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"What, with your grades?": Student Motivations and Experiences of Further Education Vocational Courses

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Background

With the take up of apprenticeships not on target due to inadequate Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) (Skills Commission, 2009) and parents, employers and universities still to be convinced as to the credibility of the new Diplomas, there is a risk the expanding range of 14-19 learning opportunities may not prove to be as inclusive as originally intended. An understanding of student motivations for undertaking more vocationally focused courses as well as their actual experiences of them is therefore relevant.

Research Questions

This paper outlines the key findings from a qualitative study exploring the experiences of students studying vocational courses in further education (FE) establishments. The report presents findings that explore why these students opted to undertake vocational courses, their attitudes towards their courses as well as how relevant they feel their current courses are in terms of preparing them for future employment and/or higher education.

Methods

Data was collected between January and June 2009 from forty students attending two FE establishments in the South East of England. In total, ten focus groups were carried out with student volunteers on a variety of courses: Hairdressing, Hair and Beauty, Music, Public Services, E-media, Computer Gaming and Musical Theatre. The largest focus group was eight (1), the smallest three (3) with four participants being the average number involved in a group. Some of the students included were on one year courses and some students on two year courses; students on the two year courses were from both the first and second year, but mainly the latter. Data was collected on students' attitudes to, and experiences of, their current course, why they had opted to undertake a vocational pathway and who students had spoken to for IAG in terms of their decision making process. Focus groups discussions also explored students' experiences of school and their plans for the future. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a content analysis. Interview transcripts were explored in terms of patterns and themes. Emergent themes identified related broadly to: Motivation, Experience and Future.

Frame

This study is framed using a grounded theoretical approach where, through the process of analytic induction, key concepts and ideas emerge from our data and inform the discussion of our findings. Framing an understanding of student motivations and experiences of FE vocational courses is therefore presented in light of the data. However a more deductive approach, linking concepts presented with theoretical ideas, were then utilised to add greater depth. In this study, notions of educational identity around setting by ability, for example, are helpful in exploring students' understanding of their academic abilities (Osler and Vincent, 2003).

Research findings

Our results suggest that young people need to be provided with education and training that they value, which suits their individual needs, and which enables them to fulfil their ambitions for the future.

For the large part, the students we spoke to find college to be far more rewarding and engaging than their previous school experience and almost unanimously state that their relationships with fellow students and tutors contributes vastly to this. Students feel respected, supported and feel a sense of autonomy in their learning. In addition to the positive learning experience, the background and 'hands on' experience of the tutors gave courses a greater credibility, relevance and connection to the work place than prior school based learning, significantly enhancing students' opinions overall.

Whilst students were happy with and motivated by, the choices they have made and discuss with enthusiasm many aspects of studying for a vocational qualification, some areas of weakness were identified. In particular, these related to a lack of good IAG in the process of finding their course and particular aspects of their learning experience such as a lack of work experience. A lack of information and guidance regarding progression into higher education was also identified. On a more implicit level, a prior sense of academic under achievement and/or failure also appeared to underpin many of the educational identities of students included in this study. This suggests that for some students, the choice to undertake a vocational course was a last resort for those who did not deem themselves suitable for A level study. Whilst many considered the academic requirements of their vocational course more challenging than their understanding of more traditional courses such as GCSE and A levels, clearly negative stereotypes surrounding what type of learner undertakes a vocational course exist. This was also evident in student perceptions of parental and school teachers' attitudes to vocational study. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations, including the need for better IAG for students not wanting to take the traditional A level route.