtual tour being designed and made readily available on the college website.

Whilst qualification choice, and how these choices are influenced, is a popular area of research at Key Stage 3, I would argue that there has been insufficient research

and focus on this area of choices made at Key Stage 3. The majority of published research has been on discussing how students make choices regarding studying at university. Thompson (2019) points to the ambiguities and uncertainty for students in their career aspirations and choice of HE, calling for clearer information, advice and guidance; and more scaffolding to support families in their decision-making processes to enable them to understand the information available. Combined with some students not feeling they have sufficient information, this places even greater importance on how schools, universities and professionals shape expectations, in terms of progression to university (Thomas, 2011). The findings from my current study have identified one of the challenges faced by students is that although they may have sufficient information, they may not have the help or skills available to use it.

Little appears to be mentioned about the transition from school to post-16 education in the literature. Having knowledge of factors that potentially affect students' choice of study at L3 could be useful to the policy makers and for the design of the post-16 curriculum (Stables and Wikeley, 2017). However, the amount of research in this area are lacking. There has been increasing interest in the provision of information, advice and guidance with respect to progressing to Higher Education but Further Education has been left behind (Diamond *et al.*, 2014). This research study attempts to make a contribution to the debate on how best to advise students when it comes to choosing courses for study after completing their GCSEs. I would argue that this research makes two particular contributions:



Firstly, the research has shown that the majority of students are willing and happy to access information online about career choice and advice, but still have a very strong preference for face-to-face help and support when it comes to making important decisions. This could suggest that information is available and it is accessible, but it is good advice and guidance they need to help them interpret and apply the information to their situation. Findings have also demonstrated that students are drawing on the industrial experience of their teachers to inform not only their understanding of certain careers but also to gain ideas. It is important to make sure that students are aware of all the options open to them and they have the confidence to pursue those options and also have greater exposure to employers from an early age. To achieve this students need independent, impartial advice and be able to meet people who do a range of jobs so they can gain insight, inspiration and advice.

The findings of this research would suggest that more needs to be done to raise awareness amongst students of where they can find this help and how best to make use of careers information, advice and guidance when it is made available. The concept of choice overload, given the potential number of options available to students at the age of fourteen and even more post-16, is likely to be relevant to qualification choice. Students may be prone to choice overload when presented with a large array of options. Large choice sets can be demotivating for students since the costs associated with picking the 'right' option from a long list could be relatively high (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000). Such choice overload would suggest that it would be undesirable to simply present students with very long lists of courses, as they would simply fall back on heuristics rather than fully considering the options (Moon,

*et al.*, 2004). Heuristics play important roles in both problem solving and decision-making. When we are trying to solve a problem or make a decision, we often turn to these mental shortcuts when we need a quick solution. This means students might not stop to fully think about the consequences of their choices. Purely rational decisions would involve weighing such factors as potential costs against possible benefits (Kortkeling, 2018). However, it is important to consider the impact of reducing choices as some of the options that become eliminated might be more appropriate for some students. Therefore, giving students too much choice can lead to poor quality decision-making and over thinking. Students would be less likely to pick highly-rated qualifications, and more likely to be distracted by less important information and fewer perceived differences in the quality of different qualifications (Wilson and Schooler, 1991). From this evidence schools could ensure that the guidance they offer to students is well thought out and spread throughout the curriculum, rather than in the last stages of a student's school journey. Leaving careers guidance until the age of sixteen can be fraught with uncertainties as students try to navigate the decision-making process (Ball, 2000). This may be particularly important, because it would then also give students the opportunity to change their qualification choices before it became too late. However, it is important to remember, as stated earlier, that funding has been withdrawn. Careers education and guidance, once viewed as the 'Cinderella service' within education, was later viewed by policy makers (Howells, 1998) as pivotal in the drive to increase access to opportunities to engage in lifelong learning (Guidance Council, 2000). This will remain an issue to be aware of when it comes to making policy recommendations. This might be even more significant 'Post-Covid 19' when CAG may become more important. It is also strongly signalled in the White Paper on skills,

Department for Education (2021). Careers guidance and personal advisers have formed a significant part of the delivery of the government's inclusion policy. Roberts (2002) suggests that a wide range of policies have social exclusion as the enemy.

Secondly, students felt they were able to find information, which would help them to make fully informed choices. However, they did not know which information to trust. Students who were interviewed welcomed the idea of a new online system where all the information could be found in one place. Some participants suggested a central database would be ideal, very similar to the systems set up and provided by the UCAS site when it comes to applying for Higher Education.

The support available to help aid qualification choice could be more personal in nature and equip students, so they are better able to access formal and informal support. Although, support and help is out there, it is not the lack of information that appears to be the problem, but not knowing what to do with the information, and the complexity that is causing the problems. These two points mentioned are key findings of the research. This shows that we need better information that students can go to and they need to know what to do with it. This would make an area for further study, as it would be helpful to know whether students' attitudes vary according to what stages they are at, and how family support and peer support can make a difference.

Beyond the findings and further questions generated by this study, I have learnt how to engage in in-depth interviews and to find ways to overcome my dyslexia when it comes to using qualitative methods to interpret data. I have become more in control

of my dyslexia and realised that I can be accepted into the academic world and I do not need to apologise if my way of thinking or my punctuation is slightly different to that of other people. I hope in the future to continue to gain confidence in my writing and to eventually publish some of my research.

### **Suggestions for further research**

It has been acknowledged earlier in the research that because only a small sample has been used it is important not to over generalise. This research offers a snapshot from students' lives. This is an illustrative study which takes places in a particular place and time which seeks to illuminate important issues. The findings, although tentative in terms of the sample size, appear to confirm that there is plenty of information out there but more needs to be done to improve the usability of the information for both students and parents and carers. However, the literature considered throughout chapter two shows there is a clear need for further research to inform policy in this area as a way of moving forward. This is another implication of my study that supports my third research question. Policy makers could think about better information and better advice and guidance so that students know how to use it effectively. This could be researched by:

- identifying the professional development requirements of teachers who are involved in CAG provision
- focusing on how parents or carers who may have attended school some time ago can make sense of the new qualifications
- how stronger self-help skills could be introduced into the curriculum.

More research in the same context and age group would triangulate the findings of this research and add value to them.

Further research in particular could explore the impact of gender and class stereotypes in qualification and employment choices post-16. Although, this was not mentioned as an area of concern within this current study, it was discussed within chapter 2. An ideal study could also consider how students view certain qualifications as right or wrong for them, and the associations that these perceptions have with social class and gender. Among female students, across all age ranges and institutions, they tend to choose qualifications based on enjoyment and their own self-perceptions within a subject compared to males who often choose a qualification because of the finance rewards, for example computing (Irigaray, 1984). These differences reflect gender differences that have already been characterised within feminist research.

The stories and voices of the students and their parents and carers who took part in this research show they are keen to see improvements in how the information is used so that they are better equipped to handle the information. This may allow students to make more informed choices about the qualifications they wish to study and the career routes they choose for their future lives. It needs to be acknowledged that choices made by students about future qualifications and their perceptions of appropriate careers, are heavily influenced by factors beyond their control. Further exploration of these issues could be usefully developed to inform policy in this area. These findings could represent the starting point in terms of knowledge, to facilitate further research. Future research would aim to be longitudinal and ideally follow

students from when they start secondary school at eleven, to see how their career choices change and progress. This will identify how decisions may change over time and how parents and carers are involved in this process. Longitudinal studies would also be able to explore how students engage with their qualifications and opportunities available to them. Further research could also investigate whether certain groups of low achieving students really are directed to more vocational qualifications. This would be an area to be developed in further research as it is crucial that every student has the opportunity to participate fully in the decision-making process about the qualifications they wish to study post-16. The subjects and courses students choose to take from age sixteen can have profound implications for their later life, education and economic opportunities. Shaw (2012, p120) suggests that choices 'are not in any sense free', nor are they simply a question of rationally matching qualifications with opportunities to achieve the most favourable outcomes. Therefore, it remains vital we understand how students make their choices, and whether any aspects of the current decision-making process may be detrimental to a student's future.

My study has demonstrated that intervention surrounding qualification choice, particularly around Year 9 may be too late, as students may already have discounted subjects without having a clear understanding of the options available to them. Supporting students to make an informed choice about post-16 options and the qualifications they need to study could begin much earlier on their school journey. This could also involve their families so that meaningful conversations about qualifications and career choice can start at an early age. The argument is that students are not interested, and there are fewer experts in providing careers

information advice and guidance. Parental engagement has a large and positive impact on children's learning and education (Statham, 2010). When parents and carers are fully engaged it is said to raise a child's engagement and aspirations. Choosing the right qualifications at the right college or sixth form is an important decision, involving a significant investment of time and discussion with other people. By ensuring parents and carers are fully involved this will help to equip and empower students to make important decisions about future career pathways and different qualifications.

This research has suggested there could be a basic entitlement for all students, from an early age, to have access to the right support and advice so they fully understand and can engage with all the options available. Many students turned to parents and carers for support. It is important that this is recognised more than it is now. Parents and carers are often invited to attend 'Options Evenings' when their child is thirteen or fourteen. The lack of information available to students when they make their choices prior to studying post-16 qualifications is one of the reasons why some of the students' parents were unhappy with their children being on a certain course and directed their children to choose more well-known traditional qualifications. Parents with degrees or equivalents are significantly more likely to encourage their children to study for academic qualifications and to steer them away from vocational qualifications (Clemens, 2011). Interviews showed that parents and carers were unaware of many of the different qualifications available. This was particularly true of science courses. Parents and carers would direct their children to study for the traditional A Levels in Science and were unaware of the existence of L3 BTEC science qualifications until college lecturers suggested it to them. This again demonstrates a need to consider how schools and colleges market, or inform their

students about the variety of post-16 qualifications available. This process might start more effectively in Year 7. This would enable parents and carers to have sufficient information about future options and qualification routes that might give them more knowledge to provide advice. This would give them the opportunity to be able to offer the best support possible. This detachment from the decision-making process could be avoided if parents and carers become more aware of what happens during the tutorial process in Years 10 and 11. Any Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provided must be accurate and meet students' needs. To help achieve this the Government introduced a new legal requirement, from September 2018 for schools to publish information about their careers programme on their websites. The information could be targeted at individual students if the tutorial staff are familiar with both the courses available and the individual students. My interviews found that participants only really understood the limitations associated with certain qualifications after they had commenced their studies and it was too late to change. This was particularly true of students who were studying English, English Language, English Literature and Language combined when they found out they were not on the correct A Level combination of English to enter their chosen Higher Education Course. This may be an indicator of gaps in any IAG that the students receive when selecting their qualifications.

More awareness of the financial support and opportunities offered by many Further Education and Sixth Form providers could be made available earlier on. Parents and carers are unaware that free travel, free school meals, and bursaries to help with books or specialist equipment for those eligible are available. This lack of knowledge has meant that in some cases parents and carers were only focusing on the Sixth Form at their current child's school or local further education college due to the cost



of travel. Cost was found to be more of an influence on decision making for disadvantaged students and those who tend to follow more vocational qualifications. Findings from the interviews with the parents and carers showed many were unaware of the 16-18 Bursary Fund. According to the Gatsby Standards all schools should ensure that students understand the programmes available to support them with the costs associated with staying in post-16 Further Education; for instance, costs such as transport, accommodation, books, equipment and childcare. This was clearly not happening as concern from the parent and carer interviews was that it would be too expensive to buy the equipment needed for a vocational course (for example, specialised knives and uniform for a catering course) so only discussed A Level options. Parents and carers stated that they wished they had found out about available bursaries sooner, as a large number only discovered the information through chance encounters by talking to other parents. It is not uncommon for students to switch off a career pathway or qualification because of the barriers associated with the cost of study (McDowall *et al.*, 2012).

There is evidence from this research that as 'more' choices become available and 'more' complex there will be a greater need for personalised information, advice and guidance, so that the needs of all abilities are met. This is supported by The Post-16 Skills Plan (2016) which highlighted the Government's intention to empower students, parents and employers by making more information available about what students go on to do and how much they earn after taking particular qualifications. Clearly, this information needs to be easy to access and understand so that students can use it to compare different education and career options and make confident and informed choices.

The influences of schools, teachers and families have all been shown to be important in the decision-making process. This study suggests that these influences are more significant than those of careers advisers and services. However, despite all the help and advice available at the end of the day it is the way institutions present qualification choices that are likely to be a significant determining factor of students' ultimate choices. Parents and carers, social media, teachers and careers advisers can all make suggestions about helping to make informed choices, but if an institution does not offer a qualification or entry requirements are not met, then these external constraints will prevent students from pursuing the qualifications they would like to study. This assumes that students are aware of the alternatives, but it is probable that for at least some students, a 'real choice' as defined by Matthews and Hansen (2005) is impossible. Thaler *et al.* (2013) refer to the practice of influencing choice by 'organising the context in which people make decisions'. This can be another example of choice architecture, as a similar application frequently mentioned is how food is displayed in cafeterias, where offering healthy food at the beginning of the line or at eye level can contribute to healthier choices. This could be applied to how educational institutions market courses, making one course look more desirable over another. The real power of choice architecture is not its ability to coerce but its ability to persuade students that this is the best qualification to choose.

This could explain why many students 'fall' into what they end up doing. The last question on the student questionnaire asked them to state using one word or phrase why they had chosen their current qualifications. Sixty-five per cent said, 'by chance' or similar. This also reflects findings by Helmsley-Brown and Fosketts (2001) which suggests that for many young people, the reality of their eventual choice is one that emanates from a failure to achieve their original personal goal. Their choices are

second (or lower choices) and they must go through the process of defaulting to lower ambitions in qualification and career choice pathways. This could mean there are no real alternatives open to them and therefore students 'had no choice' or a 'restricted choice' determined by the grades they had achieved in relation to what they could study at Level 3. This is an example of choice architecture because advertisers like to think that consumers choose the brands they advertise deliberately. In reality, people spend a lot of their time avoiding making active choices. Instead they take the choice that is no choice at all – the default choice.

A suggestion from this research to help provide real choice for all students would be to create a range of options within different education institutions to cater for the diversity of students. This will also allow for more disadvantaged students to be targeted and offered the information, advice and guidance they often miss out on. However, this will be irrelevant if nothing is put in place to support those who offer the guidance about the options available or what is right for each student.

All students, in all institutions, need good information, advice and guidance on all the routes and pathways of qualifications available to them. This at least should begin from the start of secondary school, ideally providing opportunities to visit or talk to college or sixth form teachers and students who have successfully completed the qualifications. The information, advice and guidance given should be meaningful and not just a 'token gesture' to allow institutions to 'tick' boxes so it appears standards have been met.



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## Appendix Section

### Appendix 1: Informed Consent Form.

This is a copy of the letter that was given to all students over the age of eighteen and to parents or carers for students below the age of eighteen so they were aware of the implications of the research.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to take in my research study towards my professional doctorate. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Project Title: Paths in Education: choices made between academic and vocational courses at Level 3 for 16-19 year olds.

Researcher: Ms. Z Lewis

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part I would like to explain what my research is all about.

*I am looking at the reasons why students like yourselves have chosen to study for your current qualification and what has influenced this decision.*

If you have any questions about my research or are unsure about anything I am researching, please ask me before you decide whether to join in.

You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and to. If you are under 18 years old, you will need to obtain permission from your parent/carer before you are allowed to participate.

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire about the reasons you have chosen to study for your current Level 3 qualification. You may also be asked to take part in an interview so that I can find out more detailed information about your choice and what led up to it.

I would like to assure you that all information will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of my research. I may tape record your interview and I would like your permission to use this material as part of my research.

### Participant's Statement

I agree that:

- I have read the information above and understand what the study involves.
- I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify Ms Lewis and withdraw immediately

- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study
- I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998
- I agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study
- I understand that the information I provide will be used to form the final written report and I will be able to see a copy should I wish. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any written material.

Signature (participant)

Date:

Signature (parent/carer if under 18 years of age)

I would like to reassure you that again all this information will be confidential and will be kept securely with only myself having full access to the information you provide.

Ms Z Lewis

## **Appendix 2: Student Choice Questionnaire.**

This is a copy of the questionnaire which was given out for all students to complete.

The decisions you make regarding your career and qualifications you wish to study post-16 are possibly one of the important decisions you will have to make in your academic career. Therefore, the support and advice you receive during this process can influence which qualification routes you select to study. The purpose of this research is to investigate how these decisions are made and what recommendations could be put in place to help future learners.

This questionnaire is specifically designed to be answered by those in the age-group 16-19.

As part of this research I will be asking you to answer the following questions. The questions are designed to be answered either by ticking one or more of the boxes, writing a figure or one word answer or by writing a more detailed response.

This questionnaire is anonymous and the results will be treated with complete confidentiality, so feel free to be honest. Please write in as much detail as you can where requested as this will help the research. The questionnaire should not take long to complete and I hope that you will find it interesting and enjoyable. Read the questions carefully and follow any instructions that are given.

When you have completed the questionnaire, either give it to me in person in my classroom G/08 or place it in the 6<sup>th</sup> Form internal post tray in the 6<sup>th</sup> Form staff room.

If you have any problems or questions about the questionnaire please contact Ms Z Lewis on [Zoe.Lewis@.....ac.uk](mailto:Zoe.Lewis@.....ac.uk).

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP AND CO-OPERATION.**

**PLEASE TURN OVER THE PAGE.**

1. What is your current Level 3 programme of study or combination of subjects? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

2. Number in order of 1-4 (1 being the most important) the following items that you see as being influential in helping you to decide on your current programme of study:

Peer influence \_\_\_\_\_

Parental influence \_\_\_\_\_

Career aspirations \_\_\_\_\_

Careers Advice and Guidance \_\_\_\_\_

3. Did you have a Careers Advice and Guidance Interview in either Year 10/11?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If **YES** did this influence your current qualification choice? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

If **No** could you explain why you did not have an interview \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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4. Did any particular teacher in your school life have any influence on your choice on your current qualification?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Please explain your answer \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Did you have a particular career in mind when choosing your current qualification?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

6. Did your peer group have any influence over your current qualifications?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Please explain your answer \_\_\_\_\_

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7. Were your parents/careers involved in helping you choose your current course?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Please explain your

answer \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Were there any other factors that influenced you in deciding on your current course, for example, t.v. programmes, social media etc \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Using **one word/or phrase** who or what had the most influence over why you chose to study your current courses? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire. I would like to reassure you that all the information you have provided will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Good luck with your future studies and forthcoming examinations.

### **Appendix 3: Debriefing Form.**

This is a copy of the debrief letter that was given to all participants who took part in the research.

Thank you for participating in my research. I hope you enjoyed the experience. This form provides further background about my research to help you learn more about why I am doing this study. Please feel free to ask any questions or to comment on any aspect of the study.

Also, on this form are contact details should you wish to discuss any aspect of the research with a careers advisor or require further support.

You have just participated in a research study conducted by Ms Z Lewis.  
My contact number is: Zoe.Lewis@.....ac.uk

As you know, your participation in this study is voluntary. If you so wish, you may withdraw after reading this debriefing form, at which point all records of your participation will be destroyed.

Please be assured this will have no come back on you or the current qualification you are studying for.

You may keep a copy of this debriefing for your records.

If you have questions now about the research, please ask. If you have questions later, please email me.

If, as a result of your participation in this study, you experienced any adverse reaction or become upset in any way and wish to talk about your current study or career options, please contact the college careers advisor service which is located on Floor 2 (F2/06) or visit the Drop in Workshops run by the Counselling Team on a daily basis 9-11.30am (F2/09) – This is a confidential service.

Thank you again for your time in helping with my research.

Ms Z Lewis

## Appendix 4: Ethics submission and approval form



### Ethics Submission Form 2018 Faculty of Education, Health and Well-being

- You must complete all sections of this form in as much detail as possible. (word counts are given if necessary) If your form is incomplete, it will be returned to you to resubmit.
- You must be given approval for your research project from the University before you can begin.
- Applications should be submitted by 1st Monday of each month to FEHWRsearch@wlv.ac.uk

#### SECTION ONE

1. Enter Your First Name and Surname Below:

First Name	Zoe
Surname	Lewis

2. Enter your University Student/ Number

9701308
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3. Enter your University e mail address (e.g. M.Name@wlv.ac.uk)

[REDACTED]
------------

4. Enter your daytime contact telephone number in case we need to contact you.

[REDACTED]
------------

5. Enter the name of your Project Supervisor, Director of Studies, or Principal Investigator.

Professor Peter Lavender
--------------------------

6. Which subject area is your research / project located? Please ✓ all that apply

		✓
1	FEHW	
2	Education	✓
3	Health	
4	Sport	
5	Psychology	
6	FSE	
7	FOSS	
8	FOA	
9	COLT	
10	Cross University Project	
	Other – Please give details below:	

7 Please indicate if this study is	
	✓
Staff Research (Externally funded)	
Staff Research (University funded)	

8. Which Category of Project Are You Applying For?					
Categories are outlined in the handbook from the RPU ( <a href="http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu">www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu</a> ) Please tick ✓					
Category A		Category B	✓	Category 0	

9. Give details of service user involvement

## SECTION TWO

10. What is the title of your project?
Paths in Education: how young people make qualification choices at Level 3 and who influences these choices.

11. Give details of any proposed research questions/hypothesis
<p>1. What are the main influences on choice of Level 3 qualifications amongst those aged 16-19 years?</p> <p>2. What are the main reasons given as to why young people choose to study their current qualifications?</p> <p>3. What are the implications for the choices that young people make for education policy?</p>

12. Briefly outline your project, stating the rationale, aims and expected outcomes. (300 words)
<p>Research undertaken shows that young people are making key decisions about future qualifications without seeking professional guidance. Instead decisions are mostly based on hearsay from friends or social media. These trends can be partially explained by examining the kind of career advice students receive in school: only eighteen percent of students surveyed said that they received enough information to 'make an informed decision' (Palmer, 2016). This study explores how young people get their advice and how they make informed decisions on the qualifications they wish to study at Level 3.</p> <p>A mixed methods approach will be undertaken to investigate the influences or themes that are central to how young people choose their qualifications to study after they have completed Level 2 qualifications. The methodological approach being used combines a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews and</p>

questionnaires will be carried out with students, lecturers, parents/carers and careers personal advisors. In addition a focus group consisting of lecturers and parents/carers will also be convened. From my pilot research I foresee five main influences and themes emerging from the research as being central to career choice:

- > Peer influence
- > Career aspirations
- > Parental or family influence
- > Careers counselling, advice and guidance
- > Media influences.

**13. How will your research be conducted? (750 words max.)**

Describe the methods so that it can be easily understood by the ethics committee.

Please ensure you clearly explain any acronyms and subject specific terminology.

- Students, staff and parents will be recruited from a large sixth form college where I currently teach.
- All participants will be aged 16-19 years on a full time Level 3 programme. In-depth semi-structured interviews with ten students will be conducted. These will be completed on an individual basis
  - Questionnaires will be completed by fifty students on their choices of courses
  - Two Focus groups, one consisting of students, the second a mixture of teaching staff and parents/carers- to give their views on choice of course will be completed
  - Posters will be displayed inviting students to volunteer to take part in the research process in the student common area. There will also be an announcement in newsletters for parents/carers so they are fully informed about the nature of the proposed study.

Results will be interpreted using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data.

A copy of the interview questions and questionnaire can be found with the supporting documentation provided with this form.

**14. How will your data be analysed?**

- Mixed methods approach will be used, to offer both scale and depth to data interpretation.
- Using statistical data on its own to interpret the data would not allow personal views or feelings to be taken into account. I am interested in hearing the voice of the participant.
- Qualitative analysis looking for key words and themes from interviews. These will be colour coded throughout to identify key themes and trends.
- Bar charts will be used to display findings along with a written explanation of results.
- Interviews will be interpreted using both statistical and written analysis again to focus on key themes that have been mentioned throughout the interview.

**15. Is ethical approval required by an external agency? (e.g. NHS, company, other university, outside organisation, etc.)**

1. NO ✓
2. YES - but ethical approval has not yet been obtained

External Approval will be sought from:

3. YES - see contact details below of person who can verify that ethical approval has been obtained)

**16. What in your view are the ethical considerations involved in this project? (e.g. confidentiality, consent, risk, physical or psychological harm, etc.) Please explain in full sentences. Do not simply list the issues. You should also make it clear how you are going to deal with issues with regard to your own welfare and safety.**

Areas	✓	Intervention
Confidentiality	✓	No names or identifying features will be used. Interviews, questionnaires and transcripts will have no identifying features, instead a code will be given to each participant which only the researcher will have access to. All recordings will be

		kept securely on a password protected file and will be destroyed afterwards.
Consent	✓	All participants will give full informed consent and will be given a consent form and a debrief form at the start and end of the research. They will be made aware that they can withdraw from the research at any time. Parental consent will be gained for participants under the age of 18 years.
Participants Under 18	✓	Informed consent will be gained from parents/guardians by means of a letter which they will need to sign along with the participant. Details of the study will be provided in the letter, along with information on how to contact the researcher and supervisor should further information be required.

17. Have participants been/will participants be, fully informed of the risks and benefits of participating and of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the research at any time?

1. YES (Outline your procedures for informing participants in the space below.) ✓

2. NO (Use the space below to explain why)

3. Not applicable - There are no participants in this study

Each participant will be given a copy of the consent form and the debrief form (see attached documents for copies) which has all the information they need along with contact details for myself, my supervisor and how to contact the college safeguarding officer should they require further information or need support.

Participants will be asked to read and sign to say they fully understand the research and what they will be participating in. A consent form will also be sent to parents/carers for those participants who are under 18 years of age.

Any participants who have literacy difficulties will be able to have the form produced on the appropriate coloured paper. The form is fully compatible with reading software packages. Students who have emotional difficulties will be able to seek help from careers staff or the college safeguarding team as required.

All information will be provided on the consent form and was fully explained within the compulsory college induction days.

To avoid coercion I will be allowing all students within the 6<sup>th</sup> form to participate. I only teach a small percentage of the 6<sup>th</sup> form students. All students will be treated the same and standardised instructions and resources will be used throughout. Participants will volunteer to participate in the study by self-selection. Posters advertising the study will be displayed around college and also adverts will be placed in the weekly sixth form newsletter. In addition, the researcher will visit all year 12 and year 13 tutor groups in the 6<sup>th</sup> form to explain the proposed research and answer and questions participants may have.

Approval has already been gained from the college governors to conduct the research,

along with the Head of Sixth Form.

18. How will you ensure that the identity of your participants is protected (See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for guidance on anonymity)

No names or pictures of the participants will be used and it will be impossible to identify participants from subject combinations or courses as the institution used has over 800 students within the sixth form.

The gender and ethnic origin of the participants will not be referred to.

All documentation will be destroyed at the end of the research.

19. How will you ensure that data remains confidential ((See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for definition of confidentiality)

To ensure confidentiality no names will be used throughout the research. Participants will be referred to by code A, B, C etc.

No names of colleges will be mentioned and no paperwork which identifies the institution will be included in the research.

Only myself, my supervisor and my mentor will have access to full data recordings and only I will know the true identities of the participants.

Only two transcripts of interviews will be made. All the rest will be kept as audio files and then destroyed. This is because my recognised dyslexia means that I am unable to transcribe more than two full interviews.

20. How will you store your data during and after the project? (See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for definition of and guidance on data protection and storage).

All data will be kept on my computer which only I have access to. This is password protected. Interviews will be recorded using my personal Dictaphone and all files will be password protected.

After the project all data will be kept securely in a password protected file on my own personal computer. This is not a shared computer so no one else will have access to the files.

### SECTION THREE

The following questions must be answered otherwise your form will not be reviewed and it will need to be resubmitted to the panel at a later date.



21. Does Your Research Involve Children Under 18 years of Age?  
Please delete and leave your response below

If Yes, Do you have an Enhanced Disclosure Certificate from the Criminal Records Bureau/Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)?

1. Yes I have DBS clearance as a teacher.

22. Are participants in your study going to be recruited from a potentially vulnerable group? (See RPU website ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow link to Ethical Guidance pages for definition of vulnerable groups )

2. NO

23. Does your research fit into any of the following security-sensitive categories? (For definition of security sensitive categories see RPU webpages ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) follow links to Ethical Guidance). If so please complete questions 22-26

	Security Sensitive Categories	If YES, please tick below. ✓	If NO, please tick below. ✓
1	Commissioned by the military		✓
2	Commissioned under an EU security call		✓
3	Involve the acquisition of security clearances		✓
4	Concerns terrorist or extreme groups		✓

24. Does your research involve the storage on a computer of any records, statements or other documents that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts? Please delete and leave your response below.

1. NO

25. Will your research involve the electronic transmission (e.g. as an email attachment) of any records or statements that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts? Please delete and leave your response below.

1. NO

26. Do you agree to store electronically on a secure University file store any records or statements that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts. Do you also agree to scan and upload any paper documents with the same sort of content? Access to

this file store will be protected by a password unique to you.  
Please confirm you understand and agree to these conditions.

1. YES I understand and agree to the conditions

27. Do you agree NOT to transmit electronically to any third party documents in the University secure document store?

1. YES I agree

28. Will your research involve visits to websites that might be associated with extreme, or terrorist, organisations? (for definition of extreme or terrorist organisations see RPU webpages ([www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/rpu)) and follow links to Ethical Guidance.

2. NO

29. You are advised that visits to websites that might be associated with extreme or terrorist organisations may be subject to surveillance by the police. Accessing those sites from University IP addresses might lead to police enquiries. Do you understand this risk?

1. YES I understand

30. Appendices (All submissions) Please list the items that you are submitting with this document. (These will need to be submitted to [FEHWResearch@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:FEHWResearch@wlv.ac.uk)) You may want to include additional information that will help the panel with their decision such as your proposal. You need to provide examples of research instruments, recruitment posters and leaflets, information sheets (age appropriate) assent forms (for children), consent forms, risk assessment if research is carried out abroad .

1. Consent form  
2. Debrief form  
3. Research proposal form.


### Section 4

#### CONFIRMATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL AND FEEDBACK ON SUBMISSION

#### TO BE COMPLETED AS INDICATED, BY MODULE LEADER, SUPERVISOR AND/OR HEAD OF ETHICS PANEL

##### CATEGORY A PROPOSALS:

*I confirm that the proposal for research being made by the above student/member of staff is a category A proposal and that s/he may now continue with the proposed research activity:*

For a student's proposal – Name of module leader or supervisor giving approval	
For a member of staff's proposal – name of Head of Ethics panel giving approval	Diana Bannister
Signed	
Date	29/10/2018

##### CATEGORY B PROPOSALS:

*I confirm that the proposal for research being made by above student/member of staff is a category B proposal and that all requirements for category B proposals have been met.*

##### On behalf of students (only):

Name of module leader or supervisor	
Signed	
Date	

**On behalf of members of staff and students**

*I confirm that the proposal for research being made by above student/member of staff is a category B proposal and has the following decision*

<p><b>Approved</b> with no conditions/ amendments. Continue with study.</p>
<p><b>Approved subject to conditions.</b> Make minor/major amendments.</p>
<p><b>Not Approved –</b> Substantial re-write. Resubmit as New application</p>

Signed	
Name of Chair of Ethics Panel	
Date	

**Checklist of submissions required for Category B proposals:**

Outline summary: rationale and expected benefits from the study, with a statement of what the researcher is proposing to do and how	
Explanation of the methodology to be used	
An information sheet and copy of a consent form to be used with subjects	
Details of how information will be kept	
Details of how results will be fed back to participants	
Letter of consent from any collaborating institutions	
Letter of consent from head of institution wherein any research activity will take place	

**ALL PROPOSALS:**

<b>Office Use Only:</b>	
<b>Submission Number</b>	<b>102018ZLUOW</b>
<b>Date of Review</b>	<b>29/10/2018</b>
<b>Identified Category</b>	<b>A</b>
<b>Decision</b>	<b>Approved with Provisos</b>
<b>Comments and Feedback</b>	<p>Thank you for your submission to the IOE Ethics Committee. A panel have reviewed your submission. The panel felt that this research can be classified as Category A.</p> <p>It is clear that you are working with your supervisor to check your work and develop your work accordingly. Please continue to do this. The panel were happy to approve your work. Whilst no major concerns were raised, the following points were made and therefore, I am sharing them with you for discussion with your supervisor.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. For the student participants who are under 18, parental consent is being sought; is consent from BOTH parent and student going to be required, before proceeding? This is currently unclear. This may lead to possible problems e.g. if a student is keen to participate, then later they discover they can't because their parent hasn't given consent. This is possible for some students but not others, depending on their age. Will the researcher check dates of birth?</li> <li>2. Efforts to make the questionnaire fully accessible to all participants is to be commended; how will a participant indicate their need for an alternative format such as electronic or a hard copy printed on coloured paper?</li> <li>3. How will the questionnaire be disseminated? How will it be returned? (potential implications for</li> </ol>

	anonymity)
<b>Proposed Actions</b>	The points raised can be discussed with your supervisor.  Complete the revisions to the informed consent form and the debriefing information as outlined by your supervisor.
<b>Date of Further Review</b>	Not required