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Not going to university: Context-based rationality, with links to social class and rural location in the career decision-making of school leavers in Scotland.

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Abstract

In the past fifty to sixty years there has been a rapid expansion in participation in higher education meaning that it is no longer a preserve of the elite (Carpentier, 2018). However, there remains a participation gap between the most and least privileged (OECD, 2018, Chowdry et al., 2013, Carneiro and Heckman, 2002). Furthermore, there is a growing body of research on how rural location can impact career decision-making (Alexander, 2013, Bakke, 2018, Corbett, 2013, Ramage, 2019). Research has shown there are many benefits for participating in higher education such as improved earnings, better health and social capital (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). The starting point for most economic studies of educational choice is based on human capital theory which suggests that, given there is a graduate wage premium, and in the presence of either perfect capital markets (or, in the case of Scotland, government-funded low interest loans) would suggest it is 'irrational' for qualified young people not to choose higher education. That they do so requires examination of other influences which affect their decision.

This longitudinal qualitative project brought in career decision-making theory and investigated the choices of young people in Scotland, qualified to enter higher education. It sought to uncover the process of decision-making and the role of prior beliefs and perceptions which led them to choose an alternative post-school route and identifies the consequences of their choices and how this links to socioeconomic status (SES) and rural location. Sixteen school leavers, not choosing university, were interviewed on their decision-making choices and perceptions of university over the course of two years. Thematic analysis identified key themes as: "university as a risky investment", "finding my own way" and "manifestation and limits of personal agency". Conclusions, were that participants were making choices rational to them and their context, linking with Hodkinson et al's (1996) theory on pragmatic realism and Simon's concept of bounded rationality (1997). That is that non-monetary preferences, constraints, and other unobservable factors that an average return to education would not capture had a bearing on their choices. Two years on participants overall were content with the choices made, even if their realised plans changed from their initial plans. Changes, challenges, and setbacks were often framed as "learning experiences". This

project has practical implications for school professionals supporting young people in their decision-making and widening access policy.

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Elysha Ramage

Signature:

Definitions/Abbreviations

BTEC: British Technical and Education Council

CDMSE: Career decision-making self-efficacy

D&G: Dumfries and Galloway

DGC: Dumfries and Galloway College

FA: Foundation Apprenticeships

GA: Graduate Apprenticeships

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

IFS: Institute for Fiscal Studies

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institutions

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

HNC: Higher National Certificate

HND: Higher National Diploma

LEO: Longitudinal educational outcomes

MA: Modern Apprenticeships

OECD: Operation of Economic Co-operation and Development

ONS: Office for National Statistics

RTA: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SAAS: Student's Award Agency Scotland

SAW: Scottish Apprenticeship Week

SCCT: Social Cognitive Career Theory

SCQF: Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

SDS: Skills Development Scotland

SES: Socioeconomic status

SFC: Scottish Funding Council

SGURC: Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification

SIMD: Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

SQA: Scottish Qualifications Authority

SRUC: Scotland's Rural University College

STEM: Science, technology, engineering, and maths

SVQ: Scottish Vocational Qualification

UCAS: University and College Admission Service

YTS: Youth Training Scheme

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Chapter

This study assesses why a young person with the qualifications to go to university chooses another route. It examines the reasons and factors influencing their decisions with a focus on socioeconomic status (SES) and rural location. It takes an interdisciplinary approach and draws on theoretical perspectives from economics, sociology, and career decision-making theory to give a holistic understanding of the young person and their context. It contributes new evidence on the decision-making behaviours of young people through a primary research study, which follows suitably qualified Scottish school leavers for up to two years, documenting their decisions and influences. As the fieldwork began in 2021, it was uniquely placed to capture how the global COVID pandemic and subsequent restrictions impacted the career choices of these school leavers.

This chapter aims to provide a justification for why this research is required, as well as framing the problem and gaps in the existing literature. It then proceeds to highlight the research aims and questions before discussing how the remainder of the thesis will be structured.

1.2 Justification for Research

In the past fifty to sixty years (Carpentier, 2018) there has been a rapid expansion in participation in university education, meaning that it is no longer a preserve of the elite. Participation in higher education by age 25 shows females outnumbering men at a bachelor degree level (OECD, 2018) and as an average across OCED countries 66% of young adults will enter tertiary education (OECD, 2018). However, despite this expansion there continues to be a gap between the most and least privileged in terms of higher education participation. Research consistently shows that despite attempts at widening access this gap still exists globally (OECD, 2018, Chowdry et al., 2013, Carneiro and Heckman, 2002, Schindler and Lorz, 2012).

In the UK, there has been a shift in government policy towards creating a work-based learning system equal to that of the higher education system (The Scottish

Government, 2014c). The development of such a system has been cited by the World Bank (2018) as one of their key priorities in a technologically advancing world. This emphasises the value of post-secondary education and argues that it can take more than one form. Furthermore, the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017 with the aim of increasing economic productivity and better-quality apprenticeships (HMRC, 2016). In Scotland, there was a target to offer 30,000 new modern apprenticeship (MA) starts every year, however in light of COVID this has been revisited and adjusted with an aim to get back to this target in coming years (Skills Development Scotland, 2022b). In addition, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Scotland's National Skills Agency delivers impartial careers advice, so customers accessing the service will explore all options available to them, not just university (Skills Development Scotland, 2012).

The landscape around careers and the labour market is rapidly changing. This is in part due to the speed of technological change and how this is affecting the way the global and local economy operate (Office for National Statistics, 2019b). Some commentators maintain we are currently undergoing a fourth, digital revolution (Coyne, 2020). There is the argument being presented that people need to adapt their skill set to keep up with this changing environment (OECD, 2001). The terms 'learning' and 'knowledge economy' are being used and the argument is that this is increasing the need for individuals to be educated and that there is the move from transferable skills to meta-skills (Coyne, 2020). This demonstrates how the landscape around careers and the labour market is rapidly changing and the complex and conflicting environment in which school-leavers are making their decisions and choices.

However, there are still many prescribed benefits for participating in higher education that policy makers are keen to extol such as improved earnings, better health and social capital (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). Indeed, the starting point for most economic studies of educational choice is based on human capital theory which suggests that, given there is a graduate wage premium, and in the presence of either perfect capital markets (or, in the case of Scotland, government-funded low interest loans) it is irrational for qualified young people not to choose higher education. That they do so requires

examination of other influences which affect their decision and its consequences.

Simon's (1986) theory of bounded rationality relaxes these assumptions and was developed through empirical evidence from psychological research to show that humans make neither strictly 'rational' or logical decisions. Building on this, Robert's (1968) sociological theory of opportunity structures, focuses on the constraints of environment in decision-making including socio-economic background, gender and local labour market. Whilst this theory has been modernised to reflect uncertainty in the labour market, protracted education and individual choice it still asserts this choice is bounded (Roberts, 2009). This research, based in economic theory therefore bringing in career decision making theory to enrich its theoretical perspective. Furthermore, addressing the call of Simon (1997, 1986) and Altman and Altman (2017) for more sociological and psychological research into the decision-making of humans this project, therefore, seeks to go beyond the boundaries of neoclassical economics and taking a behavioural economics perspectives creating an interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach to the research to broaden the economic decision-making research by studying a hard-to-access and under researched population of individuals.

Within economics, most of the research around higher education participation by social class takes a quantitative approach. It has been widely demonstrated that social origin and other factors including prior educational achievement (Chowdry et al., 2013) and parental education (Henderson et al., 2019) are linked to higher education participation. There is also an established and active body of literature on widening access programmes and their effectiveness (O'Sullivan et al., 2019, Scottish Funding Council, 2022) as well as studies focusing on those individuals who have chosen to participate in university despite the odds against them (James et al., 2008). However, there is much less research conducted around the individuals who have achieved the qualifications to go university but choose another option and the complexity surrounding their choices. Therefore, complementary theoretical perspectives from economics, sociology and career guidance are combined in this study to inform how educational choices are

informed by social class, rural location and how labour market outcomes can be influenced by individual attributes.

1.3 Project Aims and Research Questions

The key aims of this project are therefore:

1.To investigate the choices of qualified young people domiciled in Scotland, which seeks to uncover the process of decision-making which led them to choose an alternative post-school route from university, for example college or an apprenticeship.

2.To examine in detail the perceived consequences of their career decision-making and the role of social origin, rural geographic location and COVID.

3. An exploration, based on the lived experience of the same group of qualified young people, the role of a broad range of attributes valued in the labour market beyond formal qualifications and how these attributes develop over time.

From these aims, the project seeks to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What are the contributing factors to the career decision-making process for an individual who has the required qualifications to progress directly to degree level study to choose an alternative route?

> 1.1 What barriers and support does a young person experience when making their decision not to go to university?
>
> 1.2. What has the impact of COVID-19 been on the individual's career decision-making process?
>
> 1.3 What perceptions does a young person have about university and how have these perceptions influenced the decision-making process?

Q2: How do the lived experiences of the individuals two years on relate to their initial choices and goals?

Q3: How does socio-economic status and rural location interact with the choices and decision-making processes?

Q4: How does the skill set of an individual develop and change over time in relation to their career?

To address the aims of the project and answer the research questions a qualitative approach is required. The qualitative study of the pupils will provide a data-rich narrative of the lived experiences of the qualified young people, through a combination of interviews and survey data. It will seek to uncover the process of decision-making which led them to choose an alternative route, and, to examine in detail the perceived consequences of this decision.

1.4 Structure of the Study

This chapter has provided an introduction and context for the research as well as presenting the research questions. Chapter two will provide a theoretical framework for the study including works by Becker(1994), Simon (1997, 1986), Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), Roberts (2009), Hodkinson et al. (1996). Chapter three will provide a review of the empirical literature to build an understanding of what is known about the career decision-making of young people as well as where further research is needed. Chapter four presents the contexts for the project. Chapter five presents the methodology and how the primary research was conducted and analysed. Chapter five presents first the descriptive statistics from the survey data, before presenting the main findings from the thematic analysis in chapter seven. Chapter eight provides a contextual discussion of the results linking to the literature, theory, and key findings of the research. It then proceeds to provide practical implications and recommendations from the evidence, before highlighting limitations and recommendations for further research. Chapter nine provides the final remarks and concludes the thesis.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction to the Chapter

There are many competing theories which seek to explain the inequalities in education and SES. The complexities and systems surrounding an individual making their initial post-school decisions cannot be fully captured by one theoretical perspective. This research project is therefore taking an inter-disciplinary approach. This section provides an analysis of key theoretical approaches from economics, sociology and career guidance. It is by no means an exhaustive analysis of theories, but rather a selection of the most relevant for this project.

2.1.1 Economic Theory: Human Capital Theory

2.1.1.1 Human Capital Theory

Economic theory on educational choices is largely concerned with theoretical modelling which can assess the return on investment. As there is a statutory requirement to provide education which is free at point of entry, this monetary investment in schools can be evidenced by a return to the economy. That is on completion of education, pupils enter the labour market, earn, and spend money and pay tax. A starting point from an economic perspective would be to analyse the decision of the student using human capital theory. This theory places a monetary value on individuals to determine their productivity and therefore worth to an individual, employer, business, and the economy. This includes an individuals' knowledge, skills, qualifications, and attributes.

The notion of human capital dates to Adam Smith, but gained more traction in the 1960's through the works of Becker (1975, 1994) and Mincer (1958). It is now a well-recognised approach as a measure of economic growth and knowledge and (Goldin, 2016). Becker (1975, 1994) provides a theoretical model of participation in education as a financial investment. From this perspective a rational decision would be for students to enter Higher Education if this were assessed to be a worthwhile financial investment given their set of constraints.

Mincer's (1958, 1994a, 1994b) pioneering empirical work established the link between age, education, and earnings which has since been replicated, and demonstrated that earnings are positively correlated with years of education. Mincer (1994b) examined how wages rise and fall over an individual's career and the reasons behind this. It examined what elements can be attributed to opportunity cost, training, and education. It discussed the relationship between attainment, ability, job training and levels of human capital. It asserted that those that have invested in training, are more likely to do so again and demonstrated a positive relationship between schooling and training and ability and subsequent wages. This extended to on-the-job training. It argues that the demand for skilled labour came first and that the resulting wage premium caused a growth in education, and thus is the empirical corollary to Becker.

2.1.1.2 Defining Human Capital

There are varying definitions of human capital. Mincer (1958) does not explicitly define human capital but discusses a theory relating ability to personal income and discusses wage differentials in relation to years of training and occupation type. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) take a broader view of human capital and in their Wellbeing of the Nation Report define it as the "*knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being*" (OECD, 2001, pp17) a definition also used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (Office for National Statistics, 2019a). These definitions capture the essence of uniquely human abilities to add value to a product, service, or society.

The argument for using a broad definition is to counter the criticism that human capital views individuals as workers whose only value is to improve economic output. Indeed, Becker (1994) discusses how initially he was reluctant to use the term human capital for that reason. The OECD (2001) expand the discussion and include the types of skills and knowledge which makes up human capital. In skills they include communication, numeracy, literacy, intra and inter-personal skills. Within knowledge, know-what, know-how, know-why and know-who is

differentiated. This therefore suggests an overlap with social and cultural capital defined by Bourdieu (1986) which will be discussed further in the sociological theory section 2.1.3. Burgess (2016) lends support to this distinction by advocating that the definition is continually evolving and argues that ability is broader than just IQ and that traits such as conscientiousness, resilience, motivation and determination have a role in the formation of human capital. Other commentators have included ability, years of schooling, quality of schooling, training and environmental influences (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011) as components of human capital.

Becker's (1975, Becker, 1994) view of human capital is of a unidimensional concept that aids productivity (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011). Becker (1975) conducted empirical research on white, native, male graduates in the U.S.A in 1939 and 1949 to assess an estimate for the rate of return on education. The assessment showed a benefit to continuing to HE rather than leaving after high school, however, the rate of return varied depending on what factors were controlled for. For example, controlling for IQ, rank in high school and father's profession all reduced the rate of return. The research also included other groups of individuals including women and those from rural backgrounds and the varying rates of return for continuing education. The analysis here was less detailed which was partly attributed to lack of data. Becker's later addition (1994) discusses the changes in the global economy over the preceding 25 years discussing technological advances, changes in women's participation in the labour market, the expansion of participation in HE and its continuing positive rate of return. Whilst on average the rate of return to HE is positive the figure obtained is through large data sets and the actual return to an individual can vary greatly.

Therefore, an individual can possess a broad number of attributes that contribute to the human capital they possess. This set of attributes is embodied in the person that possesses them, they cannot be separated and sold. Through investment in learning they can increase their skills and knowledge and skills not kept up to date can depreciate. This learning can take a variety of forms from formal education such as going to university to on-the-job training and informal

skill-set development. This learning can occur at any age. From an individual's perspective there are choices to be made about how much to invest, for example, in training, to increase their human capital. This depends on several factors including age, financial-constraints, time-preferences, and attitude to risk. Whilst differentiating skills and abilities allows for a richer data set and insight it also means it is harder to model due to its complexity.

2.1.1.3 Calculating Human Capital

One widely used calculation of human capital is to estimate the income potential of an individual over their lifetime of work (Becker and Chiswick, 1966, Becker, 1975, Becker, 1994, Mincer, 1958). For an individual deciding on whether to pursue post-secondary education a rate of return could be calculated to work out if the decision is rational from a monetary point of view. From this perspective continuing to HE would increase a student's human capital through the learning they undertake and the increased productivity and value to the labour force which as a result leads to higher earnings. However, the potential increase of future earnings needs to be assessed against the cost of continuing in education. This includes both the direct cost such as tuition fees, textbooks and equipment and indirect costs such as wages foregone whilst in education. If the potential earnings are higher, then from this viewpoint, the rational decision would be to continue to HE. In the same way employers can derive a similar estimate when establishing the worth of investing in training of an employee.

In addition, an appropriate discount rate needs to be applied. This discount rate reflects the 'real' value of the investment so accounts for rates of inflation, the risk-factor in the chosen career such as availability of work and an individual's time preferences. Findlay and Hermannsson (2019) argue that the discount rate is likely to vary across sub-populations (and their decision to continue in education). Whilst this variation was mentioned it warrants further exploration, and they argue is likely to be of huge importance.

Other factors which need to be considered, include those which affect the entire economy such as a recession or factors specific to an individual such as poor health (Chyruk and Benzoni, 2015). Therefore, setting a discount rate for

educational decisions is challenging. Becker (1975) discusses the high-risk nature of an investment in HE. An example was made to a business investment with a five-ten year pay-back, compared to an investment in HE which has a much longer payback period. It also argues that investment in HE is highly illiquid making it a much riskier investment than the above example of a business investment. Therefore the 'net gain' of being tertiary educated varies depending on what discount rate is used. The OECD (2018) demonstrated this by showing the change in return (in dollars) depending on whether a 2%, 3.75% or 8% discount rate was used. Different countries use different rates for calculating such a cost benefit analysis. The U.K uses a 3.5% rate whilst Canada uses an 8% rate (OECD, 2018). If the U.K used a 2% discount this sees the net benefit of tertiary education to be $231,777, at 3.75% this falls to $134,800 and at 8% this drops to $27,700 (OECD, 2018).

In addition, the risk of investment in human capital potentially has a greater impact for those with credit constraints or from families with credit constraints as they may find it more difficult to borrow funds to pay for direct costs. This could result in them needing to work more during the study period than someone from a wealthier family who can rely on parents for financial support should the investment not pay off.

2.1.1.4 Strengths and Uses of Human Capital Estimations

A clear strength of human capital estimations is its wide use both within the academic and non-academic community. Estimates of human capital are used by organisations such as the ONS (Office for National Statistics, 2014, Office for National Statistics, 2019a) and the OECD (OECD, 2001, OECD, 2018, OECD, 2022) to assess the growth of knowledge and skills for example, within a nation. The ONS (2019) includes its reasons for measuring human capital as follows:

- A measure of human capital can help assess the impact of social benefits, for example the impact education has on health.
- Tracking human capital allows for an analysis of skills and to predict possible skills gaps in the economy.

- Measuring human capital allows for the assessment of the impact of an aging population and changes in retirement age.
- Allows for an assessment, of how skills and knowledge, are evolving in the economy.

In addition, there has been significant justification in academic research for using a human capital model. It can be used as a way to understand the difference between workers' wages (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011), to support social and economic development and identify where inequalities exist (OECD, 2001). Much of the focus of human capital both at an academic and government level has been on the human capital gains from continuing to HE and obtaining a degree. The model provides a quantifiable method of assessment which can be replicated across systems and nations allowing comparability that can be understood in economic terms.

Although the pecuniary focus, as will be discussed below, can be conceived as a limitation it is also a strength of the model. In career guidance theory, income and expenditure are rarely discussed as influencing factors on an individual's career decision-making. In its most simplistic form, it is a debate between environmental and individual factors (Law, 1981). Roberts (2009) arguably goes the closest to a discussion of earnings, through the concept of opportunity structures. For example, social background is a primary focus in the context of unemployment risk and potential financial constraints restricting choices. Whereas, career guidance theories with a psychological grounding often focus on aspirations, interests and confidence (Bandura, 1991). Whilst this links with an underlying assumption that individuals want a prestigious career which is well paid it is not often overtly discussed. Given that it is widely accepted that people work as they either want or need to earn money, human capital theory neatly encapsulates this.

2.1.1.5 Limitations of Human Capital in the Context of School Leavers Educational Choices

However, when applying the human capital model in the context of a young person making a career decision there are several limitations and challenges.

The human capital model assumes that young people make a rational decision when considering their career and that they have full access to all necessary labour market information (perfect information) for example, projected salaries, to aid in making these decisions. The evidence increasingly shows that this is not the case (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Institute for Employment Research and Enterprising Careers, 2006). That is, young people neither make completely rational decisions, in a logic sense, nor have all the information available to enable a decision. Arguably, with projections that two thirds of primary school children will work in jobs that do not currently exist and the increasing speed of change in the labour market (Skills Development Scotland, 2017), calculating a rate of return is not without its challenges. In addition, even though Becker (1975) discusses the risk of HE investment, Dickson and Harmon (2011) point out that attitude to risk is often ignored in human capital calculations.

Linking in with the decision-making process of young people it assumes that young people have a career goal in mind and work backwards from this point, whereas many young people are focussing solely on their next step from school and do not have longer term plans. In Scotland, pupils make initial subject choices in S2 and S3 at around the age of 13 (Education Scotland, 2015b). At this point many of them will not have a fully formed idea of what their plans are for when they leave school. Therefore, by the time they have reached an age where that decision needs to be made, they have potentially already eliminated many course options due to the combination of subjects chosen. Whilst there is evidence of a positive return to HE this is often due to grouping a variety of course options together (Luthra and Flashman, 2017), and as will be discussed in more detail in section 3.6.3, returns vary depending on the subject studied (The Scottish Government, 2019b), therefore, estimating a rate of return can be problematic.

Whilst educational attainment through formal exams can evidence qualification levels it does not provide information on an individual’s skillset. An individual will need to have an interest in studying for several years and a skillset to compliment the formal qualifications. A challenge of measuring human capital is how to assess knowledge and skills (Chyruk and Benzoni, 2015), that is,

unobservable factors. Many of the factors used to assess human capital are proxy measures. Furthermore, different education systems between nations and countries can pose challenges in equivalences. Human capital does not operate independently so 'teasing' out what is truly the human capital aspect can be challenging (OECD, 2001).

Although, mention is made of environmental factors and the risk factors in human capital investment this perspective assesses decisions and success by their monetary value. Becker (1975) discusses the link between ability and economic success suggesting the role of unobserved heterogeneity individuals. However, this excludes the fact that different career choices have different earning potentials and not all individuals choose their careers based on earnings potential (Alexander, 2013). Other factors including geographical, intergenerational, financial status, SES and labour market conditions (Denny and Flannery, 2017) all influence the decision to participate in tertiary education directly from school. So, whilst a human capital model provides a useful starting point for exploring the career decision-making behaviour of young people with a quantifiable assessment of potential return and justification for continuing to university, it struggles to account for the complexity of human behaviour and non-rational decision-making.

Therefore, the following sections examine other theoretical perspectives which can complement human capital and aid theoretical understanding of school leavers career choices. Firstly, the theory of bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) will be discussed before moving onto Bourdieu's (1986) sociological perspective of capital will be assessed before discussing two key career decision-making theories.

2.1.2 Economic Theory: Theory of Bounded Rationality

Whilst human capital provides a useful starting point when considering educational choice, one if its limitations as discussed is that it assumes that individuals make rational choices. The concept of bounded rationality was coined by Simons in the 1950s (Wheeler, 2018) and argues to exchange rationality assumptions of decision making in economic modelling with

cognitively bound ones. Where neoclassical economic models such as human capital suggests than humans are rational and logical in their decision-making process empirical studies in psychology have shown this not to be the case. A example demonstrating human's difficulty with logical decision making, is the classic cognitive psychology experiment on the hobbits and orcs problems (Thomas, 1974) where participants encountered difficulties in solving the presented problem.

Simon (1986) puts forward a model of bounded rationality that suggests limitations in both available knowledge and the cognitive capacity when making decisions. In the instance of human capital theory, bounded rationality would put forward relaxing the assumption that there are a fixed set of alternative outcomes and that these outcomes are knowable. There are several key concepts to consider in terms of bounded rationality but forward by Simon (1997). One key concept is that individuals instead of 'maximising' will 'satisfice' when making a decision. Maximising refers to decision-making which considers all possible alternatives and makes the 'best' decision. Satisficing (Altman and Altman, 2017) refers to a decision-making strategy where individuals search for a solution that is 'good enough' rather than perfect. Depending on the viewpoint these decision can be seen as sub-optimal (Lorkowski and Kreinovich, 2018) or as 'smart-thinking'(Altman and Altman, 2017). Research has shown (Simon, 1997) that one of the most time-consuming parts of a decision is the investment into looking at the alternative options or 'generation of alternatives'. Once these have been determined deciding between the alternatives is less demanding. In most cases working out all the alternatives is not possible. If this is put into the context of a career decision the options are potentially limitless in terms of industry, pathway, specific job etc so focussing on a smaller number of options makes this decision more manageable.

Indeed Gottfredson's (2002) psychological theory of circumscription and compromise would argue that many careers are eliminated through childhood and by the time an individual reaches adolescent they have already narrowed the possible range of careers. This then taps into the concept of 'criteria of

choice' and the idea that an individual does not have the cognitive function to process all possibilities. Another central component is 'evaluation of consequences' which involves cognitive limits but also limits of knowledge including predictions for the future. In the case of career decisions whilst trends can give an indication of the type of returns to expect from participation in higher education, give the number of factors and stakeholders involved in obtaining a job it is impossible to fully know whether investing in university will pay off. Becker (1994) discusses the high risk nature of education participation given the long payback time and illiquid nature of the investment.

Simons (1997, 1986) puts forward that the way to understand the process of the decision is through psychological and sociological research and by doing this it will enhance economics modelling and predictive power. Altman and Altman (2017) also discuss the sociological aspect to the decision making and the role of the decision-making environment which is often ignored in neo-classical economics modelling. They also put a strong emphasis on the behaviour that individuals display in decision-making scenarios such as the role of intuition and self-sacrificing behaviour. However, its concepts are focused on how humans make decisions broadly rather than a theory that more specifically providing a framework in career context. Continuing with the theme of the role of psychology and sociological factors in decision making, the following section will bring together sociological and career decision making theories which relate and contribute further to some of the key aspects of bounded rationality theory.

2.1.3 Bourdieu: A Sociological Perspective of Capital

Whilst Becker (1994) discusses some of the non-monetary benefits of education such as improved health and fitness, the human capital model is still largely focussed on the monetary return of investment in education. There is building evidence that the development of social relationships play an important role in the success of an economy and that human and social capital are closely linked (OECD, 2001).

Three of Bourdieu's most well-known concepts are "field", "habitus" and "cultural capital" (Grenfell, 2008). In the context of this study a focus is going to be made on Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) proposed that capital extends further than the wealth that an individual or organisation possess. The concept of 'cultural capital' was initially proposed as a hypothesis to explain the difference in academic achievement in pupils from different social backgrounds. Cultural capital refers to the social aspects of a person including their knowledge and education. Bourdieu (1986) argues that cultural capital can exist in one of three states. The first is the *embodied* state which refers to an individual's skills, qualities, and knowledge. The second state is the *objectified* state which is books, pictures and matter which provide the knowledge and have symbolic value in that society. The *objectified* state links with economic capital as a painting may be sold or transferred to a different owner however the value of that painting is symbolic, and value is dependent on the society in which it exists therefore linking with cultural capital.

The third state is *institutionalised* state for example an individual's education. Bourdieu (1986) makes the comparison between the individual who has official qualifications and a person who is self-taught. He argues the former confers a certain value to the individual, thus providing that individual with status in society. However, this has boundaries in that different cultures have different values, and therefore what constitute cultural capital is not consistent. Moreover, this institutionalised state provides a scale or measurement of value so that a monetary worth can be placed on an individual's qualifications and therefore their economic value.

As with other types of capital the *embodied* form of cultural capital requires an investment in time and needs to be built upon. Whilst it cannot be sold as it is inherent within an individual, cultural capital is 'inherited' from families. That is families with more cultural capital pass this on to their children giving them in turn more opportunities for example access to jobs and careers. An example would be the investment in social activities such as going to the theatre, dining out and the knowledge that comes with these activities such as how to behave, so that an individual not familiar with these activities may find themselves

alienated. Therefore, whilst the *embodied* state is unique, individuals have different starting points dependent on their social origin.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *social* capital refers to the connections an individual has and in turn how much capital (in whatever form it may be) those connections have. Therefore, someone with a high level of *social* capital may have access to certain parts of society; invites to functions, a foot-in-the-door to a company that another may not. Once again, the starting point is different between individual's dependent on their family and the connections sought. Social capital suggests an exchange between parties and requires an investment in time to develop social relationships where obligations and favours are required. This sees 'groups' formed with certain boundaries to 'membership' whether official or implied. Those introduced, need to conform or 'fit-in' to be included, and it is argued that having high-levels of social capital is a form of power. This discussion on capital also relates to the concept of "habitus", that is the dispositions, habits and skills individuals possess that have accumulated due to their experience of society and their environment (Bourdieu and Nice, 1977). This is also an important concept at it suggests that people are influenced by their environment and others around them and decisions they make will be inextricably related to these experiences. This potentially relates to career decisions due to the role that 'status' plays in career choice and more so when considering the argument that education serves to reproduce social boundaries and inequalities, rather than remove them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

2.1.3.1 Strengths and Limitations

Bourdieu's concepts have been highly influential in discussions around the role of class within the economy and society (Silva and Warde, 2010, Grenfell, 2008) and can provide a link between human capital and the sociological aspects of career decision-making theory (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). It would suggest that the lack of capital would make it both harder for an individual to access HE for example, through increased costs as well as the view held that some working-class individuals hold that HE is for middle class individuals (Stevenson and Lang, 2010). Whilst Bourdieu is celebrated for his theoretical contribution

the basis of his theory originated from empirical evidence giving further traction to the concepts (Grenfell, 2008).

However, Sullivan (2002) offers a robust critique of Bourdieu and argues that although cultural capital is a useful construct it is not clearly defined. Sullivan (2002) argues that Bourdieu is not clear on the relationship between and the importance of different forms of capital and how children 'inherit' cultural capital from their parents. In addition, the author argues that Bourdieu is unclear on the importance of educational qualifications and often focuses on tertiary education rather than across different post-compulsory options. The critique included a review of studies which measured the relationship of cultural capital and educational attainment and participation. The results were mixed which was partly attributed to the way cultural capital was measured within the study. The author concluded that cultural capital was one aspect of inequality in a much broader picture. Despite this critique, Bourdieu's concepts continue to be influential and has relevance today in understanding why inequalities persist.

2.1.4 Career Decision-making Theory

Human capital theory provides a starting point from which to assess an individual's decision as to whether to progress to HE or not. Bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986)brings in the concept of limited decision making capacity which can go some way to explaining the decision-making of young people transitioning from school. Bourdieu's (1986, 1977) cultural capital builds on the premise of connections and value to the intangible constructs that can impact on the life-chances of an individual. This next section discusses three key career decision-making theories which are relevant to the current project.

Career development theory is a growing field with new theories and models being introduced and adopted into practice. Career decision-making theory focuses on how people make career choices and decisions. Within the field of career development theory, a whole myriad of theories have been developed (for a comprehensive review of career theories see Bimrose (2019)). Many of the theories stem from either sociological or psychological theory and have been

adapted to the context of career decision-making. Broadly speaking they can be divided into traditional and modern career theory, although some traditional theories have been modernised to reflect changing economies, education, and labour markets.

It is acknowledged that creating a theory that accounts for the full complexity of career decision behaviour is challenging (Patton, 2008). A theory that is too specific risks ignoring key factors whilst a broader theory may include everything but explain nothing. Whilst arguably each theory has some relevance to the current project the following, most relevant, have been selected and will be discussed below:

- Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory/ Lent, Brown and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT)
- Robert's (1968) theory of opportunity structures
- Hodkinson et al's (1996) 'careership' theory

The first theory is a psychological theory of career decision-making, the second is sociological and the third is a middle ground theory encompassing both the individual and their place in society.

2.1.4.1 A Sociological Theory of Career Decision: Theory of Opportunity Structure

Roberts (Roberts, 2009, Roberts, 1968) is a traditional career theorist whose initial framework built on the works of Super (1980) and Ginzberg (Ginzberg et al., 1951, Ginzberg, 1951). The focus of his work is how "opportunity structures" such as class, geography, and gender, confine the career opportunities that are available to an individual.

Roberts' (1968) seminal paper was based on a study of young working men to establish an empirical evidence base. The study investigated the workers' ambitions, mobility and job satisfactions which lead to the opportunity-structure model. The model proposed that an individual does not have free choice when

deciding on an occupation and instead places a large emphasis on the structural factors in society. The model described career choice as being limited to a set number of available occupations.

Roberts' (2009) later theory acknowledges the role of the individual and weakening of social structures; that more individuals are extending their education and delaying entry to the labour market which has become more uncertain with a reduction in entry levels roles from which an individual can have a secure job. Whilst there are still roles that require no formal entry requirements many of these are temporary or seasonal (Brown et al., 2004).

Roberts' (2001, 2009, 2011) updated theory balances structures which bound an individual's career such as geographical space, gender, SES, and the role of individualism. The concept of working-class individuals suffering from a 'poverty of aspiration' is refuted. This concept suggests that individuals choose not to progress in education against their own best interests, partially due to intergenerational factors. However Roberts and Atherton (2011) discuss how at early levels of schooling there is little difference in pupil aspirations and that it is in secondary school that differences emerge. They argue that the education system is designed to work for those who are academic and that those who do not get the qualifications are left with no meaningful option for progression and are therefore more at risk of unemployment. Cross-national evidence gives support to this view. In most countries a general programme of study is offered however some offer a vocational programme (OECD, 2018). Whilst vocational programmes are viewed as an alternative a question of equity is raised when the demographics of those choosing a vocational programme differ from those choosing a general programme.

The analogy of transport to describe the changes in choices within a career is used. Roberts' (2009) described how transitioning to job is like taking a journey in a private car; there can be several routes to the same destination and some individuals will be in powerful, faster more expensive cars whilst others will be in smaller less powerful cars (Roberts, 2009). An extension of this analogy would be that some individuals would not have access to a car at all but have to walk

or get the bus. There are parallels here with Bourdieu's (1986) *institutionalised* state in that families with more resources can further their children's education and invest more time combined with the importance placed on education. So, this view would see that an individual with less cultural capital who participates in HE may feel they do not have the cultural knowledge that goes with attending university and feel they do not 'fit in'.

In summary, whilst Roberts' (2009) has updated his theory to reflect changing practice in career decision and career uncertainty, he maintains that the opportunity structures on which the theory is based are still valid today. Where human capital would provide a cost benefit analysis to the decision of whether to enter HE, which assumes the individual has perfect knowledge of the future, Roberts' (2009) builds on the factors that may deter or prevent a working-class individual from participating in HE. Whilst there is a slightly deterministic feel to his arguments, the role of structural factors in a career decision cannot be ignored and a bank of international evidence (OECD, 2001, OECD, 2018, Elsley, 2014b) supports this view.

2.1.4.2 Robert's focus on defining socio-economic-status

The current project has a focus on understanding the reasons behind the differing levels of participation with regards to socio-economic status as much of the policy surrounding education has an aim of reducing inequalities in levels of education. Paterson and Iannelli (2007) assessed the variations between social origin and educational attainment and the influence of policy on these changes. They concluded that that impact of policy was unclear but suggested that its influence had been to generally improve attainment. However, Irving (2004) stated that the policy landscape emphasises the individual's responsibility and moves away from state responsibility. Furthermore, the argument was raised that using education as vehicle for social mobility is a narrow view on inclusion and potentially excludes individuals that do not wish to take this route (Irving, 2004). The suggestion was made that another way to approach equality would be to focus on the reduction of social dominance of the privileged and repression of the disadvantage. This arguably ties in with Bourdieu's (1986) view that

education ‘preserves’ class and status rather than removing it. It addresses the commonly held concept of university being a ‘gold standard’ leading to occupational aspirations, upward social mobility, better health, and happiness. Irving’s (2004) article advocated for a healthy challenge of policy and not a blind following. This argument has been picked up by other commentators more recently taking the stance that what social justice means within HE needs clearer definition (Riddell, 2016) with Reay (2018) also arguing that university is not the sole key to social mobility. The main argument presented here is that whilst accessing university education has been used as a vehicle to reduce inequality it is not the only way.

The key inequality focus for the project is the relation between non-participation in HE and social class and links to rural location. Within the existing literature there is no consistency in the terminology used to describe ‘low socio-economic status’; this is referred to and defined in many ways; ‘low social origin’, ‘low SES’, ‘working class’, ‘underclasses, and ‘less privileged’ are all terms that have been used.

In addition to the wording used to describe social class status, there is also the way it is defined, and this has been debated extensively within the literature over the years (Roberts, 2018, Reay, 1998, Archer et al., 2003, Boliver et al., 2022). Different studies have used a variety of measures and assessment from different philosophical perspectives. Part of this difficulty stems from the changing nature of social class over time (Roberts, 2018). Other difficulties stem from the fact that individuals will not often fit neatly into categories. Reay (1998) examined pupils going through the decision-making process of which university to attend and discussed the complexity of social class dynamics and the difficulties in defining someone’s class. The study presented an example of an individual who was middle class due to their parents’ occupation, so they were rich in economic capital but less so in cultural capital as neither parent had attended university. In contrast, another individual whilst not having the economic capital had the cultural capital with a family tradition of attending Cambridge University.

James et al (2008) also highlighted the difficulties of defining social class and stressed how the concept is embedded in culture and therefore difficult to compare across countries and difficult to measure per se. The article discussed how in in Australia, SES has typically been ascertained by postcode however their research suggested there were limitations to this method as it was not relevant for older students. They argue that parental occupation or qualifications are a better indicator due to their stability. Within Scotland the SIMD (The Scottish Government, 2020) is a tool used to identify how deprived an area is. It is a relative measure taken across seven indicators: income, housing, crime, employment, health, education, and access to services and is based on the area in which the individual lives. However, it is less reliable in rural area due to the large geographic space a postcode can occupy (The Scottish Government, 2020). Duta et al (2021) also argues that the SIMD is not accurate enough and advocates for a combination of indicators to determine SES.

Roberts (2018) more recently argues that class structure has changed since the 1940's and that working class and middle class are not adequate classifications. Instead, he proposes four different classes – firstly the precariat class, those whose work is characterised by uncertainty for example zero-hour contracts and seasonal work. Roberts' (2018) also groups into this some self-employed people as he argued that self-employment is increasing due to necessity rather than entrepreneurship. This echoes the discussions of Brown et al (2004) who discuss the growth of jobs which 'service' those in management roles, for example cleaners and dog-walkers. The second category is the working class, defined as those who have some physical aspect to their work. The third class is 'lower middle class' which encompasses professions including teachers and medical staff who are professionally trained but do not have high level salaries. The fourth class is the 'upper middle class' which was reserved for high earning individuals such as investment bankers and associated professionals.

Roberts (2018) adequately puts across his argument about why changes in the economy have affected class structures. However, although Roberts (2018) points out that using multiple indicators to establish an individual's class creates a more accurate picture, his classifications appear to be loosely structured from

a combination of career type and income. They show us what the classes are but do not give a framework for defining who fits in each. Again, whilst there was discussion about how class needs to be a useful measure, for example as a mechanism to identify inequalities and not about choice, the classification he proposes has limited functionality in this respect and presupposes that all want to achieve social mobility through their occupation. It did not consider those who make different life choices.

Building on this classification of social class Roberts' (2019, 2020) maintains that transitions from education have changed and outlines five possible routes from school. The role of class is a prominent feature of these routes, and aligns with the classes outlined above with a focus on the 'ultimate' class an individual ends up in. The options are as follows:

1. University into higher management/elite careers
2. University into lower middle class
3. Exit education at 18 years lower middle-class via potentially through a work-based learning route.
4. Exit education at 18yrs and enter upper working class, potentially through a work-based learning route.
5. Fail in education and enter the precariat.

Whilst broadly speaking these classifications may align with the broad choices made by individuals within each of these categories are a myriad of occupations and nuanced choices. In addition, the way they are categorised suggests a grading of careers; that some are better than others rather than just an acceptance that different people make different but equally good choices. Whilst these higher management roles may command high salaries, they are frequently accompanied by travel, high pressure, long hours and poor work/life balance so it would be elitist to suggest that this is what every individual aspires to.

Whilst the debate continues with no definitive definition, what in essence is being discussed are two different concepts. The first concept is focused on

physical disadvantage for example being financially constrained or living in a deprived area with limited access to resources and facilities. The second concept relates to attitudes, behaviours, and values. Boliver et al (2022) used the term socio-economically disadvantaged to describe and identify individuals eligible for widening access programmes. Putting this into a very simplified context to illustrate, an individual may have degree educated parents but live in a deprived area. If either or both parent were unemployed then they would be at a socio-economic disadvantage but the values and attitudes would possibly be more “middle class” and encourage university participation (Archer et al., 2003). Therefore, if the individual chose not to enter university it would more likely be because of the physical barriers. In contrast another individual could live in an affluent area, with parents’ as high earners so they would not be financially constrained. However, if the parents embodied attitudes that working is preferable to university then, in this case non-participation at university would be attributed to values and attitudes rather than physical disadvantage.

2.1.4.3 A mid-range Theory: Pragmatic Rationalism and ‘Careership’

From the view of human capital, more qualifications equal more and better paid opportunities and therefore for those qualified, university is the rational choice. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, there is much research that supports this view and much policy and government strategy focus on improving attainment. Hodkinson et al (1997) explains that this is used in policy to advocate for better teaching and guidance. However, it is a very blinkered understanding of the issue, and makes assumptions about the way young people make decisions; it assumes these will be purely rational, excludes influences from out-with school, and it suggests that a young person makes their decisions and see them through.

The “Careership” theory grew from dissatisfaction with other career models which put the emphasis that career decision-making is a rational and ideal based decision. Whilst this model dubs itself a sociological model it also describes itself as mid-range seeking to amalgamate the role of the individual and the role of the environment the individual is in. The initial research (Hodkinson et al., 1996) was a qualitative study of 10 young people transitioning from education to work

under government youth training scheme (YTS) in the 1990's. The scheme issued vouchers to the participants. The aim was that this gave the participants autonomy in their decisions as they could choose which training provider to spend their vouchers with. However, the study found that there were a variety of 'stakeholders' involved and that the young people did not have full autonomy over their decisions. Hodkinson et al's (1996) aim was to tell the young people's story however through this they developed their own theoretical approach which draws on the work of Bourdieu concepts of "habitus" and "field" (Bourdieu, 1984, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

There are three key concepts to their theory. The first is 'pragmatic realism', that choices by the individuals are neither fully rational nor irrational. They link with the individuals 'horizon for action' which include the individual's interests and the availability of the opportunity. Studies have found evidence to support the concept of 'pragmatic rationality' that young people do not make rational decisions in the way of a human capital model, but make a decision that is rational for them in their context (Institute for Employment Research and Enterprising Careers, 2006). Hodkinson et al's (1996, 1997) research also highlighted the influence of external forces and that the career path of the young people in the study was not always linear; they changed their mind or followed paths different from their original plan. This is supported by Ramage (2019) who investigated the factors influencing school leavers' career decisions. Whilst one of the participants could identify a long-term career goal and knew what they had to do to achieve it, external factors were an influence in them taking an alternative route.

There is discussion that the pragmatically rational decision-making is in the "habitus" of the person, that is, the embedded dispositions an individual possesses due to their circumstances. In specific, they argue that individuals do not consider the full range of careers available to them (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) and that the environment influences the individual rather than the other way round. Research on this debate which is essentially 'nature' versus 'nurture' is mixed and complex as it depends on the variables being assessed (Burgess, 2016) and no definitive answer has been reached; other than to say there is an

effect of both. However, the argument is that decisions are not made in isolation of environment and that there may not even be conscious awareness of how their “habitus” is influencing the decision-making.

The second key concept is ‘interaction with others’, this could include teachers, the careers adviser and family. It is suggested that all these players have the potential to influence the individual’s choices. This is linked to Bourdieu (1984) and his concept of ‘field’ which include stakeholders in the individuals career decision. Whilst research is fairly consistent in the role of parents and friends as influencing ideas and career decisions (Ramage, 2019, Bakke, 2018, Corbett, 2013, Walsh and Cullinan, 2017), it suggests a two way street, that this influence can be positive or negative. However, this concept focuses on the power of different stakeholders and the inequality of resource between them and the individual. This suggests that an individual has limited agency in their career decisions. Whilst again this is true to an extent, for example an employer makes the decision as to which candidate to employ, the individual still retains some agency. An example of this agency in action would be to choose whether to accept the job. However, in the case of the YTS, that was the basis for the theory, an artificial situation is created due to the number of ‘stakeholders’ and bureaucracy involved explaining why the individual’s autonomy was diminished. Whilst this may be valid for those individuals on a YTS, this powerplay does not necessarily fully extend to individuals deciding on whether to pursue HE. Therefore a criticism of Hodkinson et al’s (1996) initial study is that a relatively limited sample of young people from a homogenous background has then been extended to account for the decision-making of all young people.

Despite this criticism the theory is still relevant to the current project. The third concept is the career trajectory over time. The authors argue that it is unrealistic to assume a career can be mapped out so replace the term ‘trajectory’ with ‘careership’. They argue that ‘turning points’ such as redundancy, or finishing school initiates a change and these combine with ‘periods of routine’ to form the path an individual takes. This third part of the theory is directly relevant to the current research project as it is assessing

individuals at one of these aforementioned ‘turning points’; that is the end of school.

A strength of this theory is that it takes a middle ground between the view that careers are pre-determined with little choice and the view that careers are an individual’s responsibility and made exclusive of the individual’s social context. The concept of ‘pragmatic rationalism’ is important as it accepts that decisions made are not purely financial. That is, the decision to pursue a certain career or take a certain job can be for a good reason even if that reason on the surface may not appear to make sense to an outside observer.

2.1.5 Summary of Chapter

This chapter has by no means exhausted the possible theoretical frameworks which bear relevance to the current research project. It has highlighted five theories from three disciplines. Whilst Human Capital theory provides a starting point for examining education participation and acknowledging that monetary returns is a valid reason for pursuing non-compulsory education, its rigid assumptions of rationality in decision making mean that it cannot account for the variations in human behaviour. Bounded theory brings in the concept of satisficing in decision making and relaxes these assumptions and has strong linkages with empirical work in psychology and sociology. These concepts compliment Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of ‘cultural capital’, ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ which puts gives a context to the decision-making. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) pragmatic rationalism which was built on from Bourdieu theory builds further on the concepts introduced by bounded rationality. Whilst bounded rationality acknowledges both psychological and sociological factors, the balance is more towards the psychological with a focus on processes and behaviour (Altman and Altman, 2017) and the concept of pragmatic rationality and ‘careership’(Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) redresses this balance.

Much traditional career theory derives from psychological theory seeking to explain the individual and their behaviour in a vocational context where modern

theories approach the career from a more dynamic, culturally diverse understanding. In essence all accept that both the individual and the environment have a role to play. Where the theories disagree is which has the biggest influence and how these factors influence career decisions.

Finally, Roberts' (2009) focus on structural factors such as geography and SES builds on the contextual factors influencing decision making further and provides a big picture of decision making. In addition, his theoretical contribution on redefining class systems is of key importance to this project which seeks to understand how SES can have an influence on decision-making. The combining of these theoretical perspectives from different disciplines gives a strong base on which to build the empirical research and enhance the contribution that economics can make when looking at the decision-making behaviour of human agents.

Whilst these theoretical perspectives are from different schools of thought there are also significant overlaps. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is not entirely separate from Roberts (2009) opportunity structures or Hodkinson et al. (1996) concept of 'interaction with others'. The next chapter provides an account of the empirical literature associated with factors influencing the decision-making of school leavers and their choice to participate in university.

Chapter 3 Factors Influencing Post-Compulsory Schooling Decisions and Higher Education Participation

3.1 Introduction to the Chapter

The previous chapter gave a theoretical underpinning for the research. Understanding why young people who have the qualifications to go to university but choose not to go is a complex topic especially when examining the role that SES and rural location play. Whilst different disciplines have individual contributions to make, as a topic it is understudied and fragmented within the literature. As this study coincided with the global COVID pandemic a section of the literature has also been dedicated to the newly emerging research and its impact on young people. Therefore, the literature review takes a thematic approach to the empirical literature to build understanding relevant to the research questions pulling on articles from different disciplines. Literature was gathered from a variety of sources including books, academic journal articles, reports, government policy documentation and media articles. It brings together empirical literature that focuses on factors that are relevant to post-compulsory schooling decisions and specifically factors that influence the decision on whether to participate in university.

3.2 Inequalities in Education

There is a strong literature base on inequalities in the participation in tertiary education and where these inequalities begin. Research is generally in agreement that inequalities begin at an early age (Chowdry et al., 2013) with those being born privileged most likely to stay privileged (Cullinan et al., 2021, Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Cross-national studies have demonstrated that higher levels of parental education and income relates to an increased likelihood of participating in HE and obtaining a 'high status job' although there is some evidence that this is mediated by educational attainment (Iannelli,

2002). Despite cross-national efforts to reduce the inequalities in HE participation, they still exist globally and remain resistant to change (Iannelli, 2002, James et al., 2008, The Scottish Government, 2023b). Initial leaver destinations for the 2021/2022 cohort of Scottish school leavers showed a 35.9pp gap between the 20% least deprived and most deprived in terms of HE participation (The Scottish Government, 2023b).

The current study acknowledges there are many different types of inequalities present that affect participation in HE for example gender (Deemer et al., 2016), race (Arday et al., 2022) and disability (Ryan, 2011). However, the focus of this study is on the relationship of SES and geography to participation or non-participation in HE.

Raffe et al (2006) examined changing inequalities in education over time in Scotland and England. Their final measure showed that the greatest inequalities were participation in a degree level study with an expansion of inequalities in the 1990-1993 and after this a slight narrowing. The authors tentatively suggested that this could be professional children taking advantage of the HE expansion first and working-class children taking time to catch up with this opportunity. However, more recently, Duta et al (2018) assessed the chances of participation in HE using linked sibling data. This approach showed a more coherent picture of participation as it analysed the achievements of all the children in a family and demonstrates the role of ‘family’ and background in participation. It demonstrated that those from a more privileged background were more likely to go to university and those from a less privileged to not go and that in most cases siblings took the same route in terms of HE participation adding more evidence that inequalities by SES are still prevalent.

The participant base of this study are pupils who have already achieved the qualifications required to access HE. Therefore, they will have overcome this initial barrier and have the potential to access university, whether by a direct or articulated route. However, as Reay (2018) argues, having the academic qualifications to go to university is often the easier part and it is the social acceptance and ‘fitting in’ that is more challenging.

3.2.1 Participation in Education by SES

There are a range of studies which have investigated HE choice with a focus on SES and the barriers an individual from a low SES may face. A case study by Reay (1998) found that working class individuals applying for university demonstrated a lack of confidence in the process, that geography was an influencing factor in their decision-making and that they had little understanding of university selectivity compared to the two participants in the study who had been privately educated. Family was also shown to have a role to play, and this differed between class background with the notion of 'automatically' proceeding to university for middle class students, who could depend on family for knowledge on the process where for working class students there was uncertainty from family unfamiliar with university requiring working class students to make more autonomous decisions. This study therefore builds on the concept that there is more to the decision than just 'getting the grades' and that the decision-making is multi-faceted. Whilst this study is now over 20 years old many of these factors are still being shown as relevant today, suggesting relatively how little progress has been made on narrowing this gap. The participants in the study were all at the stage of applying to university so the findings can only be used as a proxy measure of what might deter an individual to apply to university.

A more recent study by Reay (2018) examined accounts of working-class student experiences at elite universities, where working class students continue to be underrepresented. The findings were that they reported not fitting in and feeling excluded as well as less clever than their middle and upper-class counterparts. This is significant as it perpetuates the commonly held perception of working-class students that 'university isn't for me' (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003a, Marks et al., 2003). Mark et al's (2003) study examined reasons why working-class students had initially rejected university from school but chose to attend as mature students. The narratives from the participants were that whilst at school university had been perceived as an option for the "rich clever", however over time perspectives had changed, though the reasons and influences for attending as a mature student were varied. What it does show is that the decision to go to university is not binary.

A study on HE participation and links with social class modelled participants attitudes to HE which included non-university participants (Archer et al., 2003). Significant factors relating to university participation included receiving information from their school about university, enjoying studying, viewing university as an investment to a better life, having the belief in themselves about their chance of success at university, and receiving encouragement to go from family. However, whilst this correlated with an increase chance of participation, there were individuals in the study who had a positive perception of university but had no intention of going to university demonstrating that perceptions and action may not always be congruent. These findings linked with a study on the influences on decision on participation at university by low social class groups (Connor et al., 2001). Factors influencing the decision, were classed into “encouraging factors” such as better job opportunities and “discouraging factors” which included individuals wanting to enter the labour market rather than delay by enrolling in more education. Finance and confidence in the ability to succeed were also found to have an influence which touches on the concept of university being viewed as a risky investment for those with financial constraints.

Building on the theme of risk, Archer and Hutchings (2000) assessed the views of working-class non-participants in HE and their results echo the findings of complexity on the discourse surrounding the choice on whether to participate. The theme of risk was prevalent in the discussions in terms of effort that participants put into participation. Participants were concerned about failing exams and not making entry requirements, therefore seeing it as wasting money and time. The rhetoric around the risk of failure was complex, it was seen as being a real possibility and whilst most families supported the students there was the repercussion of failure being a social entity and adding pressure to the potential students’ decision. This highlights the disconnect from the positive spin policy puts on university participation and what individuals’ actual views were – very few of the participants thought the experience of university would be positive; but a means to an end that would require effort and sacrifice. However, the participants cited that the benefits of university were a route to upward social mobility and more and better opportunities – ‘knowledge jobs’

were cited as being accessible through completion of university. However again, the theme of risk emerged as there was concern that the labour market was overpopulated with graduates and that they would not be able to get the job they wanted and would end up in a role for which they were overqualified and trying to escape in the first place.

A further article published (Hutchings and Archer, 2001) as part of this project echoed the above and also found that participants knowledge of entry requirements and cost of university was vague. In addition, there was discourse around the 'types' of people who go to university. They were perceived in one of three ways; middle class, white individuals who 'just wanted to get drunk and have fun'; 'boffins' or thirdly, ambitious working-class individuals who want to better themselves. What is useful about the above studies is that they included participants who had chosen either to delay or not to enter HE, where most studies have focused solely on reasons to participate as opposed to reasons for non-participation. Connor et al (2001) calls for more research into the barriers of HE participation especially in different geographic regions. What is interesting is the modelling of these studies as to whether they are assessing 'educational choice' or 'barriers to HE'. Whilst practically it is difficult to separate these out theoretically it is an important distinction to make. The former suggests the individual as an active agent in the process of making their decisions and their context, whereas the latter suggests the individual is passive and with external forces limiting choice. It also places a higher importance on the role of university than other post-school options.

Forsyth and Furlong (2003a) concluded in their survey of Scottish school leaver destination that academic achievement was a stronger indicator to progressing to HE than social class, however there was some evidence that those from a more deprived background with the entry requirements to go university would be more likely to take an HNC/D rather than progress straight into degree level study. Follow up interviews revealed a variety of barriers to university which concur with reasons highlighted in the studies already discussed, for example finance and cultural barriers. The point was also highlighted that to simply discuss the issue as participation or non-participation is simplified as those from

more deprived backgrounds were more likely to defer entry into university education, a finding that appears consistent with other research (OECD, 2018, Archer et al., 2003).

Another key point made by Forsyth and Furlong (2003a) was the low number of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals progressing to elite institutions. This point is pertinent as choice of institution has been demonstrated to be linked to graduate employment and salary. This, therefore adds to the growing body of research that university is a riskier investment for someone from a more deprived background, as university costs more for them and they are less likely to gain the returns as those graduating from an elite university (Archer et al., 2003). This leads to the question “Is university worth it?”, a viewpoint that is, as discussed, gaining media attention (Shearing, 2022). However, what Forsyth and Furlong (2003a) did not assess was the school leavers motivations for alternative choices and how these choices evolve and work for the individual.

The research over the past twenty-five years demonstrates that there is a clear pattern of persisting inequalities with more recent studies are showing similar patterns, suggesting that these older studies are still relevant when assessing this issue of HE participation. Whilst some individuals from working class social origins do not make the qualifications to go to university, some do and will participate in university, and some will make the qualifications but still choose not to participate in university. What is less researched is what those individuals with the qualifications required, choosing not to participate in university education do instead and why they have chosen a different option and how this option plays out for them. In addition, few of the studies have a specific focus on Scotland and even less with a focus on individuals living in a rural location. The current project intends to go some way to addressing this gap in the literature and the remainder of this section will highlight other key areas where inequalities may be present.

3.2.2 The role of prior educational attainment

As the focus of this study is participants who have the required attainment to go to university the role of prior attainment will be only briefly discussed. Despite ongoing policy to reduce inequalities in HE, participation rates are not equal, and SES continues to play a significant role. Data shows that inequalities in education start before enrolment in school and accumulate as time progresses (Elsley, 2014a).

Iannelli (2002) found that educational attainment reduced the impact of parental education (often used as a proxy of SES) on HE but did not eliminate it entirely. This paper demonstrates that the issue of inequality in HE is not clear cut; some students from working class social origins will overcome the educational hurdle and gain the grades they need to study at university but not all will choose to go. Therefore, an understanding of other factors in the decision-making process is required.

Building on the previous study, Chowdry et al (2013) examined HE participation in a cohort of pupils from different SES from both state and private schools in England. The pupils were grouped into different quintiles according to SES which was classified by eligibility for free school meals and as well as neighbourhood characteristics. Their model found that when early educational achievement was accounted for, this reduced the chance of a pupil from the lowest quintile to progressing to HE. The authors suggested this finding demonstrates that low SES has an impact early in a pupil's academic career. Further analysis investigated the role of the school and whilst this had less of a significance on whether a pupil entered HE, it did have a significant effect as to whether a pupil applied for a high-status institution. The authors concluded that the gap in HE participation began at an early academic stage and not at the point of entry to university.

The authors acknowledged that their data did not extend to understanding individual pupils reasonings for choosing or not choosing HE and suggested that the choice to participate went beyond qualifications, for example that the

individual may choose not to fully engage with school as they view university 'not to be for them'. This suggestion acknowledges that whilst prior educational attainment is a significant contributing factor to the difference in participation the picture is more complex than this, as otherwise those that had the qualification would all participate in university which is not what is happening.

3.2.3 Parental Education

Parental education is often cited as a factor influencing university participation and is sometimes used as a proxy measure for social class. The OECD (2022) report that individuals without university educated parents are less likely to continue to post-secondary education and cross-national research data has demonstrated that those with highly educated parents are more likely to graduate than those with parents with a low education (Iannelli, 2002). Additionally, evidence from the OECD (2018) demonstrated that pupils without university educated parents were more likely to be studying a vocational programme than those with one or both parents with a university education. This finding was echoed by Corbett's (2013) study of career decision-making complexity in rural Canadian coastal communities. The findings showed that students from families from a low SES-status were more likely to choose a university course with direct links to employment, whereas those from a higher SES saw university as a cultural norm or rite of passage with a focus on the experience of university rather than a means to an end.

For those individuals who do progress to university education without university educated parents, 82% will enter university education for the first time before the age of 25 years compared to 90% of those with at least one university educated parent (OECD, 2018). This trend was found across OECD countries suggesting that those without university educated parents are more likely to delay entry to university education which mirrors the findings by Forsyth and Furlong (2003a). This finding is also supported by Henderson (2019) who conducted a longitudinal study examining the participation of 'first in the family' university graduates in England. The study examined the consequences of growing up in a family where neither parent has obtained a degree. Their

initial analysis found that pupils with university educated parents were more likely to obtain a university degree by the time they were aged 25. Whilst this adds to the evidence base, the data they collected did not account for whether an older sibling had gone to university. Potentially this could have significant effects on the participant's experience of university and/or influence the decision as to whether to attend. An individual from a family where a sibling has already attended would have a direct contact to get advice on applying as well as the social and academic sides of a degree.

Wash and Cullinan (2017) found a strong influence of both parents and siblings on university institutional choice and Duta et al (2021) found that there was congruence between siblings' education. These studies point to the role of social capital which the individual could take advantage of even if they study in a different institution at separate times. For example, Toutkoushian et al (2018) focused on the role the parent plays in a young person's education and highlights possible reasons for the trend that parents with a university education are more likely to have children who attend university. Whilst the authors discuss a variety of potential reasons for this, for example that the parents have the cultural capital to ease the way, knowledge to help their children choose a course, better finances to support them and are more likely to extol the benefits of HE, they acknowledge that this question has not been answered in their research. Even if the reasons given by Toutkoushian et al. (2018) were speculative, there is an established body of research which demonstrates the hugely influential role of parents in their children's education choice (Tamayo Martinez et al., 2022). The value of parental education also ties in the with the distinction being made between "socioeconomic disadvantages" and "working class background" discussed earlier in Chapter 2.

In summary, the research shows that there is an impact of parental education on university participation, however the explanations for how are often tentative and exploratory. This study aims to build understanding on the role of parental influence in their children's post-secondary educational and career choices.

3.3 Widening Access

There has been a priority of the Scottish Government (2016) and the SFC (2018) for the development of entry to university through articulation routes and advanced standing. That is to make it more accessible for pupils choosing an initial route of college to progress to university.

There is acknowledgement that the term 'articulation route' is defined in multiple ways. The following definition is used by the Scottish Government in their final report by the Widening Access Commission as "*progression from college to university where full credit is awarded for prior learning*." (The Scottish Government, 2016, p32). It was acknowledged in this report that there was considerable variety in the articulation routes on offer. They discussed how articulation routes were limited to certain types of course and that not all institutions participated equally – some provided partial credit of prior learning and in 2013/14 84% of the articulation was delivered by five institutions. The Social Mobility Commission (2019) describes FE as being under-funded and recommends the creation of a *"seamless and clear transition between technical and academic routes for all students" (Social Mobility Commission, 2019, p60).*

Since this report it is unclear if there has been an improvement in structure of articulation routes. There has also been the development of associated degree routes where the individual would apply to a specifically designed degree programme where they would undertake the first two years of the course at college before completing their final two years at the partnership university without having to go through a second application process. However, articulation routes and associated degree programmes are more likely to be offered at post-1992 institutions (Universities Scotland, 2023). The research would show that individuals from a lower SES are more likely to access college as a way into university and this therefore continues to limit their access to more prestigious institutions.

3.3.1 Effectiveness of Widening Access Programmes

The following provides a brief overview of the impact of widening programmes in the U.K. Widening access is not a key focus of the project, however, it is relevant to the broader picture of university participation of non-traditional groups, so merits some discussion and can be assessed at various levels.

Riddel (2016) focused on widening access at a policy and strategy level in Scotland, and highlighted the concerns around effectiveness of policy and whom these policies should target and with whom the responsibility lay. Whilst the author discussed higher level issues of widening access there was little offered in the way of solution or addressing these ongoing problems. Boliver et al. (2018) focussed on organisational identity of universities to explore the slow progress of widening access. They discussed the recent increase in entry requirements, therefore exacerbating the attainment gap between the most and least deprived and meaning entry requirements far outstripped the actual ability required to complete the course. Whilst most universities offer a form of contextualised offer, the authors argue that this is only a grade or two below standard entry requirements and does not go far enough. Using a combination of interviews with admission personnel and policy document, the analysis found that universities focussed on research and recruiting the highest qualified students were causing a barrier to widening participation. However, those universities focused on teaching quality over research had a better understanding of the socio-economic gap in participation. This article is important as it demonstrates systemic issues within widening participation.

There is some evidence to suggest a focus on recruiting the highest achieving students from the widening access programmes. O'Sullivan (2019) assessed widening access programmes in two selective universities through a qualitative study which interviewed the staff involved in the admission of widening access participants. It examined the use of contextualised offers and foundation years. Themes included recruiting the right candidate and the indicators used to achieve this. There was a point put across that contextualised offers were 'cream skimming' those from lower SES. There was also discussion on the

balance between fairness of access versus maintaining academic standards. The study found that those participating in widening access programmes were largely from a lone-parent family, low SES, however they were not a homogenous group.

A further study by Harrison and Waller (2017) investigated the effectiveness of widening access programmes in England. Included in their findings, were perceived inefficiencies in participant recruitment which manifested in several ways. This could be not intervening early enough or working with individuals who were planning to go to university anyway without the intervention. Another finding was the difficulties staff had in evaluating the impact of the programmes due to time scales and the variety of influences on a young person. However, their respondents were directors and other senior level staff involved in the delivery of the programmes, so whilst this provides a valuable insight into the effectiveness of the programmes from an administrative level it does not explore the experiences of those participating in them.

This is not an exhaustive account of widening access but highlights key issues at an organisational and programme level. However, within this are reports of some success and progress at an individual level. The role of college in the widening access agenda will be discussed in section 0.

3.4 Geography

There is a growing body of research on the role that geographical location has to play in both accessing post-secondary education, occupation and industry choice with an acknowledgement that not all opportunities are equally accessible to all (Alexander, 2013, Alexander, 2016). Location is an important indicator of performance with pupils in urban schools performing better than pupils in rural schools (defined as a school in a community with less than 100,000 inhabitants) in most countries (OECD, 2018). This was accounted for due to urban schools having more qualified teachers and pupils being more likely to have a better socioeconomic background (OECD, 2018). The impact of this is that pupils from a rural school are less likely to gain the educational attainment to access university, as well as having less access to universities. An assessment of the

distribution and accessibility of HEI's in Ireland found that whilst the majority of individuals had an HEI within a reasonable catchment area there were a significant number that did not and there was no guarantee the closest HEI offered the required course (Cullinan and Halpin, 2017). The findings also showed that most individuals choose an HEI close to them suggesting that students may not be as geographically mobile as popular view would indicate.

Corbett's (2013) study of a rural Canadian coastal community of school leavers highlighted the complexity of the decision-making process. It introduced the discourse of "learning to leave or learning to stay", that is, due to the rurality of the area pupils had to leave the community to access HE. This concept has been picked up and expanded on in a Swedish study of school pupils (Rosvall et al., 2018). This article investigated post-school transitions for rural school pupils in Sweden through an ethnographic approach. Sweden upper secondary is divided into a vocational track or academic track which in turn paves the way for access to HE. Key narratives were that parental education and career were influential on which track a young person takes, as did SES, cultural resources, and connections, as well as the social codes for that area in terms of whether the norm is to stay or go. This demonstrates the competing influences and structural factors influential in the young person's decision-making. More recently Alexander (2021) discusses within-country migration of students from a Scottish Island community with a focus on access to education. She highlights the importance of migration for career development and the diversity in the experience of those migrating. She calls for more research in understanding the dynamics between migration from a rural to urban area and subsequent career development. This is important research as it acknowledges that some young people need to move away to access certain career opportunities.

A separate study by Walsh and Cullinan (2017) found that attending an HEI closer to home was an important factor for those from a working-class background in an effort to reduce cost which echoes findings by Gibbons and Vignoles (2012). Building on this Ramage (2019) found that rural students in Dumfries and Galloway, prioritised university location over course selection and often eliminated universities they regarded as too far away. This can therefore have

an impact on choice of course available but also the ability to fully participate in university life. Elliot et al (2009) who explored the demand for university education among non-traditional learners in Fife, found that a lack of local provision was a contributing factor to non-progression to university and Kenyon (2011) discusses how those looking to access university from a non-traditional background/first in family can be at risk of exclusion due to their geography. This could be due to the cost of relocating, transport, or length of commute time. Results of a focus group showed that these exclusions can continue even once a student is at university as they are unable to participate as fully as their better connected or more privileged peers. Riddell (2016) also highlights that within the widening-access agenda the obstacles faced by those from rural locations are often not considered. Building on this Lassele (2021) argues that Scottish rural students are more likely to be missed due to the insensitivities of the SIMD at capturing rural deprivation. To summarise, whilst a rural location is not an unsurmountable barrier, it adds an extra a layer to the decision-making process and often impacts those from a financially constrained background more than those who are not (Rosvall et al., 2018, Corbett, 2013, Kenyon, 2011).

3.5 Finance

There is a growing body of research that demonstrates that financial constraints as well as beliefs and values on student debt have an influencing factor on if and when a prospective student accesses university. This is of importance as key policy drivers for decades have focussed on equity of access to university and evidence consistently shows a lower-take up of university education by those with financial constraints (Chowdry et al., 2013).

Carneiro and Heckman (2002) examined the long-term financials factors affecting enrolment of pupils at college (university) and subsequent completion of the programme in the U.S.A, against short term credit constraints including the cost of college education. They found that longer-term factors were the primary cause of non-enrolment or completion. Examples of long-term factors included families with greater resources being able to access better quality schools, as well as expectations about education and life-chances being

influenced by parents over their lifetime. They proposed that short term credit constraints were a minor factor and quantified this by stipulating that at maximum only 8% of pupils would be affected by this. Carneiro and Heckman (2002) made the point that their data was taken where substantial financial aid exists for post-secondary education. Similar to Chowdry et al (2013), they concluded that inequalities began before the point of entry to university, in terms of prior achievement but even when this was accounted for, there was still a lower uptake of university by those that were more likely to have financial constraints.

Carneiro and Heckman (2002) also highlighted that lower participation rates by those from a disadvantaged background still occur in areas where education is free, lending support to the argument that long-terms factors have considerable influence. In Scotland, where tuition fees for a first undergraduate degree are paid at point of entry, there is still a consistent gap in the levels of pupils attending HE when examined by SIMD (Scottish Funding Council, 2022). In Ireland, the abolition of tuition fees made little difference to participation rates by SES, the explanation given for this was that students from disadvantaged backgrounds would have already been eligible for a fee waiver so abolishing fees would have had no impact on them from a financial perspective (Denny and Flannery, 2017).

Whilst waived tuition fees reduce the financial barrier it is not the entire cost of university education. There are other factors such as cost of borrowing, less financial support from parent meaning that university for some students costs more than others. Findlay and Hermannsson (2019) assessed the role of financial viability of HE for students of different social origins in Scotland. Their analysis calculated that students from a working-class background were subject to a 11% wage penalty compared to those from a middle-class background and that bursary levels needed to more than triple to cancel this out. Another scenario they presented, assessed the impact of increasing student loan funding to decrease the cost of finance. By increasing student loan funding to 100% this decreased the cost of borrowing and increased the net present value to almost that of middle class students but did not eliminate it entirely. Therefore, as the

actual return to a student will depend on other factors not assessed here such as attitudes to debts and course studied, the authors concluded that for working class students not choosing HE can demonstrate a rational choice. This finding lends support to Becker's (1975) analysis which demonstrated that free tuition fees only increased the return slightly whereas elimination of foregone earnings would make a greater difference on rate of return and make HE a more appealing proposition to those with financial constraints.

Callender and Jackson (2008) assessed the attitude to debt among high school and FE leavers when considering university. Their findings demonstrated that working class individuals were more likely to view university as a burden rather than an investment and found that fear of debt had an impact on university choice with individuals from a working-class background more likely to choose a university close to home. Whilst the study found that debt did not impact the choice of qualification the study stopped short of assessing whether debt had stopped an individual applying altogether. Wilkins et al (2013) assessed the impact of increased university fees in England as an influencing factor in choosing HE. The study surveyed pupils' responses on receiving information at the proposed fee increase in 2012. Their hypothesis that finance would be a key factor was supported, accounting for 26% of variance, however they found no evidence that pupils from a working-class background were less likely to choose university. Whilst the authors focus on the increase in tuition, the factor described as "financial issues" included all aspects of finance including cost of living and repaying loans. However, there should be a degree of caution associated with these findings as the sample pupils were provided with information directly before the study about the proposed increase in fees, so arguably their responses were based on an initial 'gut feel' rather than the decision they ultimately made.

In contrast a qualitative study produced for the Scottish Government concluded that students largely did not consider finances when making choices (Snook, 2012). However, this seems to be at odds with much of the literature. Warhurst et al (2009) conducted a review of the income, expenditure and debt in higher and FE students. Key findings were that working-class university students had

higher levels of income which was tentatively attributed to having to work more as they were less able to rely on financial support from parents. Working-class students on average had higher levels of debt than middle class students and higher levels of expenditure. A comparison with non-students noted that 40% had decided against university for financial reasons. Furthermore, Schlinder and Lorz (2012) examined student motivation and demonstrates that potential reasons for working-class pupils not to proceed to university education was due to their desire to be financially independent and not delay earning.

3.6 The Social and Private Benefits of Higher Education

3.6.1 The Benefits of Higher Education: Context

The previous section outlined the policy environment in which the young people making their transitions are situated. This section seeks to evaluate the literature surrounding both the private and public benefits of HE. Public benefits can be split into the direct benefits to economy such as lower unemployment rates, tax that higher earning individuals generate and therefore less or no reliance on state benefits and secondary non-monetary benefits such as improved health, well-being and fitness (OECD, 2018, Chan, 2016). Private benefits include greater earning potential, greater access to opportunities, prestige or status associated with their career as well as the aforementioned health benefits. Higher levels of education are also associated with more community participation, self-reported happiness (Flannery and O'Donoghue, 2017), social cohesion, links to lower crime rates (OECD, 2001), child-health and social capital (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014).

The Dearing report (Dearing and Garrick, 1997) claimed if you attend university you will be happier, healthier and wealthier. So, whilst this section summarises the benefits for HE participation, it is worth noting there are alternatives to university education (which will be discussed in chapter 4). Indeed, Burgess (2023) recently investigated 'non-conforming' English pupils who rejected university as a post-school option and sought an alternative going against what was expected of them. They found that there they were disadvantage in terms

of gaining impartial information and guidance on their choices and had to use networks and resources to investigate their alternative options. There is an argument that there has perhaps not been the same research into the benefits of not attending university/choosing an alternative option or delaying university participation.

3.6.2 Challenges of Measuring the Benefits to Higher Education

As outlined above there is wide and consistent research on the benefits of HE. However, measuring the benefits and comparing the results of different studies possess several challenges. Firstly, is what type of benefit is being measured; pecuniary, non-pecuniary, private, public or a combination of different benefits (Perna, 2005). The second is what factors are included and excluded in the assessment (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). For example, the rate of return depends on what levels of education are being compared and the definitions used for those education levels. For example, lower-secondary with tertiary or college with tertiary education. It also depends on factors such as gender, ethnic background, SES, and for cross-country comparison which economies are included (OECD, 2018). Thirdly, it is not just the factors being included in the analysis but the actual data collection methods used and the models of analysis which can all produce differing estimates of educational returns (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). Patrinos (2016) discusses the benefits and limitations of the Mincer equation as a measure of returns to schooling. This has become a standard approach to calculating the rate of return due to it providing a clear cost/benefit analysis and the flexibility it has to add in additional independent variables. The article discusses its use with policy makers to assess investment in education and for individuals to assess the benefit to them of continuing in education, however it highlights the methodological issues of cross-country comparisons (Patrinos, 2016).

Finally, it can be hard to separate the benefits from HE from other causes and also when to measure the effects of education, as these continue to change over a lifetime (Perna, 2005). For example, an individual may not use a developed skill so there is a rate of attrition where another individual might continue to

build their skillset. Such challenges go some way to explaining the reason for differing rates of return in HE. Schwerdt and Woessmann (2020) discuss the issues of accounting for unobserved factors and possible reverse causality in economic models and solving the endogeneity problem. That is that correlation does not necessarily imply causation. They acknowledge, that within economics of education they are unobserved factors influencing statistical modelling. The authors discuss a broad range of quantitative empirical techniques currently being used within economics including randomised and natural experiments. This article suggests that this is a limit to what can be calculated through a human capital model and that more varied approaches are needed to build on existing knowledge and help solve this causality problem.

3.6.3 Monetary Returns to Education

Research generally shows, globally, a positive correlation between educational attainment, years of education and income (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014, OECD, 2018, Long, 2010). This section provides a broad overview of the estimate of returns to education at a primary, secondary, and higher level; however, it is by no means an exhaustive review of all literature in this area.

Montenegro and Patrinos (2014) assessed data from 139 economies. The results of the analysis demonstrated that returns have declined only slightly over the last fifty years despite big increases in levels of attainment, providing evidence for an increase in the global demand for skills. They also found there were significant returns to having a university level education. However, it was acknowledged that this only included labour market earnings and excluded self-employed, apprentices and those working in the “informal sector” due a lack of data (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). This exclusion could result in a positive skew on the data if those working in the excluded sectors were university educated. Roberts (2018) highlighted the increase of poorly paid self-employed individuals, due to wider labour market changes, which adds to the argument on the possible positive skew of the results. Whilst Montenegro and Patrinos (2014) gave an estimate of what the returns were, it did not attempt to provide a reason for the differing levels of returns.

The OECD (2022) also provided an estimate on the benefits of HE. The report claimed that on average, across OECD countries tertiary educated individuals earn 44% more than those with an upper-secondary level of education. In addition, they report a greater potential for faster wage increase and a higher ceiling on earnings. In a report by The Office for National Statistics (2019a) the estimated lifetime premium for having a degree was shown to have decreased since 2004 but remained at about 30% compared to someone with A-levels or equivalent. The focus was on the premium gained from degree level study compared to high school qualifications but did not make a comparison with other qualifications such as apprenticeships. In fact, the research that compares the difference between university and other post-secondary qualifications is limited and will be discussed further in the section "Alternatives route to university".

Perna (2005) assessed the benefits of gaining a Batchelor's degree compared with those leaving with a high school education. The study tracked the educational and occupational progress of a sample of U.S. students in 1988 until 2000. The assessment of benefits took place eight years after graduating from high school. The findings were that those that gained a degree had an average of an 18% higher income than those leaving from high school. One focus of the study was the difference in 'benefit' between students of different SES. The study found no evidence that the benefit of HE was less for those from a low SES. However, the authors acknowledged that the assumption was made that all students incurred the same costs and had the same access to funding. Neither was institution or course studied differentiated. This is an interesting perspective as there is evidence which discusses the higher opportunity cost of students with a low SES (Findlay and Hermannsson, 2019, Warhurst et al., 2009, Forsyth and Furlong, 2003a). In addition, pupils from a low SES tend to have less access to prestigious institutions (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000, Forsyth and Furlong, 2003a), which is linked with better job opportunities and pay so not to taking either of these factors into account could account for the null finding.

Lannery and O'Donnoghue (2017) used the 2014 data from the Irish component of the European Union Statistics in Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and created a model which simulated the year on year benefit of those who had exited with an

upper-secondary education. Their method used net income as this reflected the actual return received by the individual. They calculated that having a degree gave a 37.6% return however they caveated this as a particularly high return due to being in the middle of a global recession when opportunities costs were lower. They provided 2008 as a point of comparison and estimated returns to be 25%. Bynner et al (2002) conducted a birth cohort study found that that the strongest link to earnings was post-16 qualifications.

However, when returns are examined in more detail, the returns become less homogenous. Bratti (2008) used the 1970 birth cohort as this was after the HE expansion and increased costs. The research examined difference in returns by gender, background, ability, and unobservable factors. The article argues that an average return was misleading and that even within the same period the research was mixed with regards to the rate of return for a degree. This study also compared non-degree HE with degree and found no significance of returns for men but a significant difference from women. The results also found an effect of degree class, and by broad subject area with social sciences having the best returns, then science then arts and humanities. However, it is worth noting that these are extremely broad subject areas, and it is likely within these groupings there would be further variation. The article concluded that despite the differences of returns that HE is worth the investment. Building on the concept of heterogeneity of returns, one study excluded medicine from its analysis as its high returns meant it was a clear outlier and positively biased the rate of return to degree level study (Dickson and Harmon, 2011). Burgess (2016) calls for more research to induce a greater understanding of the spread of returns by degree type and for more research which gains a better understanding of pupil’s reasons for attending university.

Building on this, more recently the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Britton et al., 2020a) carried out research using the longitudinal educational outcomes (LEO) dataset combined with labour force surveys. They concluded that whilst 80% of individuals participating in university would see a return on investment, 20% would have been better off not going (Britton et al., 2020a). They discussed that this difference is largely due to the subject studied at university, with those

studying subjects like medicine and law positively skewing the average return. This is a significant finding as it builds on the above research that suggests the return to university is not as homogenous as other reports would suggest. Furthermore, Walker (2020) examined the heterogeneity in returns to higher education and highlighted that whilst costs are inflexible the benefits are unclear due to limited information and being far in the future. The conclusions of this paper were that the returns vary hugely due to subject choice with some options offering little in the way of monetary return compared to not having a degree. The magazine The Economist (2023) also recently published an article titled “Was your degree really worth it?” and argues that whilst many see a return many do not, and that confidence is being lost in the value of a degree. This appears to be a growing viewpoint in the media with the Telegraph (Lytton, 2023) reporting students suing universities in England for lack of teaching following the pandemic.

Whilst media reports are not a peer-reviewed papers, this article suggests that questioning the worth of a degree is gaining public attention. Deming et al (2023) also calls into question the value of the degree and argues that in the USA the value of a degree is declining and claims that 40% of undergraduates are in jobs that do not require a degree. These articles are all very recent, and merit further exploration and beg the question, if these students would have been better off not going to university what should, or could they have done instead?

The research into the financial returns of a degree shows that on average there is still a significant return on having a university education but these ‘averages’ hide a more complex picture, with emerging research calling into question the value of a degree (Britton et al., 2020a). There is considerable heterogeneity in the rate of return between studies and this heterogeneity increases further when individual context is brought in, showing that those from a more disadvantaged background potentially gain less of a return from a degree and some gain no benefit. Most often, when estimating the return of a degree, the comparison is made with high school qualifications. What is less clear is the comparison between having an apprenticeship and a degree or FE and a degree and what the subsequent return would be on this.

3.6.4 Lower Levels of Unemployment

As well as the potential to gain greater earnings over a lifetime, participation in university is also linked to lower levels of unemployment (Chan, 2016). When looking at the link between education attainment and employment across OECD countries (2022) the unemployment rate for young adults is higher for those who did not complete upper-secondary; 11% compared to 4.2%. However, for those individuals that completed upper secondary or non-tertiary post-secondary the unemployment rates are only slightly higher at 6.3% suggesting the big gain is in completing upper secondary education rather than HE.

3.6.5 Non-Pecuniary Benefits to Higher Education

The above has provided an overview in terms of monetary benefits associated with HE. This section now explores the non-monetary benefits. There is a body of research which shows that the benefits of higher levels of education are not limited to improved opportunities and income but also include benefits to health and social participation. The OECD (2001) reported that higher levels of education are linked to lower crime, better health, political and community participation and better social cohesion. This finding included controlling for several factors such as, income and race however the authors caution that causation is not clear. They claimed the clearest benefit of education is health, that those with higher levels of education were less likely to smoke or smoke less, less likely to be overweight and more likely to participate in exercise. Perna’s (2005) study, however found mixed results for positive health related behaviour for those with a degree education. The findings were that levels of smoking were lower however alcohol consumption was higher, and exercise was lower. Again, there were mixed results for educational attainment relating positively to leisure activities, however some of the measures used were extremely specific such as attending two concerts per month. This is open to interpretation as to what defines a concert, but also does not consider any geographical challenges in accessing concerts. Oreopoulous et al (2011) whilst not focussing specifically on HE discussed a variety of non-pecuniary benefits with increase years of schooling including both labour market and life choice

benefits. This tentatively suggests that it is not necessarily university per se that is solely responsible for health, wealth, and happiness and indeed the authors discussed the problematic nature of causation and correlation around key factors. In a further article (Oreopoulos and Petronijevic, 2013), the point was made that the decision to go university needed to be made on a case-by-case basis due to the complexity in the decision-making process and the factors involved.

More recently Chan et al (2016) researched the benefits of HE from the perspective of both the HEI and the student. The analysis found that there were some discrepancies between the perceived benefits from different perspectives. Students were focussed on the personal benefits, for example university as a rite of passage, as well as higher earnings and lower levels of unemployment. The HEI, perspective however, focused more societal benefits such as education as a vehicle for social mobility. This article demonstrated that the reasons for pursing a degree are varied, complex and that individual reasoning may be at odds with the governing policy for reasons for HE participation.

3.6.6 Summary

Most research has shown a consistent return to tertiary education; however, the size of the return depends on the calculation being used and is often compared with leaving with a high school certificate or equivalent and methodological issues in calculating this return have been discussed. However, there are now emerging studies (Britton et al., 2020a, Deming et al., 2023) suggesting that not all individuals benefit financially from going to university.

Whilst there is a body research on returns to apprenticeships, few of the studies discussed above compare the returns of a vocational or FE qualification with the return from tertiary education but make a comparison with high-school qualifications. With the push from the Scottish Government (2014c), the OECD (2018) and the Social Mobility Commission (2019) to create a strong vocational system of learning that integrates with the academic system of HE, this is something that requires more investigation.

3.7 The Role of Support Networks

3.7.1 Family, Friends, and Community

It is acknowledged both anecdotally and through research that parents are one of the biggest influencing factors on pupils' career decisions (Cullinan et al., 2017, Montacute and Cullinane, 2018, Cabinet Office, 2008). This can manifest in several ways. Firstly, it could be deliberate, for example encouraging the young person to pursue a certain career, implicit, for example a young person witnessing their parent's work ethic or thirdly, unplanned, for example a parent experiencing a redundancy situation (Institute for Employment Research and Enterprising Careers, 2006). In a study which examined school-leavers career decision-making, Ramage (2019) also found family a key influence, with incidences of both deliberate and implicit influence. Participants discussed parents providing encouragement for plans as well as providing inspiration through wanting to 'better themselves'.

Archer et al (2003) also discusses the role of child expert and styles of parenting discussing that families from a working-class background are more likely to assume their child knows best in the context of career decision-making where parents from a more advantaged background are more likely to encourage, steer and guide their children down a pathway, often university. This would make intuitive sense as it is more likely that parents from a middle-class background have higher levels of education so would feel more confident discussing university pathways and this was a finding of a recent Sutton Trust report (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Ramage (2019) provides the example in a study of career decision-making, that a pupil discussed being able to speak to their mother about educational decision as she had 'been through the system' where her dad did not understand the varying levels of qualifications so found that she turned to him less for support.

Several commentators have discussed the concept of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' information (Slack et al., 2014, Archer et al., 2003). 'Hot' information refers to accounts from an individual's social network, such as parents, 'warm' is

information from wider acquaintances and 'cold' information is from official sources. Slack et al (2014) discusses how 'hot' information is viewed as trustworthy and therefore holds more weight than cold information and that individuals are more likely to make decisions based on this 'hot' information. The point was also made that there is a key connection with SES as someone from a middle-class background is more likely to have several close contacts they can speak to about university and corresponding experiences, where someone from a more deprived background may have less access to informal sources but still be wary of official information. However, much of the research into the role of 'hot' information has focused on university selection and participation rather than its role in deterring someone from university, although Archer et al (2003) highlights there is a possibility that this could be the case within a working-class context. In addition, Cullinan (2017) reported that parents were the biggest influence on a young person's post-school destination although highlighted that those first in family were more likely to seek out support from school to help with applications due to the limited support available at home. This is consistent with the narrative of the above studies.

Furthermore, parents continue to be a significant provider of financial support to their children after they leave school. The National Student Money Survey (Brown, 2022) estimates that parents on average give £149.50 a month towards their child's university education. For young people who do not move away, parents continue to provide financial support through accommodation and food. This is an area which has a disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged families and how much they can afford to support their children. Montacute and Cullinane (2018) discuss how middle-class parents invest more in their children from an early age right through to post-18 education, providing a significant advantage over those from more deprived backgrounds. Their report sums up that the practical support parents can provide is split between cultural resources and finance but the extent to which they can do this largely depends on financial and socio-economic circumstances. Tamayo et al (2022) also found a double advantage of high levels of parental education and parenting practices in terms of child intelligence and school achievement, linking to the early effects that parents can have on their children. It is important to note that this section

is not saying that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds give inferior support to their children, just that the resources they have are often limited.

More broadly, a report by the Social Exclusion Task Force (Cabinet Office, 2008), which focused on aspiration in deprived communities in England, highlighted that parents were the biggest influence in their children's aspirations and education. In addition, they found there was a significant role of the community the young person grows up in and that parents were often influenced by the values of the community. It recommended a multi-agency approach to help communities broaden horizons and networks. Whilst this study was based in England this chimes with other, more recent research, that has focussed on community values. Corbett (2013) and Bakke and Hooley (2020) discuss the nuanced career decisions young people have to take in a rural area where a strong sense of community holds influence and is often cited as a core component of rural life.

Building on the above, the role of friends and wider networks have been acknowledged as an influential factor in young people's career decision-making but not given as much attention in the literature. Kim et al (2022) conducted a longitudinal study on the role of friends influence on career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) a concept that is part of social cognitive career theory (discussed in 1.1.1.1). They highlighted how the role of friendship has been understudied and sought to remedy this, by using a longitudinal social network approach. Their findings were that peers were a crucial form of career support and provided a network that individuals could discuss ideas and gain information which led to an increase in CDMSE. However, friends were not influential in future planning and the authors attributed this to being more related to SES and social capital. Whilst intuitively this explanation makes sense, it was informed through previous literature rather than evidence from their study. These findings were echoed by Naz et al. (2014) who highlighted the key role friends play in socialisation during adolescent years and found that individuals reported that friends were significant in career making decisions. However, the scope of the information gathered, relating to career decision-making was limited to five general items (for example, "help in career decision-making"). So, whilst the

study could assert that friends were 'helpful' it did not discuss how they 'helped' or influenced in the career decision-making process. Sinclair et al. (2014) discussed the fear of being isolated and socially excluded and how this corresponded to individuals adjusting career behaviour to that of their friends to exclude this. Sinclair et al (2014) found that there continues to be gender differences in educational choice and some participants were willing to trade courses to be with friends. However, they highlighted that whilst friends were one influence, they were not the only influence with other factors rated higher. Whilst this specific study focuses on the influence of gender on course choice, it still has some key take home messages, primarily that the fear of being isolated can impact and result in career compromise. These studies build on the complexities of the decision-making process that young people face when deciding on their post-school choices.

The research discussed above demonstrates the influence that an individuals' support network places. It also demonstrates how inequalities manifest at this level and how widespread and persistent they are. Linking to section 3.2.1 on the role of prior attainment, parental influence begins at an early stage but that is not to say it ends once the individual has gained the educational attainment required for university. In addition, the role of peers builds as a young person enters their adolescent years (Sinclair et al., 2014).

3.7.2 The role of School and Educational Professionals

Another key source of support for young people in their educational and career pathways is the role of the school and educational professionals, including teachers and careers advisers.

Archer et al's (2003) study on exclusion of working-class students discussed the role of teachers and the narrative from students that they had been dismissed as not capable of university. Whilst not an extreme example as this, Marks et al (2003) conducted a qualitative study of mature students and why they had initially rejected university and how this linked to gender and SES. The point was mentioned that some of the participants did have the grades to go directly from

school but were not encouraged to apply to university by the school, so did not consider it a real option.

However, other research has shown that this bias from teachers against working class individuals is not unanimous. Forsyth and Furlong (2003a) discussed a change in attitude towards university by a working-class student following encouragement by teachers. Further building on this, Berkowitz et al. (2017) conducted a review of the literature and examined whether a positive school climate could disrupt the effects of low SES and educational achievement. There were wide variations in what constituted a “positive school climate” but generally it encompassed the school’s ‘personality’ and how well it worked alongside parents and the community. Their findings were that a positive school climate did have a positive effect on educational achievement, however the authors highlighted that it was hard to assess causality and they advocated for more research on the role of school climate. Finally Taylor et al. (2018) used a combination of datasets to assess the role of school in Welsh pupils’ chances of participation at university. They found that there was an effect of the school a pupil attended on their chances of participation, however this was based solely on the categorisation of the school in terms of ‘support required’. So, whilst the study could attribute school as a factor it was limited in explaining why the school was a factor. In summary, whilst parents are still cited as the biggest influencers in their child’s education this small selection of studies provides an insight into the pivotal role a school can play in the plans of young people.

Another form of support in schools is the career service. The crucial requirement for good quality careers advice is well documented (Shattock, 2001, OECD, 2019). Hooley et al. (2014) demonstrates the key role that careers advice can play in aiding social mobility by supporting individuals to consider options out with their immediate networks. Therefore, by supporting individuals to challenge key assumptions, career guidance can help widen their ambitions, which links in with SCCT (section 2.1.3.1) and the concept of self-efficacy (Lent and Brown, 2019). However, Cho et al (2015) suggest that careers’ intervention needs to be more than a one-off isolated event. Their longitudinal study found evidence of a development of career skills in school pupils who had taken part in

two or more career activities over a two-year period where those that only took part in one showed no development. However, this study investigated a broad range of career activities rather than specifically on the impact solely of 1-2-1 career counselling/guidance.

Within Scotland, SDS (2012, 2023c) operate a targeted career service with a careers adviser based in every publicly funded secondary school in school. Whilst the service is targeted to offer careers appointments for those with the highest level of need, it is open to all, so any pupil can self-refer for an appointment. Evidence from a recent review (Skills Development Scotland, 2022c, Hooley et al., 2021) recommended that the careers support in school should be more universal, with every pupil receiving a careers appointment in the year they are choosing to leave school. This is a move away from the current targeted system to ensure parity of support. The Developing the Young workforce (The Scottish Government, 2014c) agenda made recommendations to improve career learning in schools however other than Allan's (2015) critical article on career learning in Scotland being akin to "ground hog" day there is little peer reviewed literature that discusses the specific efficacy of the current system in Scotland.

3.7.3 Summary

The highlighted research in this area demonstrates the persistence and widespread nature of inequalities and how they can impact a young person throughout their life. Whilst there is widespread literature on the nature of inequalities this review has demonstrated the challenges in adequately defining SES as an effective measure and highlights that in many economic based studies whilst financial constraints are considered attitude to debt and borrowing has received less attention.

Also, most of the studies based on widening-participation focus on those who have ultimately chosen to go to university and take a retrospective approach to the research. Whilst this is valuable in its own right it could be subject to reframing memories (Hristova et al., 2020) where an individual amends their story and reasoning to fit with the outcome. This project intends to address this

by interviewing pupils making their decisions about their current attitude towards university and their knowledge of university and how these attitudes and knowledge changes over a two-year period and how their SES and rural location affect and impact these decisions.

3.8 The Impact of COVID-19

The global pandemic of COVID-19 put the UK into two national lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. There was a flurry of research that took place within the first few weeks/months of the first lockdown which assessed the impact that COVID had on young people. Jorgensen et al (2022) carried out a literature review on the research carried out in these early stages and concluded that early research exhibited many biases. These biases manifested in where the research took place; there was more focus on wealthier countries and that much of the research was conducted online so biased towards those with digital capability and finally, that the young people were often not involved in the design of the research. However, whilst the authors noticed these methodological issues, the lock-down made a challenging environment for conducting the research and there were still useful insights produced on the way young people have responded to and coped with the pandemic. However, the research they reviewed was primarily focused on physical, mental health and adapting to quarantining (Jörgensen et al., 2022) and these appear to be the consistent themes of a broader search of the literature.

Since this initial flurry there has been a building literature base on COVID's impact on young people. The literature on high school students' mental health is generally in agreement with the conclusion that COVID has had a negative impact on students' mental health. Yin et al. (2022) conducted a study on the long-term mental health impact of US high school students and found that during the second year of the pandemic over a one-third of students surveyed report heightened anxiety levels. Building on this Fisher et al (2022) examined academic performance during COVID in high school students and found a significant number report declines in grades which was significantly linked to reports of depression symptoms. Gazmararian et al. (2021) conducted online

surveys of students at a rural school in Georgia and found that those from a low SES were more likely to be impacted by mental health concerns than those form a less deprived background. Whilst this provides a literature base for the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of high school pupils, little of this research has been conducted in the UK context. Creswell et al (2021) commented on the limited UK literature on this topic, noting the exception of the co-space project, an online survey tracking the experience of 11-16 year olds. However, this age group is outwith the focus of this current study.

The impact of COVID continues to be a live topic with new research continually emerging. However, the literature remains limited for school leaver transitions during COVID. A grey paper (Del Bono and Holford, 2020) predicted that the lockdown would make post-school employment harder however this was based on trends from past recessions. Holt and Murray (2021) quoted some viewpoints of young people's opinions on how they would be affected post-school from previous research but made no further analysis or conclusions on these viewpoints. Stark et al. (2022) investigated German school leavers intention to progress to university during COVID and the impact of SES. Whilst they found differences in results between a pre-pandemic group and the current group it was unclear how COVID specifically affected the decision-making and the focus was more on the differences between socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups. They did however highlight the greater importance of open days for prospective students from a disadvantaged background and the impact of these being unavailable due to COVID.

There is now literature emerging on the impact of hybrid learning. Alstete et al. (2023) discussed the ongoing research in hybrid learning and highlighted the requirements for adequate technology and other indicators required for success. Aisha and Ratra (2022) conducted a systematic review of the literature on COVID opportunities and challenges for students and discussed the negative psychological impact that the sudden shift to online learning had for students. They were also keen to extol the opportunities of hybrid learning and how this could be built on and implemented into HE. However, both these papers focussed on university provision and the experience globally of university

students rather than for school leavers in rural Scotland. A novel study by Hamilton and Hamilton (2022) investigated the role of techno capital in relation to community college students' preference for support when learning online due to COVID. Techno capital is a form of cultural capital that is a measure of users' technological ability to engage with networks. They found those with higher levels of techno capital are more self-reliant and will seek informal support where those with lower levels are more likely to favour formal support. This is interesting as it taps into the role of support networks and how these may be evolving due to the online learning experienced during COVID. However, the study was based in the USA so presents a different cultural context to the present study. This research projects seeks to address to this gap and investigate the immediate and longer-term impact on Scottish school leavers.

3.9 Role of Skillset in Career Decision-making

The last section of the literature review will assess the literature around the role of skillset in a young person's decision-making and how this skill set develops in relation to their career. This is important as much of the literature has a focus on educational attainment (Paterson and Iannelli, 2007) and other non-academic attributes are often overlooked. The role of non-academic attributes was discussed in relation to a human capital model of decision-making in section 2.1.1. and it highlighted those difficulties in measuring these non-academic attributes as well as their fluid nature (Burgess, 2016). With a qualification you have a certificate demonstrating your competence for posterity to future employers or educational institutions, even if that knowledge is not refreshed. However, skills often have no such certification (or possibly for some have timebound certification) and can deteriorate if not used. They also develop in a wide variety of settings.

Scotland's curriculum for excellence (The Scottish Government, 2019d) was refreshed in 2019 with a key focus on holistic learning around their four key values: responsible citizens, successful learners, confident individuals, and effective contributors. Within this was a focus on meta-skills and an equal focus on all areas not just academia, demonstrating that at a policy level there is a

value being place on wider learning and not just academic achievement. However, a recent review of the curriculum for excellence found that overwhelmingly “successful learner” was being focussed on to the detriment of the other pillars (OECD, 2021).

In the current policy landscape in Scotland the DYW agenda has a focus on the reduction of youth unemployment with a focus on work-based learning and therefore the corresponding skill development(The Scottish Government, 2014b). SDS (2018) have been driving forward the concept of a fourth digital revolution of which developing uniquely human skills named “meta-skills” as the way to successfully manage a career. Whilst there is some literature advocating for the development of these skills in apprenticeships (Young, 2020) and in university students (Rohm et al., 2021) there is little research on how this policy is translating into practice in schools.

More broadly, Brunello (2021) provides a review of the literature on skill shortages and mis-match from the demand side (employer side) rather than the supplier side (employee). The authors highlight that there is more to consider than just skills – individuals may inflate their skill set and whilst an employer may say there is a skill shortage this could be due to wage and conditions being offered. There was also discussion on who is responsible for the development of skills and reducing this mismatch. Brunello (2021) suggests that there should be a split in responsibility between schools, job-seekers, employers and policy. Building on this, Somers et al (2019) looked at horizontal mis-match between employment and field of education also found that graduates that developed general skills through their degree suffered less of a wage penalty than those that developed highly specific skills. They discuss how there is an absence of data on the role of skills and advocate for more research in this area, to help reduce a skills mismatch in employment, which generally was shown to have negative consequences.

Defining types of skills can also be challenging. Brunello (2021) discussed cognitive (such as numeracy), non-cognitive (such as organisation and work-ethic) and technical and manual skills. However, assessing the non-academic

attributes pupils believe are important for success in the labour market, and the reasons why these attributes have an impact can be complicated. This project intends to address this gap in the literature and assess school leavers connection and development with their skill set over time.

3.10 Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the literature around the factors influencing educational choice. This review has demonstrated that many factors contribute to an individual's choice such as availability of provision and cost of accessing university and attitude to debt, support network and skillset. There is a plethora of research on SES and educational choice and this review has by no means exhausted it. The research still shows that there is a divide between SES in terms of university participation which is partially attributed to financial constraints and parenting styles and attitudes. However, whilst there has been a variety of studies, most of these focus on the young people who do attend university not the ones that have the qualifications to go but are choosing not to. This study aims to go some way to addressing this balance. The emerging literature on COVID demonstrates that it has had an impact on young people however more research is needed to fully understand its impact. The next chapter will provide a geographic and political context for the study as well as considering the alternative options that a young person has.

Chapter 4 Contextual Framing of Study

4.1 Introduction to chapter

The previous chapter gave an overview of the empirical research that has been conducted around the decision making of young people. This chapter provides the geographic, labour market, and political context for the current study before discussing the alternative routes route available to a young person transitioning from school. It then concludes by summarising the key points of the chapter.

4.2 Thematic, Geographic and Demographic Context

This project was primarily focussed on the East of Dumfries and Galloway (for full discussion on choice of area see Chapter 5: Methodology) and therefore this section provides a brief overview of the geographic context for the project. Dumfries and Galloway is the third largest local authority by land mass in Scotland and ranks 13/32 for population (National Record of Statistics, 2022). It is classified as rural on the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2020 (SGURC) with significant areas classed as remote rural (Scottish Government, 2022).

Figure 1: Map of Dumfries and Galloway (Source: D&G Online)

Further education (FE) facilities are Dumfries and Galloway College (DGC) and Scottish Rural University College (SRUC). DGC have two campuses: one in Stranraer and one in Dumfries. SRUC has one campus situated outside Dumfries. In terms of university provision, The Crichton Learning Centre in Dumfries provides a presence for The University of Glasgow and The Open University, with University of West of Scotland having a campus co-located with the DGC Campus.

However, the courses being offered at a degree level at these campuses are limited. The clustering of the provision in Dumfries means that many pupils and recent leavers of secondary schools in Dumfries and Galloway face geographical challenges in accessing further and higher education, jobs, and training. Public transport in remote, rural areas is limited and expensive. Whilst the new entitlement card provides free bus transport for those under the age of 22 it does not extend to trains (Transport Scotland, 2022). Therefore, to access a university out-with the region can incur such high travel times that moving away

for university is often considered the only viable option and disproportionally affects those from a low SES (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). This brief overview has been intended to highlight the nature of the limited university provision in Dumfries and Galloway and the challenges facing pupils considering accessing university education.

4.3 Education Policy in Scotland

The pupil making their post-school career choices does not do this in a vacuum. They are positioned within the education system, as well as the political and economic landscape at the time of these choices. To understand the current social and political context of the U.K education system and specifically the Scottish education system, which is the focus of this study, it is necessary to have some understanding of its political and educational context.

This section provides a brief overview of key policies influencing higher education as well as key changes in the labour market. It then goes on to highlight qualifications required in Scotland to gain direct entry to university before summarising the current policy landscape. There are three strands of policy relevant to the current research project. Firstly, policy relating to young people and their transitions to the workforce as this relates to the research aim of understanding a young person's career decisions. Second policies which have a focus on skills development as this relates to the research aim of understanding the role of attributes beyond qualifications. Thirdly, policies which focus on reducing inequalities in education participation and attainment.

4.3.1 A Brief History of Educative Legislation

Over the last 150 years varying UK government educational policies have been introduced, for example, increasing statutory leaving age for school pupils and aims for increased participation in HE (Parliament UK, 2019, UK Parliament, 1987; Education Reform Act, 1988). In many countries, the majority of 25-34 year olds will now complete upper-secondary education (OECD, 2022). Whereas an average of 14% across OECD (Organisation for Economic and Cooperative

Development) countries leave without upper-secondary education. Estimates suggest that the percentage of young people today completing upper-secondary by the age of 25yrs will be 81% compared to 73% in 2005 (OECD, 2018). Previously those staying on to complete upper-secondary education were more likely to be from families of a higher SES (Roberts, 2009) and completion of upper-secondary was evidence of a pupil's upwards social mobility (OECD, 2018). The impact of these changes has means that university education has become an option for more pupils and globally the percentage of pupils continuing to tertiary education has increased. Across OECD countries the average participation rate of young adults (between 25-34yrs) completing tertiary education was 48% in 2021 compared to 27% in 2001(OECD, 2022). Within the UK varying governmental policies have placed a focus on expanding the provision of HE (UK Parliament, 1988, Dearing and Garrick, 1997) and the last few decades have seen an increase in HE participation.

4.3.2 The current political context of educational transitions in Scotland

There are several policy drivers surrounding education in Scotland. The key policy driver which relates to education and transition into the workforce is the Developing the Young Work Force Agenda (The Scottish Government, 2014c).

In 2013, The Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce (DYW) was established with three main aims for consideration: to ascertain how to bridge the gap between education and employment and improve young people's understanding of the needs of the workplace; to consider methods to improve employer engagement with education with the aim of employers becoming co-developers of the required education and thirdly to consider how to develop vocational training to complement the existing HE system. The final report acknowledged the high rate of youth unemployment, the low level of interaction between education and business and the low level of modern apprenticeships (The Scottish Government, 2014c, The Scottish Government, 2014b).

The recommendations set out to address these findings and advised: embedding career education in the curriculum, increased employer involvement, better work experience opportunities and an increased number of modern apprenticeship opportunities. *Developing the Young Workforce Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy, Implementing the Recommendations of the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce (The Scottish Government, 2014c, The Scottish Government, 2014b)* was initially a seven-year implementation plan including "*the Opportunities for all Commitment of an offer of an appropriate place in learning or training to all 16-19 year olds not already in employment, education and training*" (The Scottish Government, 2014b, p1). The strategy objectives included individuals who would be better prepared for the world of work and a reduction in youth unemployment by 40% by 2021. This was achieved ahead of target in 2017 (The Scottish Government, 2017). Another objective was to offer 30,000 new modern apprenticeship starts each year by 2020 and is still an ongoing target (Skills Development Scotland, 2022b). A recommendation of 'The 15-24 Learner Journey Review' (The Scottish Government, 2018) was that more work-based learning was required and a balance between academic and work-based skills. This policy sees a shift from a focus on progression to HE as a vehicle to drive forward Scotland's economy to a system which offers pupils several equally good post-secondary options to continue learning and developing through life. This approach is advocated by both the World Bank (2018) and the OECD (2018).

4.3.3 Waivered university tuition fees in Scotland

In England and Wales, a change in policy implemented in 2012, allowed universities to increase tuition fees from £3,000 per year to up to £9,000 in 2012 and are currently sitting at up to £9250 per annum for 2023 entry. However, eligible Scottish domiciled students electing to study at a Scottish institution do not pay for fees. Students can apply for a means-assessed government loan and those on low income can apply for a bursary (Students Award Agency Scotland, 2022).

4.3.4 Scottish University Entry Requirements

In Scotland, pupils applying to university directly from school are required to traditionally study and pass Highers (Level 6 Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework (SCQF)). Within the Scottish system there are a wide variety of subjects a pupil can study at a Higher or Advanced higher, awarded by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA). There is variation on the entry requirements between different universities and different courses. A typical university course will ask for between four and five Highers. However, some courses require three Highers, a few articulated degrees ask for two Highers and some courses, such as medicine, require Advanced Highers as well as Highers (Gateway, 2022). Therefore, it is worth noting that whilst an individual may have the entry requirements to go to university, it does not mean they have the entry requirements to access all courses and universities.

In addition, the recently introduced Foundation Apprenticeship (FA) provides a vocational alternative to a Higher, consisting of time in college and a work placement. Whilst all Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Scotland will accept an FA, there are limits on its acceptance to undergraduate degree programmes for some courses. For example, at some universities it will not be accepted as a Higher equivalent for entrance to medicine, dentistry or vet medicine, nor can it replace the requirement for the specific Highers required by some courses (The University of Edinburgh, 2023, University of Glasgow, 2022). Whilst widening access work continues (see section 3.3 Widening Access for more detail), the research would show that it is still easier for an individual to access university, especially elite institutions, with traditional qualification and it is typically those from working class backgrounds that are more likely to hold non-traditional qualifications (Reay, 2018).

4.4 Participation Rates in HE in Scotland

The following section outlines current HE participation in Scotland over the last decade. Whilst the rest of the UK has seen similar trends the current project has a Scottish focus, so this section will concentrate on Scottish Participation rates.

It will also examine the rate of participation by social class to provide for illustration purposes the existing inequalities in participation.

4.4.1 Definition of Higher Education

There are several data sources which estimate the participation in HE. It is worth discussing the term HE as this is a broad term which covers a wide variety of institutions and levels of study. The annual participation measure, developed by SDS, records the current destinations of 16-19yrs as part of their Opportunities for All (The Scottish Government, 2012) commitment. The annual participation measure (Skills Development Scotland, 2019, Skills Development Scotland, 2022a) includes Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND) which are college level certificates and equivalent to Level 7 and 8 on the Scottish Qualification Framework (SCQF) (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2019) respectively, in the HE category. The same definition of HE is used by the Scottish Government (2021b) when reporting school leavers post-school destinations.

Despite this division when breaking down the data using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) there is still a clear trend of increasing participation in HE as the level of deprivation decreases (The Scottish Government, 2022c). The Scottish Funding Council's (2022) statistical report for HE participation in Scotland also gathers information from HE Institutions and FE colleges and breaks down the participation by institution and study level. However, the University and Colleges' Admission Service (UCAS) (2022) 'End of Cycle Reports' only include full-time undergraduate degrees and excludes Scottish Students. However, most of the literature would regard HE as degree level/university level study. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the term 'higher education or HE' will be used to refer to-degree level study, but specific mention will be made if the article is using the term 'higher education' more broadly. This is an important distinction to make as the participants being recruited for the study are choosing not to go directly to university rather than choosing not to enter HE per se.

4.4.2 Participation Rates in University Education in Scotland

Participation rates in HE have massively expanded in the past few decades and overall, still show a slight increase year-on-year. Carpentier (2018) describes two key points of expansion: 1960's and the 1990's. The former is attributed to the development of the welfare state, post-war prosperity, and government funding. The latter is attributed to the abolition of the 'polytechnic' or equivalent in Scotland which saw the number of universities almost double. The following section provides an overview of participation rates in Scotland for the last 15-20 years to provide a big picture of participation.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) produces a statistical publication on entrants to HE institutions in Scotland (Scottish Funding Council, 2015, Scottish Funding Council, 2019, Scottish Funding Council, 2021). The reports publish results on total HE participation across HEI institutions in Scotland including postgraduate as well as HNC/HND courses and breaks these participation rates down by varying populations including rates by Scottish domiciled student. It does not consider a Scottish student studying at an HEI outwith Scotland.

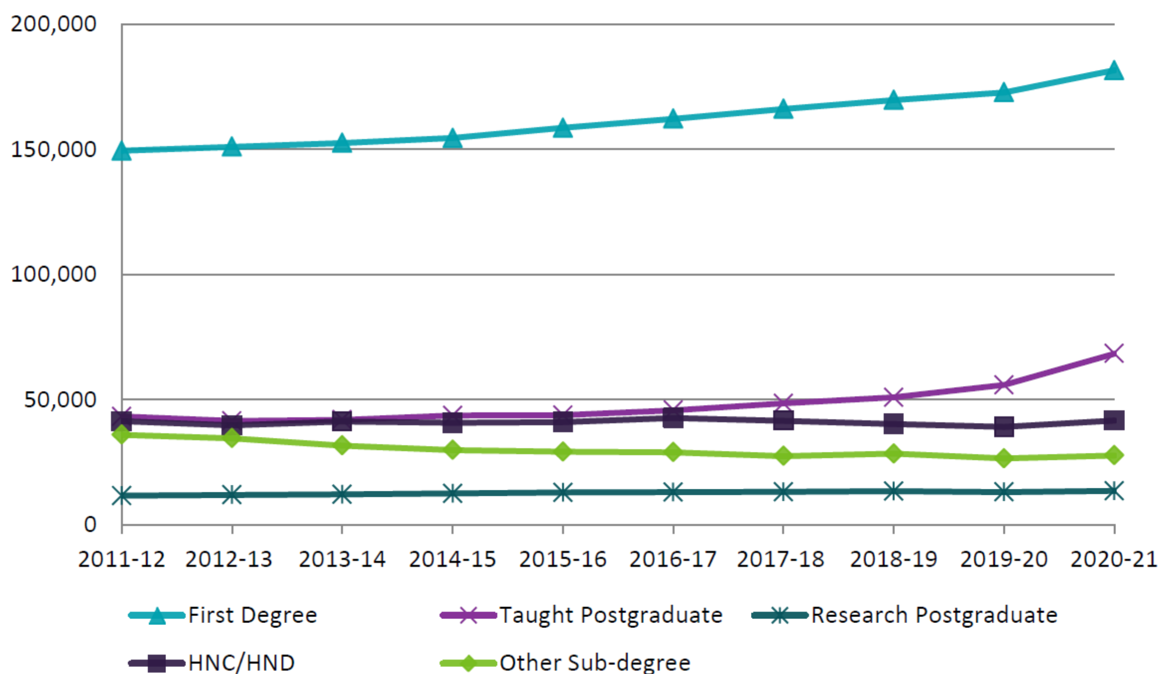


Figure 2: Scottish Domiciled Entrants to Higher Education at Scottish HEIs and College by Level of Study, 2011-12 to 2020-21 (Scottish Funding Council, 2021, pp11)

Figure 2 shows the big picture of total student participation across all ages from 2011-12 to 2020-21. Overall, the figures show a slight increase in entrants to HE and specifically to first degrees, year-on-year. The most recent publication, at the time of writing (Scottish Funding Council, 2021) acknowledges the impact that COVID-19 had on existing students but found there was little impact on numbers entering HE. Whilst this report provides numbers of students participating in HE, it does not break this down by SES to demonstrate whether there is parity of access.

Data gathered by the Scottish Government (2022c) on post-school destinations showed a 35.9pp gap between the least and most deprived entering HE. This figure includes study at a sub-degree level. As access to HNC/HND is a key aspect of the Scottish strategy for widening participation and encouraging students from a non-traditional background, to then articulate up to a degree (Duta et al., 2021), it is likely that this is a conservative measure of the deprivation gap. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2022) report demonstrates participation by percentages of pupils studying for a first degree, broken down by level of deprivation (Table 1). As with the Annual Participation Measure it shows a sustained and measurable gap between participation rates of the least and most deprived students.

Table 1: Scottish Domiciled full-time first-degree undergraduate student by SIMD (HESA, 2022)

	Academic Year				
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Quintile 1 - most deprived (SIMD)	12%	13%	13%	14%	15%
Quintile 2 (SIMD)	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%
Quintile 3 (SIMD)	19%	19%	19%	18%	19%
Quintile 4 (SIMD)	24%	23%	23%	23%	23%
Quintile 5 - least deprived (SIMD)	30%	30%	30%	30%	29%

4.4.3 Summary

This overview of HE participation in Scotland is not intended to provide a detailed analysis of the participation intricacies but rather an overview of the HE landscape. Whilst these reports provide changing patterns and levels of participation and corresponding inequality, they can provide little explanation to the reason behind the numbers.

4.5 Labour Market Changes with a focus on young people

A complexity of any study which has a focus on the labour market, transitions and policy is that it is an ever-changing environment. For example. young people

that transitioned from school in the 1980's faced different political and economic circumstances to those that transitioned in the 2000's. Since the 1960's there have been some key changes which will be summarised here and build on the argument in section 3.6.3 that individuals and organisations are beginning to question the value of a degree and not unanimously accept its worth.

The changing economic and educative landscape has over time changed perceptions in education. Up to the 1970's leaving at the statutory age to secure a job and progress to earning a good wage was standard (Bynner et al., 2002, Roberts, 2009). However, the economic downturn of the 1970's created mass youth unemployment, which was initially thought to be temporary. However, by the 1980's there was the realisation it was not going to return to what had been before due to a re-structuring of the economy (Roberts and Atherton, 2011). One viewpoint held about the youth unemployment was that young people did not have the necessary skills, although there was also a lack of jobs (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, Roberts and Atherton, 2011). Bynner et al (2002) compared two cohorts of young adults – one born in 1958 and another born in 1970. The report found that over half of the 1958 cohort left school and entered directly into employment or an apprenticeship where many of these opportunities for the 1970's cohort no longer existed. Bynner and Parsons (2002) discuss the introduction of the modern apprenticeship in 1991 but concluded they did not go far enough to address youth unemployment.

Several government schemes and training incentives through colleges, were developed to bridge this gap. However, many of these had limited value to employers who preferred young people with better qualifications (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Combined with policy change based on the agenda for investment in education and shifts in statutory leaving age as described above, pupils began prolonging their time in education, gaining more qualifications and therefore more young people had the option to progress to further and higher education and now this is considered the norm (Roberts, 2009, Bynner et al., 2002). This has resulted in a cultural shift with changed attitudes towards education. In addition, job seeking behaviours have changed

(Roberts, 2009) with individuals leaving at statutory age often deemed 'failures' and subject to social exclusion (Bynner and Parsons, 2002, Bynner et al., 2002). Arnett (2014) argues that these economic changes have led to a phase between teenage and adult where there is an exploration of choices and protracted uncertainty. However, critics have proposed that this is centred on middle-class American students and does not extend to wider populations (Côté, 2014).

However, transition from education to work continues to be a challenging time for pupils leaving education. They may face many obstacles including a lack of experience so can struggle to gain employment and may take lower paid jobs or temporary contracts (OECD, 2018), termed 'under employment'. There is a large body of research that focuses on young people at risk of social exclusion (Strathdee, 2001, Finlay et al., 2010) and a large body of research that focuses on young people entering HE (Boliver, 2011, Iannelli et al., 2011). However, there is a gap in research which investigates those that have the qualifications but are choosing a different post-school route. This research seeks to understand their career decisions.

4.5.1 Knowledge Economy, Over-Education & Technology

As discussed in section 3.5.3 the value of a degree is being questioned and as this is now reaching media (Shearing, 2022, The Economist, 2023) it could have an impact on the decision to pursue HE. Similarly, if other information sources are emphasising the importance of a degree education it could create a confusing mismatch of information for the pupil to process. This section assesses how the dialogue of 'knowledge economy' and the push to upskill and continue in education fits within the literature which assess the levels of overeducation and underemployment.

There is a growing body of literature which suggests that we are currently undergoing a fourth, digital revolution. The view held is that many careers will require workers to be more qualified and with the new digital age it is anticipated that low-skilled and repetitive jobs will be at the highest risk of automation, therefore reducing the number of entry level occupations. A recent

analysis by the ONS (2019b) of 20 million jobs in England estimated that almost 8% were at high risk of automation however they point out that this could mean a change in the role rather than it being lost entirely.

The term knowledge economy refers to "*the sector of the economy which is increasingly based on knowledge-intensive activities, creating a greater reliance on intellectual capital rather than physical inputs*" (Pettinger, 2017, pp1).

Alongside this and seemingly contradictory to it, is the literature on graduate 'over-education'. Much of this research has resulted from rapid expansion of HE. The concerns were that the labour market could not absorb such large numbers of graduates and that the impact of this would be a reduction in the graduate wage premium with more graduates taking jobs which do not match their skill-set (McGuinness, 2006).

Brown et al (2004) argues that there is an over-supply of graduates and not enough jobs. Their research followed the 'lived' experiences of both the organisations and the graduates applying for management jobs. They discuss the heterogenous nature of 'knowledge base roles' and argue that policy makers present a biased picture of the advantages and benefits of investing in HE. They critically assess the term 'knowledge economy' and discuss the qualification inflation. There is also the comment here that companies will look to the elite institutions, which the authors point out is nothing new, to secure new talent, thus favouring the wealthier who can afford to put their children through private study/education to obtain the grades to gain admission to such institutions. The authors acknowledge that their study is not representative of all graduates, only those applying for management positions but argue their results still have far reaching consequences. Roberts and Atherton (2011) support these findings and refute the commonly held idea that there are unlimited number of management jobs for those that want to think for a living and argue that there is a decline in manual roles due to technological changes. Their argument is that this has been exaggerated and that whilst there has been a growth in management, a decline in manufacturing there has also been a growth in manual roles associated with the 'gig' economy. Brown et al (2004) estimates that for every 'knowledge - based role' there are four times as many jobs that support these roles for

example cleaners, sales assistants and waiters. These two concepts – that of the 'knowledge economy' and that of 'under employment' of graduates potentially sends a conflicting message to school leavers as they are being told that they need a degree to have a well-paid career whilst simultaneously being told there are too many graduates and not enough jobs.

Walker (2008) assessed the effect of the expansion of HE on the wage premium experienced by graduates. Graduate earnings before and after the expansion were compared and despite the increase in participation the analysis showed that the premium remained, and for women there was a weakly significant effect that returns had increased. The discussion in part focussed on the unobserved skill set of the individual attending college. The argument was that with the cap on student numbers removed in England, universities relaxed tariffs so lower ability students could now attend, changing the distribution for both graduates and non-graduates. Therefore, despite the expansion rate being greater than the requirement for observable skills the authors argue that there is a demand for unobservable skills.

Chevalier (2009) examined a cohort of pre and post expansion graduates seven years after graduating for over-education and skill-set. Their definition of over-education was based on graduates' perceptions of match between the job they held and their skillset. They found that whilst graduate numbers had doubled the numbers of over-educated graduates had remained constant. They attributed this to employers adapting roles to suit the growing demand of graduates supporting a human capital model. They found no evidence that over-educated graduates were more likely to be from a modern university or were lower quality, but they did find an impact of degree subject on the likelihood of overeducation. In addition, they found that those over-educated were more likely to have a lower level of 'graduate skills' namely management and leadership. The study acknowledged the heterogeneity of graduates but indicated that it was more than just a degree which was linked to success in the labour market. McGuiness and Poulikas (2017) assessed overeducation in Ireland. Their study found 21% of graduates were over-educated for the job they were in but found that over 50% needed the degree to get the job they were doing thus

providing evidence for qualification inflation: that is a whilst a degree is needed to enter the job it is not required to do the job. Unlike Chevalier (2009) they found little support for human capital theory of employers adapting roles to suit graduates, however they noted that two thirds of the variance remained unexplained.

The above research on over-education has largely focussed on the returns to a degree however as previously discussed in section 3.6.5, there are non-pecuniary benefits of attending university. The OECD (2001) cautions against the notion of over-education with the reasoning that the social benefits are harder to measure but also of value. The OECD (2018) also states that participation in HE is more important than ever due to the reduction of roles available in manual labour. However, as there has been less research about the social benefits of attending college or completing an apprenticeship, it is difficult to conclude how unique these social benefits are to university participation.

4.6 Alternative routes to university

The literature reviewed so far has demonstrated several economic and non-economic benefits of university education. Often the rhetoric from government policy and research has advocated for the increased participation in HE as a key route to the elimination of inequalities. This includes a view that most pupils are striving to either improve or maintain their social standing and that there is a race to the top. This viewpoint of HE for all sits in juxtaposition of university as a positional good and a preservation of 'privilege' for those that choose university whilst those that do not are left behind and viewed as the 'losers'. Individuals who are often viewed as being marginalised by society do not report to viewing themselves as failures (Finlay et al., 2010) with the literature fairly consistent that most young people have positive aspirations, it just that these aspirations may not fit into the category of university (Cabinet Office, 2008, Finlay et al., 2010, Roberts and Atherton, 2011).

The benefits of university education have generally been compared with individuals leaving school with no post-secondary education. Recent data on

apprenticeships (The Scottish Government, 2019c) show that a vocational route into employment can offer good returns and Alexander (2013, 2016) who examines graduate identity in rural island Scotland, where multi-national companies and access to graduate programmes are rare, shows that status and income are not necessarily priorities for all graduates. An examination of the alternative routes is therefore key to understanding the impact of continuing to HE and it is essential that it is critically analysed and not viewed through ‘rose coloured glasses’.

Research into young people’s career decision-making demonstrate that motivations for choosing or not choosing university can be varied and the decision is not necessarily binary. It is not just a choice of whether to go to university but also ‘when to go’ to university. This section therefore assesses what research has been conducted on the alternative routes with a focus on FE, employment, apprenticeships, and volunteering which may be instead of university or as different route towards university.

4.6.1 Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship policy within the U.K. is devolved. Therefore, each of the home nations have their own framework. As the focus of the current research is on Scottish school leavers an overview of the Scottish system will be provided.

The current Scottish System offers the Apprenticeship Family, composed of:

- Foundation Apprenticeships (FA)
- Modern Apprenticeships (MA)
- Graduate Apprenticeships (GA)

The Foundation Apprenticeships offer a vocational SCQF Level 6 (Equivalent to Higher) whilst the pupil is still in school. The MA currently offers over 100 different frameworks where the individual is employed and works towards a qualification at the same time. There are a wide variety of frameworks including traditional ones such as those in the construction trades but also in areas such as

accountancy and digital media (for a full list of frameworks available go to apprenticeships.scot). Included in these are a rise in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) apprenticeships leading to careers which traditionally would have been obtained through an academic route. This demonstrates a diversity in the routes offered by apprenticeships which may attract students who would have otherwise applied for university.

There are four different level of qualifications available Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) Level 2, SVQ Level 3, SVQ Level 4 and SVQ Level 5. The level of qualification and length of the apprenticeship depend on the framework. MA's can be from one to four years in duration. The entry requirements depend on the level and framework of the MA. Some MAs ask for no formal qualifications but emphasise a certain skillset, where others may ask for National 4's, National 5's, Highers, FA, or a combination of these qualifications. Some MAs may make certain subject requirements, for example, engineering apprenticeships will typically ask for physics. The apprenticeships are advertised on apprenticeships.scot and applicants are required to undertake an application process. The individual will be employed by the company on a fixed-term contract and the qualification element is delivered by a training provider which would typically be the local college or a private company.

The GA offers individuals the opportunity to work for an employer whilst completing a degree. There are currently 14 GA frameworks including cyber security, data science and civil engineering (Skills Development Scotland, 2023d). GA's typically ask for similar qualifications to what would be required for the full-time equivalent undergraduate degree course and the training is provided through partnership with a university.

At a U.K. level the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017 whereby companies with a wage bill of more than £3,000,000 pay a levy (HMRC, 2016). The aim of the levy was to increase economic productivity and create more and better-quality apprenticeships. Whilst the levy was introduced by the U.K government it applies to all U.K. employers but is administered differently in

Scotland. It is beyond the scope of this project to discuss the effectiveness of the levy.

The above outlines the provision of the government funded apprenticeships, but it does not include companies who have their own apprenticeship training programme. The reasons given for firms conducting their own apprenticeship programmes is to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and being able to align the framework specifically to meet their needs (Roberts, 2020). In addition, the availability and distribution of apprenticeships is not evenly spread resulting in a postcode lottery for individuals wishing to apply, for example of the 25,401 modern apprenticeship starts in Scotland in 2021-2022 there were 709 in Dumfries and Galloway, of which 223 were accessed by school leavers (Skills Development Scotland, 2022b). For a full break down of MA statistics see Skills Development Scotland (2022b).

The current policy drivers have meant there is growing momentum for young people leaving school to consider apprenticeships as an alternative option. Within maintained secondary schools in Scotland work is being completed in partnership with SDS to raise awareness of apprenticeships. In addition, Scotland runs an annual Scottish Apprenticeship Week (SAW) with a variety of events and promotional activities to raise awareness of work-based learning (Skills Development Scotland, 2023d). However, whilst this offers many choices for individuals this also means the apprenticeship landscape is complex to navigate (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018).

4.6.1.1 Impact of COVID 19 on Apprenticeship Recruitment

The onset of COVID 19 in early 2020 resulted in a significant reduction on the number of apprenticeships being advertised with employers either halting or delaying their recruitment process for 2020 (The Scottish Government, 2021a). This in turn resulted in a direct impact on 2020 school leavers who found the number of apprenticeship opportunities greatly limited, with estimates that there were 50% fewer apprenticeships in 2020/2021 than 2019/2020 (Skills Development Scotland, 2021). Quarter four for apprenticeship starts in

2022/2023 sat at 26,543 (Skills Development Scotland, 2023a) which whilst lower than then the 29,035 in 2019/2020 (Skiills Development Scotland, 2020) shows some post-pandemic recovery.

4.6.1.2 Research on Apprenticeships

There is a growing body of research which calls for a shifting of perspectives and the development of an education system which is flexible, diverse and that all routes from school should be viewed as being equally valid (Snook, 2012, Social Mobility Commission, 2019, Aird et al., 2010) with calls for an end to “educational snobbery” (Wheelahan, 2014). Baker (2013) suggests that in the UK there is an aversion to manual labour and that knowledge roles are viewed as better. Therefore, if an individual shows academic competence they are steered away from manual pursuits. Baker (2013) argues that the two are not mutually exclusive and learning a skill can cement knowledge, and adds to the growing voice that all forms of learning should be promoted. This viewpoint is partially echoed by Roberts (2019) who states that many pupils who take A-Levels do not progress to university and that work-based learning could be a more attractive option for many young people. However, he argues that low level apprenticeships signal failure and indicates that in England that quality has been sacrificed for quantity of apprenticeships.

Lennon (2010) highlights the strengths of vocational training as providing a smooth transition from school to the workplace, the opportunities to have high earnings and learning in a relevant learning environment. A study by City and Guilds (2015), an organisation focussed on skills development and the delivery of vocational qualifications and apprenticeships, argue that university is a risky investment due to a lack of graduate jobs and rising levels of debt, a point echoed by Roberts and Atherton (2011). The study by City and Guilds, also advocated for an education system that considered all routes equal, with a recommendation to further develop apprenticeships. Whilst City and Guilds, have a strong motivation to conduct research advocating for more apprenticeships, their findings offer some key highlights into the decision-making of young people. They report that young people consider a relatively

narrow range of career options with what appears to be due to little knowledge of the labour market and a lack of understanding of realistic salaries resulting from a lack of information when making choices (City and Guilds, 2015). It appears this view is gaining traction with The World Bank (2018) also advocating for the technical route to be equal status to that of a traditional degree programme.

A recent OECD (2020) review of the apprenticeship system in Scotland commended the system on the progress that had been made including recent expansion, largely due to the recommendations of the Wood Report (Developing the Young Workforce Commission) (The Scottish Government, 2014c). However, it highlighted an equity issue in funding, with a bias towards HE. The report acknowledged the benefits of work-based learning and its resilience across time and encouraged the Scottish framework to continue with these fundamentals to ensure its endurance for the future. The OECD report (2020) stated that 90% of individuals an apprenticeship programme progressed into full-time work. Despite the commendations given on the benefits of work-based learning, the report maintains that earning prospects are better for HE graduates. Where the assessment of HE extends to secondary benefits such as health, happiness, and self-esteem the assessment of benefits of work-based learning has a strong focus on the technical skills, knowledge, and employability development that this pathway allows.

One of the social benefits of HE is its use as a vehicle for reducing inequality and increasing social mobility and there is the view that apprenticeships could also aid in this policy goal. Kirkby (2015) discusses the need for more higher level, high quality apprenticeship and places apprenticeships in the category of having the 'potential' to improve social mobility and offer an economically viable alternative to university. The report echoes many of the previous commentators in arguing for a shift in the culture of apprenticeships being viewed as second best, highlighting this is often a viewpoint often held by parents and teachers who are influential in the young person's decisions and to increasing understanding of how they work. However, a review of social mobility in the UK from birth to post-secondary education found there that there is an unequal

divide with the better paid apprenticeships going to individuals from more privileged backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). A key recommendation of the review was for more entry level apprenticeships to attract applicants from diverse backgrounds. However, McGurk (2016) argues that many low level apprenticeships have little in the way of progression and serve only the function to tick government policy boxes and Roberts (2020) argues that there are not enough degree level apprenticeships in England, creating fierce competition for places.

To summarise, whilst there has been a push from government to create more opportunities for work-based learning and many commentators see a key role for work-based learning as a viable option to HE, there are still concerns around the quality of apprenticeships and the options for progression. There is also the discourse around the status of apprenticeships not being equal to that of studying for HE. In addition, whilst there is a good uptake of apprenticeships by those from lower SES, there is a still a divide with the better opportunities going to the more privileged.

4.6.1.3 Returns to Apprenticeships

There is a growing body of research assessing the returns to apprenticeships. Internationally, countries with strong vocational systems report them offering good labour market outcomes (Mihály and Ineke, 2014). Kirby (2015) modelled the earnings of apprenticeships versus a degree. When split simply into these two categories the degree showed higher lifetime earnings. However, when returns were broken down by the institution the degree was studied at then there was a finding that a higher-level apprenticeship provided higher returns than a degree from a non-Oxbridge or Russel Group University suggesting that for some individuals that apprenticeship study makes economic sense. This trend of males receiving better returns from apprenticeships than females is echoed by Gunderson et al (2015) who assessed the returns to apprenticeships in Canada. The findings showed good returns for males, which were in some cases showing parity to individuals with degree qualifications, where in contrast, other pathways offered better returns for women unless they had left school without a

high school certificate. The better returns for males were partly attributed to industry gender bias with more males working in engineering which attracts higher salaries where women were more likely to undertake an apprenticeship in the poorer paid service sector. More recently, McIntosh and Morris (2018) found that those starting an apprenticeship between the age of 19-25yrs showed larger increases in earnings than those starting at 25yrs or over.

However, much of this evidence is out-with the Scottish context. Whilst in England only 20% of apprenticeship starts are between the age of 16-18 (Cavaglia et al., 2022), in Scotland the most recent report for Q2 of 2023/24 showed that 43% of starts are between 16-19 years and if those already in apprenticeships are included 51.1% are between 16-19 years and 70.7% between 16-24years of age (Skills Development Scotland, 2023b). In Scotland, the first LEO for modern apprenticeship earnings were published in 2019 (The Scottish Government, 2019c) and recently the second LEO's were published (The Scottish Government, 2023a). These report the longitudinal educational outcomes for modern apprenticeships in Scotland. The gap between publications was attributed to covid. Like the LEO for HE, it collects pay information through PAYE (Pay as you Earn) about individuals who have completed MA's and their earnings five years on. It is worth noting that for both graduate and MA LEO's there is no information on the individual's current role, only what they completed their degree or MA in.

LEO's for graduate outcomes are also published, however a comparison between MA's and graduate outcomes is difficult as neither measure considers weekly hours, nor factors in opportunity costs and there is limited parity in the industry categories being assessed. It is also worth noting there could be considerable age differences in comparisons for example an individual may have left school at 16 and completed a two-year apprenticeship so five years after completing would be 23 years old compared to a graduate from university who would be 27 or 28 years old. The reports note caution on the most recent figures for as these were for apprenticeships starting in 2015/16 with earnings being capture in 2020/21 during the pandemic (The Scottish Government, 2023a). The 2020/21 LEO's for modern apprenticeships show a large heterogeneity with the highest annual

earnings in engineering (£37,100) and the lowest earnings in personal services (£13,700), for example, hairdressing. Average earnings for 2015/16 MAs in 2020/21, five years after completion was £22,000, also five years after they completed their apprenticeships. There was a general trend of males earning more than females and those from more privileged backgrounds earning more than from those from the most deprived background (The Scottish Government, 2019b, The Scottish Government, 2019c, The Scottish Government, 2023a). In addition, the figures only include those who are working raising a sample selection issue. A further report by the Scottish Government (2022a) found that there were high returns with regards to earnings and employment for MA completers and these benefits began through the wage earned as an apprenticeship and not just post-completion. However, the level of return was dependent on the industry in which the apprenticeship was studied, with particularly high returns being seen in engineering. Whilst the returns to an apprenticeship were not compared to returns to degrees, the cost-benefit analysis concluded that apprenticeships offered good returns to the individual, the state, and the employer due to the relatively low cost of training and positive association with employment.

4.6.2 College/Further Education

For individuals not progressing to university, studying at a FE college is an option that some pupils will take. Within Scotland there are 26 institutions operating as colleges offering a variety of courses in different subject areas and levels. To add to this complexity some colleges offer degree level study which is accredited by a university so there is the option to study for a degree at some colleges or to articulate to university, however, the articulation links may be with a specific partner university. This sub-degree HE provision in Scotland is viewed as an important contributor to the widening access agenda (Gallacher, 2017) however not all courses progress to degree level study. A review of progression routes by UCAS (2016) highlighted the success of progression in some subject areas from HNC to degree level study in Scotland. However, an overall recommendation was that more transparency and clearer information on university admission procedures were required.

Gallacher (2017) discusses the roles and ambiguities of Scotland's FE college, in a shift in their role from providing vocational training to delivery of sub-degree level HE. He concludes that whilst there are options for articulation, students often do not receive full credit for their awards and as such the time to gain a degree can be one or two years longer than accessing directly from university. The point is also made that most will articulate to a post-1992 university and very few to an elite institution reducing the course and career opportunities of more disadvantaged students. This viewpoint was echoed by Riddell (2016) on her examination of future challenges to the widening access agenda in Scotland. She also highlights the disparities in funding between universities and colleges, with reductions to college budgets and highlights this as problematic as this has a bigger impact on those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A review of learners in Scotland (Snook, 2012) concluded that college is viewed as a place for only non-academics and as such going can attract stigma. Burgess' (2016) adds to this argument putting forward that in general vocational courses are low level and lead to low paying jobs. Burgess (2016) makes the point that there is some evidence of good rate of return, however, this can often be hidden as several courses at different levels may be combined in an analysis. A concluding remark of the article called for more research in vocational education. Forsyth and Furlong (2000, 2003a) conducted a Scottish based study which examined barriers to participation in HE and found that some suitably qualified individuals from more deprived backgrounds would choose to attend college at a lower-level course than to go to degree level study. The reasons for these were focussed on the length of the course although finance and geographical reasons were also influential. Following on from this, in 2022 18% of Scottish school leavers with Level 6 qualifications (equivalent to Highers) and 3.3% with Level 7 qualifications (equivalent to Advanced Highers) chose a FE course at Level 6 or below (The Scottish Government, 2023b). That is these participants would have had the qualification to progress to a higher-level course. Furthermore, a report by the CVER (Centre of Vocational Research) found in England that higher-level qualifications were associated with better earnings that stopping at a Level 3 qualification (a level three qualification is equivalent to a level 6 qualification on the SCQF), suggesting a benefit of

continued education even if not to a degree level. They also found that for those between the ages of 26-30 that returns to a degree were lower than those that had make who had completed a level 4 qualification or females who had completed level 5. However, take evidence from other studies (Britton et al., 2020a) the authors felt this difference would potentially reduce and reverse with age and time.

Within the Scottish context the Scottish Government (The Scottish Government, 2022b) recently published a report that examined returns to investment using LEO's for individuals whose highest qualification was college. They noted that 46.9% of college students progressed to university in 2019-20. The key findings were that FE students, three years after completing college had a mean earning of £13,800 and HNC/HND students had a median earning of £15,800. The key finding was that overall, most qualifications were associated with improved net lifetime earnings. Whilst report highlighted that data to match undergraduate earnings was not available and therefore the earnings outcomes were for students completing their studies in 2012-2013 this is report is of key interest as it provides a more nuanced understanding of different levels of education, and it is not just university education that can increase lifetime earnings.

4.6.3 Employment

Another option for school leavers is to progress directly into employment. Whilst an apprenticeship is a form of employment it has been separated out due to the formal qualifications offered since apprenticeships can be paid at a different wage level from standard employees. Recent Scottish Government statistics showed that 23% of school leavers with Level 6 qualifications and 6.7% with Level 7 qualifications progressed directly into employment (The Scottish Government, 2022c). This includes modern and graduate apprenticeships.

As discussed previously, the data demonstrates that those leaving with school level qualifications overall will not gain the same rate of return as those progressing on to HE (OECD, 2018). However, what these big data studies fail to show are the reasons why young people may be choosing to enter directly into

the labour market. Much of the discussion on direct labour market entry is focussed on individuals without the necessary qualifications to progress directly to university. There is little research focussed on those with Highers/Advanced Highers choosing to leave school and directly enter the labour market. Whilst there has been some work done at an educational systems and curriculum level (Iannelli and Raffe, 2007) which theorised on why there are weak links between school transitions and work in Scotland, it placed little focus on understanding the choices behind the decisions to enter the labour market. Iannelli and Smyth (2017) analysed the impact of subject choice on employment outcomes for Scottish and Irish school leavers. For the Scottish context, this was assessed using Scottish school-leaver surveys from 1997-2005. In the analysis three aspects were considered, the individuals employment status one year after leaving, their occupational status and their social class. General trends were decreases in school leavers entering employment and the quality of jobs declining over the 10-year period of study, there was also, in the Scottish context an effect on the subject studied and occupational status. However, there was no analysis around the influences for choosing employment or satisfaction with choice.

The other rhetoric on transitioning to employment is in the context of exclusion to HE due to social class. For example, the message of graduate over-education/underemployment is more likely to influence those from a working-class background not to go to university due to the risk factor involved of not securing employment after investment in a degree (Findlay and Hermannsson, 2019, Archer et al., 2003). In addition, employment for school leavers can seem like a tempting option as they provide an immediate income, rather than foregoing a wage for several years.

4.6.4 Volunteering

Another option that school leavers may choose is the option to volunteer or to take a gap year from their studies to travel. This is viewed as a temporary break with an intention to return to education at the end of the period and often encompasses work or travel. Pupils considering a gap year can apply to

university and defer their offer for a year. Individuals in this category are beyond the scope of this study as they have indicated a firm intention to progress to university and there already exists a research base on their experiences (King, 2011) implications and benefits to their career (Stehlik, 2010).

However, there are also pupils who discuss a break from education with some intention to return but without a firm plan to return to education, even if, for some this is their intention when they leave school. It is not possible from initial leaver destination statistics to discern between the two categories but 0.4% of leavers with Level 6 and 0.4% leavers with Level 7 qualifications progress to volunteering. Joy (2018) examined different post-16 routes and their effectiveness in relation to employment after degree level study. The findings were that those who took a 'gap year' had lower congruence to degree choice and subsequent employment compared to those that took over a year and less than four years before going to university. Whilst not explicitly discussed this could be attributed to those individuals choosing to return to study a degree based on their industry experience and therefore making a more informed choice about what they want to do.

4.7 Summary of Chapter

This chapter section has assessed the geographic, economic, and political context that school leavers are situated in. It has provided an overview of the nature of the rural location of the participants as well as the political and economic context they find themselves in. It presents two key messages, one that university may not be 'the gold standard' and that this attitude toward HE is beginning to shift. Whilst young people may not be aware of terms such as 'knowledge economy' there are conflicting narratives with the literature that on one hand are suggesting that university is the way to get a good job whilst on the other hand putting forward that the graduate market is saturated. This chapter has also discussed the different options that school leavers have if deciding not to participate in university. The Scottish policy agenda on reducing youth unemployment is supporting more work-based learning with targets to

increase the number of apprenticeships starts for 16-24 year olds (Skills Development Scotland, 2023a). Furthermore, many commentators are championing the view that apprenticeships are a viable alternative to HE in terms of prospects and that university is not for everyone even if they have the grades (Social Mobility Commission, 2019, World Bank, 2018). However, this viewpoint is not unanimous with some commentators maintaining that HE still commands the best returns to education. This is arguably providing a confused landscape for school leavers as there are conflicting narratives on the “best” choice when leaving school.

Whilst there has been some research into apprenticeships and rates of return in Scotland it has not been as extensively researched as progression to HE, so it is difficult to comprehensively assess the benefits of these different routes. FE can act as a stepping-stone to HE. Therefore, choosing not to go to university directly from school could be beneficial for subsequent degree choice but needs further research to fully understand the benefits. FE can also be a segway into the labour market and more research needs to be conducted around the reasons for a qualified young person to choose sub-degree level study over a degree.

Whilst a significant proportion of Scottish school leavers are entering employment , the commentary is that good quality jobs requiring only high school education have decreased (Roberts, 2019) and less is known about their reasoning for choosing employment. Finally, the research has shown that whilst university is often seen as the choice to be made when leaving school, the decision is not binary and delaying entry can be beneficial (Joy, 2018). The next chapter will present the methodology and discuss in detail how the primary research will take place to address the research questions.

Chapter 5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter discusses in detail the methodological approach. To meet the aims of the project a qualitative approach was required. As discussed in the literature

review there is a wide body of big data which has demonstrated, from a financial perspective, that for most individuals there is still a return to investment in education. What is therefore hard to explain and understand from this perspective are the reasons influencing suitably qualified individuals to choose an alternative route. This qualitative study of the pupils provided a data-rich narrative of the lived experiences of the qualified young people at the time of their decision-making processes. This chapter begins with an assessment on the impact of COVID on the project before moving on to discuss the overarching research design. It then discusses the methodology and methods used including sampling strategy and pilot studies. It outlines how the data was collected as well as key ethical considerations before discussing details of the data analysis.

5.1.1 Impact of COVID 19

Some significant changes to the project were required due to the beginning of COVID-19 in early 2020 when the project had planned to begin fieldwork. The impact of lockdown was threefold. Firstly, fieldwork was suspended. This meant that data collection was delayed by approximately ten months which in terms of a timeframe meant the second cohort could only be followed up for 12 months rather than 24 months.

Second, it limited the reach of the fieldwork due to pressures that educational establishments were under so there were additional challenges to find schools that were willing to accommodate a researcher and the number that did agree was much lower than had originally been planned. This in turn meant that fewer pupils were reached. The original plan had been to conduct research in a variety of schools in a range of local authority areas including urban schools. In addition, in the schools that did agree, the teachers that were acting as gatekeepers were limited as to how they could distribute the survey. The original plan had been for them to discuss it in a lesson or assembly and invite students to complete it. Due to lock-down the survey was instead put up on the TEAMS channel. When asked for feedback from the teachers around how effective they thought this method was, the response was that they felt it was limited. Their reason was that as the pupils were home-learning not all were regularly checking TEAMS and

the teachers did not have the capacity to issue reminders. Due to COVID and the stoppage on contacting schools directly, the design of the study had been amended to factor in advertising the survey through social media, but this had limited success.

Third, the research had to move to virtual delivery rather than being face-to-face and the interviews took place online. Whilst there was concern that this could result in a restricted sample as it would only be open to those with the technology, stable internet connection and were happy to communicate online. Overall, this did not have a detrimental impact as by the time interviews took place both the researcher and the participants were accustomed to online meetings and the meetings were only audio-recorded. Mwale and Hanna (2017) have discussed the benefits of conducting research through a virtual platform and the current project found the same. It provided the advantage of greater flexibility when scheduling for both the interviewer and the participant. Originally the interviews would have been conducted in school restricting availability to when the pupil was allowed out of class. It also was time efficient for the researcher as it meant they did not need to travel so were no longer geographically restricted in terms of data collection. The use of TEAMS had already been considered as a way to conduct follow up interviews as by this point there was the possibility of participants having moved away from home location. Therefore, using TEAMS for all interviews provided continuity throughout the process. The use of TEAMS also meant there was an auto transcription and recording of the interview which was an efficient way of capturing this data.

5.2 Research Design

5.2.1 Research Strategy

The research strategy provided the overall design for the research and as such, constructing the strategy was an important stage as it guided the completion of the fieldwork and ensured a coherent approach to the project (Johannesson and Perjons, 2014). Different commentators have discussed what aspects should be

considered within a strategy. Denscombe (2010) outlined that theory, data, environment, number and timeframe should be considered whereas, Thomas (2022) focused on asking a set of questions based on feasibility and researcher expertise.

Within economics, a neoclassical perspective (Earle et al., 2016) alongside quantitative research has dominated the field with a focus on mathematical equations, generalisation and predictability (Olmsted, 1997). Whilst this has provided a broad view of the economic landscape it has largely omitted the role of the individual’s experience and the narrative behind their decisions. Earle et al. (2016) argues strongly for pluralism in economics, stating that neoclassical economics has weaknesses and areas which it cannot adequately address through a narrow window of perspective. They discussed that by broadening perspectives it allows the building of knowledge of how humans operate within modern society by providing different research approaches (Earle et al., 2016). This project took an evolutionary economic perspective which viewed humans as contextually rational, and that research analysis should recognise the complexity within an individual’s life. In addition, it holds that humans operate within a complex society and that there is more than economics involved when assessing a research problem (Earle et al., 2016, Hodgson, 2019).

Qualitative research is already well established in many disciplines including medicine, sociology, anthropology, health studies, education, psychology and policy (Holland et al., 2004), is becoming more established in accounting and management (Bluhm et al., 2011) and there has been a call within the career guidance community for more qualitative studies to aid theory building (Leung, 2008). However, qualitative research has generally been neglected in economics. Starr (2014) provided a review of successful qualitative studies within the field of economics, highlighting that they added value and expertise to economics and aided in the answering of economic issues. In addition, it has been argued that qualitative research is ideally suited to populations which have typically been less researched by neo-classical economics such as those from financially constrained backgrounds (Starr, 2014, Earle et al., 2016, Moran, 2020).

A key aim of this project was to provide a data-rich account of the career-decision-making choices of suitably qualified individuals. The premise for this was that the big data sets already exist and have been analysed in terms of educational choice, so there was considered little merit in replicating this. Therefore, a qualitative paradigm was chosen to best fit the requirements of the project. Qualitative research broadly speaking analyses word rather than numbers, although this is not always the case (Starr, 2014). It assesses themes and has the ability to accommodate variation within the data (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Specifically for this project, qualitative research allowed for the analysis of human experience (Austin and Sutton, 2014) of which there would have been limitations to this if numerical data were used. It has been suggested that qualitative and quantitative research should be viewed as different cultures each with their own strengths and values (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006) rather than being viewed as one being better than the other.

Being qualitative, the project focused on depth rather than breadth (Denscombe, 2010). Within the literature, there has been little consensus on what the sample size should be as the number of participants required are determined by the unique parameters of each study (Starr, 2014, Braun and Clarke, 2021b, Clarke and Braun, 2013). However, whilst the participant base was small compared with sample sizes from quantitative projects, the volume of data generated from each participant was significant which enabled a rigorous, rich analysis and provided new perspectives and insights on educational choices from a hard-to-access group of participants.

Several authors of quantitative projects have noted the limitations in their studies. They discussed that whilst they could assess trends, the explanatory power for the reasons behind these trends was limited (Schindler and Lorz, 2012, Toutkoushian et al., 2018). There was therefore a compelling argument for a qualitative approach as it addressed these limitations and provided as full an understanding of the research question as possible.

Furthermore, the decisions an individual makes when transitioning from school are complex and a qualitative approach allowed for a thorough investigation of

this complexity. This approach allowed for the exploration of the ‘exception’ where in quantitative studies outliers are often omitted from the data (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001, Denscombe, 2007).

A further strength of a qualitative study was that it was better able to accommodate for unexpected events as it was not focussed on being able to generalise the results. The global pandemic of COVID resulted in the cancellation of the 2019-2020 and the 2020-2021 academic year exams for pupils and two national lockdowns. This event was not expected when the project began but the design was adapted to incorporate an investigation of the impact that COVID had on the pupils in terms of career decision-making, providing key insights into this decision-making.

5.2.2 Research Approach and Philosophical Foundations

A key aspect of the research design for any study, is its underlying epistemology and ontology as the philosophical positioning makes assumptions about the nature of knowledge and what is “knowable” (Braun and Clarke, 2022). In addition, the research paradigm should complement the research design and can influence the nature of what conclusions can be drawn from the data-set (Crotty, 2014). The debate around these different approaches and issues is complex, confusing and at times contradictory (Crotty, 2014, Thomas, 2006).

Epistemology encompasses what we can have knowledge about and how knowledge is constructed through humans. Broadly speaking this can be divided into positivism or interpretivism although alternative epistemologies include critical realism and pragmatism (Denscombe, 2010). Positivism is based on universals truths and fact where interpretivism takes the view that there are many truths, and the world is socially constructed and that it requires interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

This project took a critical realist approach. Critical realism takes an approach which goes beyond positivism/realism in that it proposes there is a truth, however this is obscured by individual’s context and perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This enabled a focus on individuals’ perceptions and choices

within a system and bounded framework. The participants were bounded by their individual contexts but there were also broader structural factors such as current educational policies and their geography. From a critical realist stance, the decision-making process and acknowledgement of the uniqueness of different individuals could be made. Whilst themes, built from commonalities in experiences were identified, generalisation and validity were not the goal. Each participant in this project was embedded in their own context which they could not be extracted from. As discussed, there was much in this project that was about understanding the individual and part of that came from the interaction of the interview and the ability of a researcher to understand the individual from their perspective.

Thomas (2006) discussed that whilst some qualitative projects take a specific theoretical approach, many researchers advocate for a straight-forward procedure that allows them to undertake the research without in-depth learning of the complexities of the different underlying philosophies and associated language. In the literature there has been much discussion on the philosophical underpinnings of a research project with ambiguity and different ways of implementing the varying perspectives (Crotty, 2014, Thomas, 2006). Thomas (2006) therefore, argues for a general inductive approach, however there was concern that this would put the project at risk of conflict and confusion in theoretical and philosophical positioning.

The research aims and questions were aligned to this approach and sought to understand the career decision of individuals and their connection with their non-academic attributes. The intended impact of the research was to both understand and challenge. By understanding the individuals' influences it sought to challenge the view that educational choice is solely, a cost-benefit analysis with a focus on monetary returns. Its impact could challenge current policy or provide practical guidance for careers advisers, educational professionals, and families of the young people. This then has an impact on the individual, so the questions were developed in line with a critical realist approach. They explored how participants felt about university being branded as "the gold standard" and investigated the participants' motivation for their own choices.

5.3 Methodology

5.3.1 Longitudinal Qualitative Research

The study took a longitudinal approach. One of the primary benefits longitudinal studies bring to the research community is that they track change 'live' rather than retrospectively (Thomson and Holland, 2003, Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001, Swanson and Miller, 2008). This provided the perspective of the participant at the time the change was happening which gave the chance for the participant to reflect on that change rather than relying on memory of events in the past. For this study, this was particularly relevant as it focused on the career decisions of young people at the point of transitions. What an individual planned for their career and what happened were often different. Therefore, this study captured the initial plans of the pupil and then tracked how these plans developed, progressed, and changed, alongside the factors which influenced these changes over the two-year period. This provided an added dimension to the understanding of the career choices of young people. In addition, whilst a longitudinal methodology has been used in the case of early school leavers (Bunting et al., 2017) it has been seldomly use to look at career decision-making of school leavers taking alternative routes from university. Finally, Swanson and Miller (2008) highlighted the underuse of longitudinal research as a methodology within career guidance and called for this to be remedied.

5.4 Methods

5.4.1 Survey

A survey was chosen as the initial data collection tool as it fulfilled two functions. One was to act as a screening survey to access participants for interviews and secondly it provided descriptive statistics which provided context for the study and the cohort.

5.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Several methods of data collection including individual interviews, focus groups and observations were considered. There is a strong evidence base for using interviews in qualitative research (McCrory and O'Donnell, 2016, Starr, 2014, Denscombe, 2007). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provided the freedom for the pupil to take some lead in the discussions and elaborate on areas of their career decision important to them. Concurrently it provided some structure so that the necessary information required for analysis and to answer the research questions was gathered. It also provides the advantage that validity of the information can be checked at the time of the interview. The interviews were all audio recorded.

Consideration was given to how successful a verbal interview could be with young people. There has been some debate on whether young people are able to fully articulate their thoughts in a format as structured as an interview (Kusenbach, 2003, Mann and Warr, 2017). Alternative methods, such storyboards, have largely been used with young people who are considered marginal, such as not being in education, employment or training (Brady and Brown, 2013). The participants for this project had the qualifications to go to university and therefore were viewed as being able to articulate their thoughts and answer questions through an interview (Denscombe, 2007). Furthermore, this method was successfully tested in a pilot study (discussed fully in section 4.6.1) In addition, the researcher's expertise was with interviewing, through their professional role as a Careers Adviser.

5.4.3 Fieldwork Journal

The third strand was to keep a field work journal. The use of field notes is a well-established method in qualitative research and has been actively encouraged (Nowell et al., 2017). It was used to provide material from an additional perspective, which enhanced the richness of the data collection. For example, it included observations about participant answers (pauses, tone)

which were not captured in the transcriptions (Aitchison, 2019). The journal kept for this research project also logged developments and challenges in the methodology, researcher observations after participant interviews and the process of data analysis. Se Appendix V11 and VIII for extracts from the fieldwork journal showing narrative on the participants interviews as well as development of themes and data analysis.

5.5 Sampling Strategy

5.5.1 Target Sample

As discussed in the literature review, the different pathways for school leavers were considered when deciding on the target sample. Pupils who intended to go to university were not included, this included those who had a deferred offer and were taking a gap year. If, however, a pupil was uncertain at the time of interview and, for example, was considering both an apprenticeship and university and at the second interview had decided on university they continued in the study.

The target sample were S5 (leavers) and S6 Scottish pupils and recent leavers who:

- Had obtained or were expected to obtain a minimum of 2 Highers (or 1 Higher and a FA) by the time of leaving school (See section 4.3.4 for definition of qualifications)

- Had chosen not to study for a full-time degree or were undecided on whether to study for a degree.

- Were from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

S5 and S6 are the final two years of high-school and the years in which pupils will sit their Higher exams (See Section 4.3.4 for details on Scottish entry requirements for university). S5 and S6 are generally post-compulsory years of schooling (for 16–19-year-olds) however if the pupil has not reached their 16th

birthday by the 30th September of their fifth they are unable to leave until Christmas of that year. The sample group were hard to access and under-represented therefore much consideration was given in defining the sample and in how to recruit the sample. It was decided to focus the study on pupils living in Scotland. The current literature showed that little research had been conducted in this area and therefore this study was viewed as a starting point on which future exploration and studies could be conducted. It was decided that a broader focus across countries and cultures and different education systems was unmanageable with regards to the timeframe and available resources.

The target sample group was S5 leavers and S6 pupils (age 16-19). This decision was made as it was the earliest point at which a pupil would have the qualifications to choose university as an option. S5 pupils who had chosen to leave were included in the study as they had the potential to meet the criteria for the sample.

The decision was made to include pupils with a minimum of two Highers as this would give them qualifications to enter HE (college) and a be a gateway to university courses and has been used as a criterion for entry in other studies (Findlay and Hermannsson, 2019). However, two Highers would limit the pupil to sub-degree level study or degree study through an associated degree pathway. These pupils in many cases would be viewed as 'borderline' pupils who had the potential to access degree level study. As an example, an individual with two Highers may plan to study an HNC in Beauty Therapies for which there is not a clear route to study at a degree level where another individual with two Highers may be planning to study Engineering with the intention of progressing to university on completion of their HNC or HND. In actuality, all participants recruited exceeded this minimum qualification requirement.

5.5.2 Sample Schools

As the target sample of pupils was hard to reach, maintained, or local authority run, Scottish secondary schools were contacted as an access point for participant recruitment. Independent schools were excluded from the study as they make up

a small proportion of the entire pupil population in Scotland (5.8% of Scottish pupils attend independent secondary schools in Scotland (Scottish Council of Independent Schools, 2019)) and therefore it was deemed that the potential eligible sample within this sample was negligible and would have a different experience from those at local authority school.

Consideration was given to non-probability and probability sampling strategies. Whilst probability sampling has been the standard for large-scale research projects it has been deemed by some authors (Denscombe, 2007) not appropriate for qualitative research as it is not looking to gain a representative sample of the population. As such the non-probability sampling strategy of purposive sampling was used for this project. This allowed the researcher to 'hand-pick' the sample and ensured the objectives of the study were met. There are different types of purposive sampling, and this project used 'extreme/deviant' type which focused on unusual cases (Denscombe and ProQuest, 2017). This was suited to the project as it researched an under-represented group of the school leaver population, and it was unclear at the start of the project how many pupils fitted into this category and what the full population number would be.

5.5.3 Multiple indicators of deprivation

A key aim of this project was to understand links between career decision-making and SES. Therefore, how to assess SES was considered. As discussed in the literature review in section 1.1 different researchers have used different indicators such as:

- Parental qualification levels, for example (Iannelli, 2002)
- Home postcode, for example (Chowdry et al., 2013)
- Eligibility for free school meals, for example (Chowdry et al., 2013, Boliver et al., 2022)
- Parental occupation, for example (Archer et al., 2003)

There was a strong consensus that the use of multiple factors provided the most rigorous approach to determining SESs (Duta et al., 2021, James et al., 2008) and therefore all four of the above indicators were used.

5.5.4 Methodological Issues

Whilst qualitative research did not aim to be generalisable, this did not mean that methodological issues were not given appropriate consideration and addressed as far as possible. The following section covers some possible methodological issues which have not yet been addressed.

5.5.5 Sample Size, Selection Bias, and Attrition

Within qualitative research there is no defined rule on how many participants to include. Starr's (2014) review of qualitative and mixed-methods studies carried out in the field of economics illustrate the range used, from three participants on a project which investigated employment, education and migration patterns among Palestinian women (Olmsted, 1997) to 607 participants in a mail survey with open-ended questions on workers attitudes towards unions (Cregan, 2005). Once COVID had been accounted for the target sample size for the current project was between 10-20 pupils.

Whilst participant participation at interviews is generally recorded as being high compared with survey response, this sample size provided an allowance for attrition over the 24-month period of the study. In addition, it balanced a large enough sample for analysis against the need for the level of data generated to be manageable for analysis by one researcher.

A consequence of this approach was that there was potentially a selection bias towards those who are more confident in taking part in a study and were willing to discuss their career-decisions. It was less likely to include dis-engaged pupils however as the target sample were pupils who were high-achievers they were by consequence less likely to be disengaged. Patterns of attrition were noted and monitored. Three participants dropped out of the study, two at the six-month point, one at the twelve-month point. In line with ethics and voluntary

participation no reason was asked for when participants no longer wanted to be part of the study.

There was the possibility of practice effect and an acknowledgement that, by interviewing the participants could have led some participants to re-consider options or think deeper on the choices they had made and therefore alter their career path. However, whilst this was acknowledged there was little way of knowing the impact of the interviews on an individual's choices except through asking the participant the direct question, which was done at the final interview. The response was that whilst the interviews made participants reflect on their choices none felt they had made different choices due to participation in the study.

5.6 Data Collection

5.6.1 Pilot Study

Before the primary data collection both the screening questionnaire and the interview questions were piloted.

The screening interview pilot was conducted in three stages. The first version which contained 66 questions was sent out to fifteen individuals to review the questions. This resulted in some minor modifications. Four young people and their parents then took part in two separate focus groups which imitated a live interview for both initial and follow up schedules. The result of this stage of the pilot was a significant alteration of the questions of the first interview schedule which improved their relevance to the research question and several questions which duplicated responses were dropped. As there were significant alterations a third version was sent out to twenty individuals to review. This received sixteen responses and minor alterations were made (See Appendix II: First Interview Schedule and Appendix III Follow Up Interview Schedule for full schedules).

At all stages of the pilot, individuals were advised that no data would be collected, and the purpose of the pilot was to ensure the questions made sense and captured the relevant information.

5.6.2 Screening Survey Pilot

The screening survey pilot was conducted in three stages. The first version which contained 13 questions was sent out to ten individuals including teachers and parents of which eight responded with their feedback. This resulted in the elimination of four questions and two questions were rephrased. In the second phase of the pilot the updated version of the questionnaire was sent out to an additional ten individuals which included school pupils and all ten responded. Three further questions were removed at this stage. In the third stage of the pilot the revised questionnaire was sent out to fifteen individuals and twelve responses were received. Minor re-phrasing of some of the multiple-choice options took place (See Appendix I: Online Survey for the full survey).

5.6.3 Reflective Note

The process of conducting a pilot study was considered useful. The author identified that many of the initial questions whilst potentially interesting were of little relevance to the research questions. One suggestion made was to include a prize draw to help response rates which had been considered before but decided against. However, given that the consensus from the pilot was that this would help response rate it was decided to add this to the ethics application.

5.6.4 Participant Recruitment

Fourteen secondary schools across South Lanarkshire and Dumfries and Galloway were contacted. Due to the advent of COVID-19 at the beginning of the process of contacting schools, responses from schools were limited. Six schools responded and agreed to send out a screening survey to pupils. The survey was also advertised on social media platforms. An online pre-screening survey was chosen as the initial method of recruitment as this ensured from an ethical

perspective, choice to participate was voluntary and with informed consent. Pupils were told they could choose to be entered into a prize draw to win £30 of Amazons vouchers for completing the survey.

The screening survey asked questions about the pupils (See Appendix I) qualifications obtained and pending, their post-school plans, any back up plans as well as information about their parents' occupations and home postcode. It ended with an option asking them if they would be happy to participate in further research which included an initial 1-2-1 interview and subsequent follow-up interviews. This outlined that participants selected for the follow-up interviews would receive a £10 amazon voucher, as a thank you, for each interview they completed.

Data collection took place over two cohorts. The first cohort was for pupils leaving school in May 2021 and the second cohort for pupils leaving in 2022. The second cohort recruitment took place due to the difficulties of participant recruitment, which arose from COVID.

In total, 186 pupils completed the screening survey, of these 41 pupils met the criteria. From these, those that had expressed an interest in participating in further research were contacted and from these, 16 participants agreed to take part. There were 11 participants in the first cohort and five in the second cohort, 15 of the participants lived in Dumfries and Galloway and one in Stirlingshire. Consideration was given as to whether to exclude the one participant out with Dumfries and Galloway. At the time of participant recruitment there was not a specific focus on rural experiences, this was part of a theme that developed due to the location of the participants that responded to the survey and took part in the interviews. Therefore, it was decided this was not necessary as they resided in a rural part of the region and met all eligibility criteria and as previously discussed the qualitative nature of the project meant there was the flexibility to accommodate this.

5.6.5 Semi-Structure Interviews

5.6.5.1 Initial Interview

The COVID-19 crisis placed Scotland into a second lock-down as the survey was distributed and interviews were about to commence for the first cohort of participants. As outlined earlier in 5.1.1, this meant instead of the teachers distributing the survey in face-to-face classes the survey was put up on TEAMS or emailed to pupils which resulted in a reduced completion rate of the survey. The interviews took place over TEAMS due to the continued closure of the schools and were audio-recorded.

For the second cohort of participants, schools had re-opened but for ensured continuity, as well as for advantages previously discussed, these interviews also took place over TEAMS.

The interview began by contracting with the participant and ensured they understood the parameters of the research, what was expected of them and what to expect during the interview. The interviews lasted for up to 60 minutes and consisted of open questions and statements. These were questions that did not require a yes or no answer but encouraged a fuller discussion, for example "What made you choose college over university?" or "Tell me more about this." The absence of 'why' questions was important as they could be viewed direct and challenging and therefore put the participant on the defensive and make them less like to share their thoughts and feelings (Egan, 2013).

Participants were asked questions around the subjects they were currently studying and subjects they had already been examined on as well as expected and achieved grades. They were asked questions around their family background and living arrangements to clarify SES. They were also asked about their post-school plans. There were questions around the support and discussions they had with their family about their plans. The questions centred around the reasons for their choices not to pursue a degree and whether they had considered this as an option and their answers to were explored. They were asked about their longer-terms plans and how they saw their choices affecting their plans. Questions were

asked around their perception of university. There were also questions around their perceived skill set. At the end of the interview the participant had the chance to add any additional comments and ask any questions. The follow up schedule of interviews were then discussed, and a date was set for the next interview.

5.6.5.2 Follow-Up Interviews

Consideration was given to the length of time to follow participants. It was decided that two years provided a time frame for participants to make progress in their career plans and develop their skill set and was also manageable within the time frame of the project. In the literature there is not a set consensus on how long a longitudinal study should be as it depends on multiple variables including size of the research team, budget and subject being studied. However, there has been some argument for there being more than two data collection points to enable not just the change to be tracked but also the process behind the change (Swanson and Miller, 2008).

This was considered a valid point for the above reasoning but also to go without contact for two years there were concerns that the attrition rate of participants would be high. Thomson and Holland (2003) discuss their methods of over-coming attrition rates which included phone calls between interviews, newsletters and Christmas cards being sent to participants to maintain contact. Therefore, in addition to the final interview at 24 months TEAMS interviews took place at the six-month, one year and eighteen-month point for the first cohort. This had the dual benefit of 'tracking' the participants career plans whilst contact was maintained. As discussed in Section 5.1.1, due to time constraints, because of COVID the second cohort were only followed up for 12months.

At each follow-up consent was re-iterated and contact details were checked. Questions were asked around how the participants plans were progressing, what was going well, what was challenging and any changes to their plans. These follow up interviews were all audio-recorded.

5.7 Ethics, Data Security and Consent

The project was submitted to and approved by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee. Each participant was given a participant information sheet, so they fully understood their role as a participant and were required to sign it, which indicated their full consent (see Appendix IV: Consent Form). They were advised that they were free to withdraw from the project at any point and that they did not need to provide a reason for this. The consent form asked for their permission to audio-record the interviews. They were advised of the project aims and objectives. They were advised that their data would be stored securely within the University of Glasgow guidelines, that it would be kept for the length of the project and then securely destroyed 10 years after the project's completion. They were advised that if their data were to be used for a different purpose additional consent would be sought to request this and that they would have the right to refuse. They were also provided with a Participant Information sheet which detailed the purpose of the project (see Appendix V: Participant Information Sheet). There were four main ethical consideration for this project.

5.7.1 Ethical Consideration 1: Practitioner-Researcher

First, was the role of the researcher as a practitioner-researcher. Practitioner research in areas such as social care and psychology is well-established allowing for an informal, grass-roots approach offering a unique perspective to the research (Fox et al, 2007). Bell and Nut (2002) discuss the ethical considerations of such a role which is illustrated by an example of a social work professional conducting their Ph.D. project, separate from but related to their work, which for the researcher of the current project was a relatable position. Some of the research participants in this study were from the school at which the researcher was the careers adviser, and therefore would know them in a professional capacity prior to the interview. This was considered both a strength and a potential concern. It meant there was already an established rapport with these research participants, meaning they were happy with the process and comfortable to answer questions put to them and more importantly were comfortable to say if they did not want to answer a question. However, due to

the professional involvement in their career decisions, there needed to be care taken not to influence the questions or interpret the answers to fit the researcher's own anecdotal observations. To address these concerns, open questions were used which reduced the chance of leading the conversation. The author's, profession as a careers adviser, meant they were practiced at doing this. When participants were recruited for the interview, it was ensured that potential participants felt no obligation to participate. This was achieved by potential participants voluntarily leaving contact details in the survey issued and not approaching them directly.

Bell and Nut (2002) discuss if the practitioner-researcher knows the specific terminology of the field that this could bias interactions and was portrayed as an issue to be viewed with caution. For example, the researcher could pretend they do not know what is meant by the terminology, however this could have implications on confidence in their professional knowledge and also has an element of deceit (Bell and Nutt, 2002). A more positive viewpoint would be that the flow of the interview is not disrupted by checking terminologies constantly. For example, having knowledge of the education system and levels of qualifications gave the researcher an advantage when interviewing pupils as they understood what they mean when they discuss different subjects and levels. This was balanced against putting the researcher's own interpretation of a participant's answer and therefore making assumptions.

However, bias is not unique to practitioner researchers and it has been argued that all researchers bring bias to a researcher project (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Furthermore, the argument has been raised that not many researchers actively try to falsify their hypothesis as advocated by Karl Popper (2002) but instead try to find support for them (Crotty, 2014). What was important therefore, was being aware of the possible biases and the reflexive role a researcher took in the project and how this was addressed. For example, acknowledgement that the researcher had a strong motivation for conducting this research as from a professional capacity they wanted to ensure best practice is being delivered across the career profession.

5.7.2 Ethical Consideration: Confidentiality

The second ethical consideration was confidentiality. This ethical consideration is not entirely separate from the consideration above of that of a practitioner-researcher and which code of ethics are adhered too. The researcher's duty of care as a professional and integrity as a researcher was at the forefront. As discussed, the nature of the research was that the researcher was not an objective bystander looking in; they conducted in-depth interviews with participants and there was the potential for a disclosure to be made. Bell and Nut (2002) discuss how there can be conflicting loyalties between an individual in the role of both professional and researcher with regards to confidentiality. This was considered very seriously, and the researcher ensured they were familiar with general data protection regulations (GDPR) and the participants understood the bounds of confidentiality. The Career Development Institute Code of Conduct (2019) states that "*members have a duty of care and are always expected to act in the best interests of their client*". This alongside the University of Glasgow Code of Good Research Practice (2018) and my duty as a corporate parent (The Scottish Government, 2014a) when acting in a professional capacity all align with regards to confidentiality and that it is bound by duty of care. When contracting with participants the researcher outlined the bounds of confidentiality and the process if a disclosure was made. The researcher also provided the participants with a privacy notice which explained how their data would be processed and handled (See Appendix VI: Privacy Notice).

Participants were advised that extracts of their interview transcripts may form part of the results and discussion of the thesis and potentially in a publication. When this occurred, a pseudonym was used instead. In addition, any reference to specific schools or location that would make the participant identifiable were removed. With regards to data security each interview transcript was assigned a number and code to identify the interview and was stored separately on a secure encrypted document on the university OneDrive system, in line with the University of Glasgow data storage guidance.

5.7.3 Ethical Consideration: Topics of Sensitivity

The third consideration was that for some pupils the area of questioning around their family background may be a sensitive topic and had the potential to cause upset or for a disclosure to be made. It has been noted that an unintended consequence of such an in-depth interview is to encourage "*reflection and disclosure*" (McCrory and O'Donnell, 2016) which could be positive, negative or neutral. This was addressed this by outlining to participants that they did not have to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. In addition, due to the researcher's experience of working with disclosures of sensitive information they had the expertise and confidence to manage any such incident in a professional and sensitive manner.

5.7.4 Ethical Consideration: Gatekeepers & Informed Consent

This final ethical consideration was the use of 'gatekeepers' as a way of accessing participants. The main method of participant recruitment was through school. Schools were contacted, and from the schools that agreed the researcher had a main point of contact who distributed the screening survey. Miller and Bell (2002) highlight the potential power-balance issues when using a 'gate-keeper'. Whilst a 'gatekeeper' may be necessary to access the participants they describe how there can be an imbalance of power making it hard for a potential participant to refuse to take part in the research which then brings into question the participant's consent. They illustrated their point through a research project into Bangladeshi's women's experience of maternity services. The gatekeeper was a woman of high social status in the community and therefore it would have been hard for the women who had been 'let-in' by her to refuse participation. In the current project the 'gatekeepers' were teachers, meaning there was an imbalance of power between teachers and pupils, and if asked by a teacher to participate, pupils may have felt obliged to agree. To mitigate any such effect pupils were provided with a screening survey where they chose to 'opt in' to the 1-2-1 interview through leaving contact details.

The follow-up interviews took place after the pupil had left school and consent was re-established at each point of contact. Miller and Bell (2002) discuss issues

of what 'informed consent' means as research projects, especially those using inductive methods, can change and evolve from the original point when consent was issued. This was considered an imperative ethical point for this current project as the longitudinal aspect to the project meant that the latter considerations were all potentially relevant. In addition to changes in the research project, circumstances for the participants may have changed or they may have forgotten what they agreed to. By having a conversation on consent with the participant at every contact, this ensured that consent was a current ethical consideration throughout the project.

5.7.5 Ethical Consideration: Inaccurate Information

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that not all the career decision-making information the pupils had was accurate. Therefore, the researcher felt there was an ethical choice to be made with regards to their role as a practitioner-researcher. One view could be that the researcher was there purely to record the participants story and not to advise them in any capacity. However, from a career professional perspective the researcher decided this would be unethical to let them make decisions based on incorrect information. Where the incorrect information they held had a direct relevance to the project, further questions were asked to clarify where they had found out this information. If the participant asked the researcher directly within in the interview whether they had got the information right the researcher would signpost to where the correct information could be obtained within the interview. When this did not apply, at the end of the interview, the researcher highlighted what the participant had said and, in most cases, signposted them to the relevant website. As an example, one participant held incorrect information on student finance and they were sign-posted to the SAAS (Students Awards Agency Scotland) website. The researcher was careful to not give them the information in case it was misinterpreted or not up to date. In some interviews, the participant expressed uncertainty about their next steps. In these cases, the researcher highlighted to the participant the career service that was available to them and how to make an appointment to see a careers adviser.

5.8 Analysis of Data: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Analysis of longitudinal research is complex as it can be analysed cross sectionally, longitudinally and then also analysing how both interact (Holland et al., 2004). With regards to this project the data was analysed longitudinally across and between participants of both cohorts. Initially there had been a plan to conduct a cross-sectional analysis, but a trial of this approach found that this led to an artificial separating of the data. The longitudinal analysis tracked change and continuity in the participants plans and the evolution of their skill set, as well as perceptions on both their career decisions and skill set.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method of data analysis that that identifies patterns in data through the coding of data extracts. Data extracts with pattern commonalities are grouped together to form codes and these codes are grouped together to form themes. Thematic analysis is a method of analysis growing in popularity with qualitative researchers (Ramage, 2019, Jones et al., 2011, Braun and Clarke, 2006, Dharmasukrit et al., 2023) and RTA is a subset of this analytical approach pioneered by Braun and Clarke (2022). RTA differs from other strands of thematic analysis as it uses qualitative tools within a qualitative paradigm rather than qualitative tools within a quantitative paradigm (Braun and Clarke, 2022). It was therefore selected as it provided the best fit for the project, in terms of research paradigm and the data collected. Its flexibility meant it did not adhere to one specific theoretical approach. This provided a good fit with inter-disciplinary approach that this project took where different theoretical perspectives were used.

Braun and Clarke (2022) discuss that there are variations with RTA and that orientation to the data can take a largely inductive or deductive approach which has an impact on the analysis. A deductive analysis is where the analysis is driven by existing constructs in the literature where inductive would-be building constructs from the data. However, there is acknowledgement that a project may not strictly fit into one category. This suited the current project as theme generation whilst largely deductive also needed scope for an inductive element

to allow for unexpected themes (Thomas, 2006). This influenced how the data was coded: it searched for themes of influencing factors on career decision-making which were informed by previous theory and empirical research. In addition to this, the researcher's position as a practitioner researcher meant they had some knowledge from professional experience on potential areas of analytical interest. However, after the first wave of data collection the researcher returned to the literature and reassessed which elements of the data were relevant, which had less relevance and which areas needed further assessment. There was also an awareness of aspects of themes that had not been previously captured by existing literature which were also identified and analysed.

RTA also gave the researcher an active role in the process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which allowed for the handling of a complex dataset. The analysis provided clear theming of the data which gave a clear understanding and insight to the complexities of the career-decision-making process of the school leavers.

Consideration was given to the question: 'What counts as a theme?' Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that there is no fixed rule for this but that it can be viewed in terms of prevalence within a data item (one interview) and across the whole data set. They also point out that a high prevalence of a theme does not necessarily mean it is more important than another theme with less prevalence. Therefore, themes will be considered on both an intra and inter-interview basis and aim to capture the 'essence' of the pupils' career-decisions. More recently they define a theme as " *a shared meaning organised around a central concept" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p77)*.

Another consideration is whether the analysis to a latent or semantic approach. The analysis took a broadly semantic approach (Braun et al., 2014) in that the data were assessed by their explicit content as opposed to any hidden or implied meaning, which would be consistent with a latent approach. Within the grounds of career decision to infer meaning beyond the pupil's response would run the risk of mis-interpreting the data. For the same reasons, an essentialist approach was taken for data analysis which allowed for theoretical analysis to be carried on the straight-forward meaning of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However,

these approaches are discussed as being part of a spectrum rather than alternatives (Braun and Clarke, 2022) so these decisions had a degree of flexibility to ensure rigour and that the coding process was not limited.

5.8.1 Detailed Process of Analysis

The research questions that were formulated through the literature review were used to inform the longitudinal analysis. For the participants in the study the change and consistency being tracked, was their plans, how these plans evolved over time and, how their perceptions changed or remained consistent over time. As all the participants were at the point of leaving school, they all underwent a 'forced ' transition (Hodkinson et al., 1996) so at the point of the second interview they had either undertaken or were about to undertake this change. However, it was not this change per se that was being analysed but also how this change matched or differed to their plans in the first interview.

The qualitative analysis software program NVivo was used to code and analyse the data from the initial interviews for both cohorts of data (See Appendix IX for extract of Nvivo analysis). The coding took place using a six-stage process as described in Braun and Clarke (2021a, 2022). The first stage began with data familiarisation where each interview was transcribed individually by the researcher soon after the recording. This process meant the interview was clear in the researcher’s mind and throughout the transcription they began to note interesting concepts and patterns. In addition, a fieldwork journal was kept alongside each transcription where researcher thoughts were noted alongside patterns and nuances to the data which would not be captured through a typed transcription (such as pauses and intonation). The field work journal, as discussed in section 5.4.3 was used to reflect on patterns and improve on future interviews which aided in the analysis of the transcribed interviews. Due to the time between interviews, it also allowed the researcher a record of what had occurred at each interview to ensure rigor within the data.

In phase two, the initial codes were generated and collated with the matching data extracts. Due to the length of initial data collection being over the course

of several months initial coding with NVivo began after the transcription of each interview. This ensured that the researcher was not overwhelmed by the size of the data set. It was at this phase that the complexities of the narratives of the participants were apparent with often seemingly contradictory statements between interviews and occasionally within interviews. This stage was accompanied by a 'messiness' to the data however within the chaos the researcher identified the beginnings of patterns and shared meaning.

Once all the interviews were coded, phase three began with the process of searching for initial themes and sub-themes. This stage began to make some sense of the data. Some codes were discarded, and some were combined as the differences in meaning between them were small. At this point it was clear that a re-reading of the literature was required, and some time was taken away from analysis to do this, before returning to the data to re-analyse. It was at this point the researcher felt that the research questions needed to be re-assessed as they did not accurately enough capture the discourse of the data and meant the data was being split which left a risk of themes being isolated and not fully captured (Braun and Clarke, 2022). They were refined to incorporate the impact of rural location and the impact of COVID. Agee (2009) discusses the importance of defining and refining research questions through the course of a project in order to better clarify and make connections with theory and field-work during project. Re-writing and re-defining research questions are described as an integral part of the qualitative process which is in contrast to the quantitative approach of hypothesis testing where the hypotheses are fixed, and the evidence may either support or not support a hypothesis.

In phase four, the themes were revised and refined. Some themes were deemed to have overlap with other themes and combined and others were discarded. Within this process the data extracts were reviewed, and a second cycle coding took place. There were some patterns that were identified in later interviews (across both the first and second cohort of data collection), so a re-reading of the previous interviews and key-word searches were conducted to pick-up on any data extracts that had not been coded in the initial cycle. An aspect the researcher was very aware of was to ensure the themes were not topic

summaries (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and care was taken to address this by re-examining the data extracts and capturing their essence. Whilst NVivo was used throughout the analytical process, memory maps and spider diagrams were also used as mediums to aid analysis (See Appendix VIII). They helped to identify the varying aspects of the themes and linkages within the data. At the end of phase four there was an initial draft of themes which coherently captured the essence of the data set.

In phase five the themes and sub-themes were named and analysed and put in context of the overall narrative of the data set. The final phase involved a final analysis of the data to check for coherence and ensure the data extracts accurately evidenced the themes. From this, a draft results chapter was written. Within qualitative research the writing and analysis are simultaneous processes as it is often through the writing where anomalies in the theme development are found. This led to a revisiting and 'tweaking' of themes, when through the writing process conflict or repetition was found.

This six-phase process took place for each cohort of data collection, that is, the initial interviews, the six-month interviews right through to the final interviews at 24 months. Each new collection prompted a revision of the data from previous collection as some patterns were not visible until the 12, 18 or 24-month data collection point. See Appendix VII for Fieldwork Journal Extract, Appendix VIII showing illustrations of Developing theme and handwritten journal extract and Appendix IX for an excerpt from NVivo showing the coding.

5.8.2 Details of Interview Data

Interviews took place between Jan 2021 and March 2023 at six monthly intervals. In total there were 60 interviews conducted totally 32hrs 8mins and 9secs of recording. The shortest interview was a 12month follow up interview (Wave 3) which was 10mins and 3sec in length and the longest interview was a first interview (Wave 1) at 1hr 04mins and 25 seconds. Table 2 shows the mean length by interview wave and a full Table of interview lengths can be found in Appendix X. The mean length across all interviews was 31mins and 27 seconds The reason

for the differing lengths of interviews partly was due to the fullness of answers that participants gave. As they were semi-structured interviews participants had the autonomy to elaborate on answers and take some lead on the discussions. However, some of the interviews' variation was due to connection issues, so questions needing to be repeated or participants needing to pause the interview. In addition, participants spoke at different speeds, took different amounts of time to answer the questions, for example by taking a pause before answering. Having some heterogeneity in the length of interviews went part way to addressing the concern raised earlier that it would only be participants confident about discussing their decisions that would choose to be involved. The follow-up interviews were designed to be shorter than the first interview which asked more detailed background questions. Whilst semi-structured interviews allow for some digression from the set questions to explore answers more fully all the questions on the interview schedules were asked (See Appendix II and III). Whilst relevant follow up questions could be asked and clarification to answers sought the questioning stayed close to the interview schedules provided (Appendix II and III) to adhere to ethical consent.

Table 2: Mean Duration of Interviews by Wave

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5
Mean length of Interview	00:42:26	00:21:43	00:24:51	00:30:24	00:38:44

5.9 Conclusions

This chapter has provided a comprehensive account of the research process from inception to conclusion of the analysis. It has also contextualised the process in terms of philosophical positioning and addressed key ethical concerns. It has provided a robust justification for the research approach and methods. The next chapter will present the results of the survey and descriptive statistics, as well as the themes generated from the thematic analysis.

Chapter 6 Results from Survey

6.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter provides an overview of the results from the survey to provide some descriptive statistics ahead of the main analysis. It provides context to the main analysis and illustrates that the decision to go university by many students, whilst still a popular option was not always without consideration of other choices.

6.2 Survey Timeframe

The survey was launched in December 2020 and remained open until the 1st of August 2021. It then re-opened in December 2021 and closed again on the 1st of August 2022 after a second round of data collection. The primary purpose of the survey was to screen for eligible participants but also to collect descriptive statistics on school leaver choices. These background statistics provide some context around the pupils' decision-making from a broader sample. Data collection was highly restricted by COVID. This was in part due to the teachers', who functioned as gatekeepers to distribute the survey, competing priorities. Therefore, the numbers completing the survey were much lower than had been anticipated. Reminders were issued to schools to re-send the survey to pupils, which was met with mixed responses.

6.3 Reach of Survey

The survey was initially issued through six schools. Five of which were in Dumfries and Galloway (117 responses) and one in the South Lanarkshire (12 responses) local authority area. All upcoming school-leavers, with Highers, were encouraged to complete the survey. The survey was also advertised through social media channels which resulted in a further 50 responses from Moray, City of Edinburgh, Stirlingshire, and West Dunbartonshire, giving a mix of urban and rural responses as classified by the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification (SGURC) 2020 (Scottish Government, 2022).

6.4 Descriptive Statistics

In total, 186 respondents between the ages of 16-19 completed the survey. Of these 28 (15%) were excluded due to not being eligible (either through not providing consent or through qualification levels not being high enough). This left a sample of 158 which was used for the following descriptive statistics. It is understood that this is a small sample of school leavers in Scotland with the qualifications to go to university. Moreover, a sampling frame was not available to the researcher that enabled the drawing of a representative sample. However, the survey findings provide a useful extension of the qualitative data.

6.4.1 Expected qualifications and parental qualifications levels

Pupils were asked questions on their expected qualifications by the time they left school. 60.8% respondents expected to have advanced Highers and 39.2% expected to have 2 or more Highers or SCQF Level 6 equivalent. At the time of responding 24% of these pupils held only National 5 which would mean they would be required to sit enough Highers in S6 to make entry requirements for university.

The survey asked for the highest level of parental qualifications, as coming from a family where no one has previously attended university can lower chances of an individual themselves attending university (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Just over a quarter of those surveyed did not know their parents' qualifications. Across all respondents, Figure 3 shows that only 35.44% of parents held either a postgraduate or undergraduate degree as their highest level of qualification. The remaining percentage either held vocational, college, school, or no qualifications.

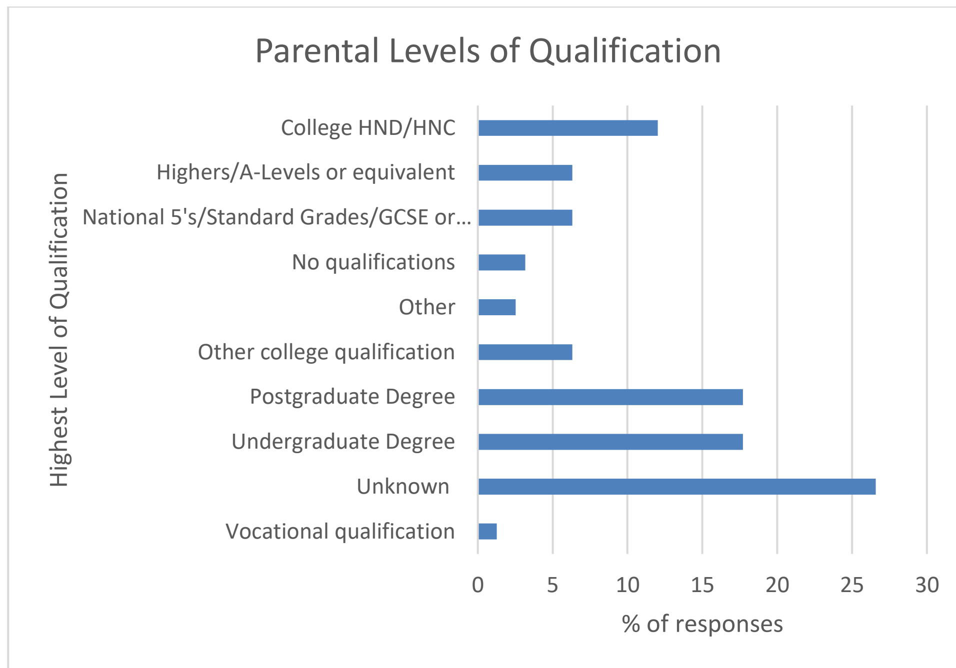


Figure 3: Parental Levels of Qualifications

6.4.2 Post-school Destination Choices

Pupils were asked about their first and second choices for when they left school. Figure 4 shows that university was the most popular choice with 65.2% of pupils indicating this was their first choice. A further 7% planned to take a gap year. Twelve percent of pupils planned to do an HNC/HND at college and 2.5% who were planning to go to college to do a non HNC/HND course.

Only 1.3% had a first choice of a graduate apprenticeship and 5% who wanted to pursue a modern apprenticeship. A further 1.3% were planning to undertake other training and 4.4% were still undecided. 1.3% of pupils had a first choice of employment. This showed that most suitably qualified pupils were choosing university as their first choice. However, of those planning to do an HNC/HND from school, 68.4% had already achieved at least two Highers in S5 and expected to gain more Highers and/or advanced Highers in S6. This suggests that there were pupils choosing a course for which they were overqualified for.

Whilst this sample demonstrates that university was the most popular first choice there are still a substantial number of suitably qualified individuals

choosing not to go to university. In total, 29.8% of those surveyed were choosing not to go to university or, within six months of their anticipated leaving date, were still undecided on what they wanted to do after school.

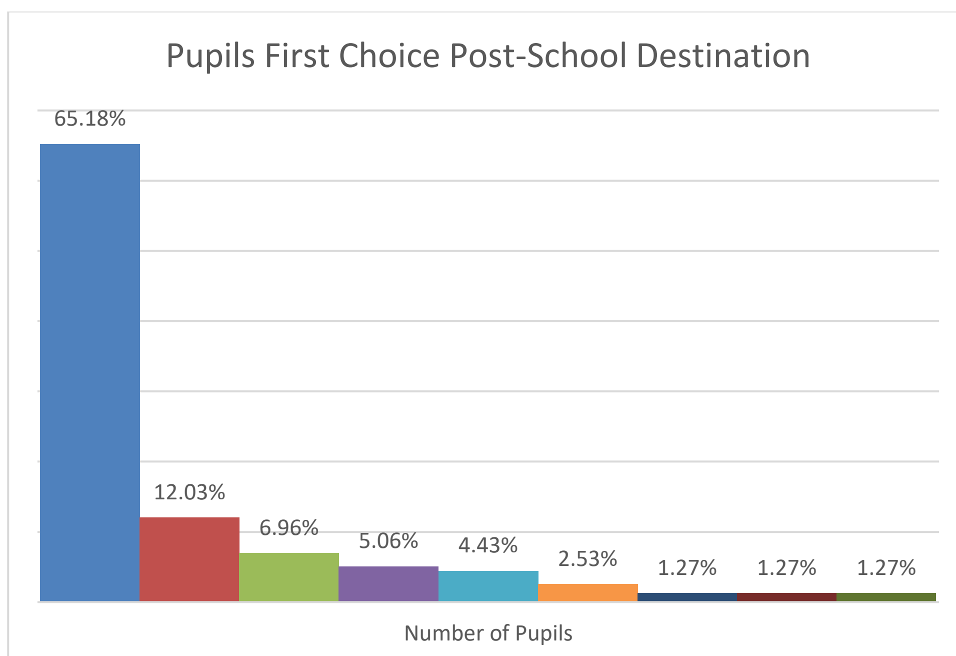


Figure 4: Pupils' First Choice Post-School Destination

Pupils were also asked what their second choice after leaving school would be and the reasons that would lead them to pursuing their second choice. For pupils with a first-choice response of university 77.3% indicated this was the only option they were considering. However, what this demonstrated was that 22.8% were considering a different option and indicating that the decision to go to university was potentially not clear cut for a proportion of the respondents.

An additional, 13.9% of pupils indicated university was a second choice. In terms of a first choice for these pupils, there was mix of response including gap year, undecided about a first choice, graduate or modern apprenticeship, employment, and college.

Pupils were asked what would stop them pursuing their first choice of post-school destination. Figure 5 shows that the most common response was that they were uncertain about making the entry requirements with 48.73% pupils giving

this as their answer. The next most popular reason was not having decided between their first and second choice, sometimes this was between two university courses but sometimes it would be between two different routes. Thirty pupils had already received a secure offer so did not see anything getting in the way of them pursuing their first choice and a further 11.4% gave other reasons for not pursuing their first choice which included COVID restrictions/online learning, lack of confidence in their ability and limited/no relevant apprenticeships locally.

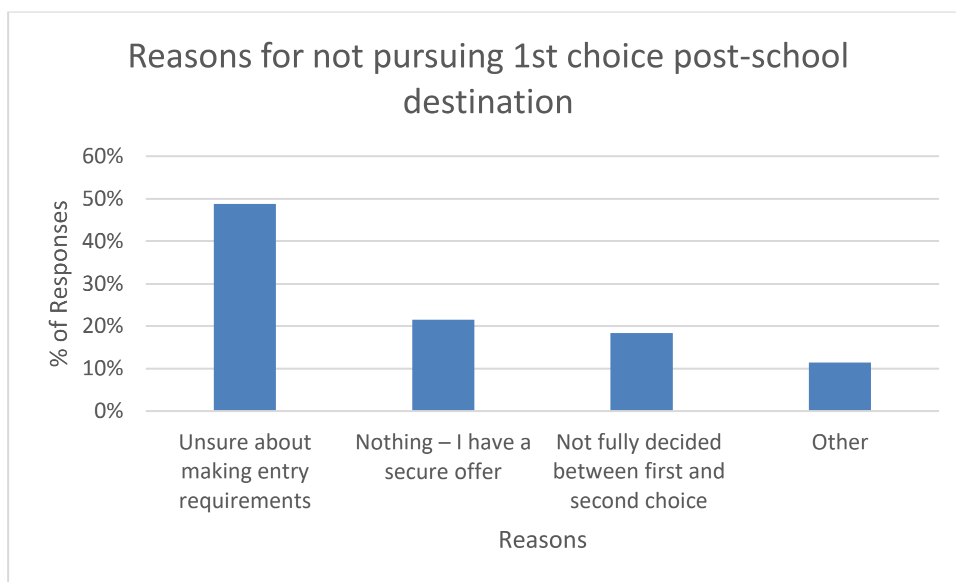


Figure 5: Reasons for not pursuing first choice.

6.4.3 Post-school Destination Choice by SIMD

In terms of level of relative deprivation, Figure 6 demonstrates the number of responses broken down by respondents' SIMD decile, showing a normal distribution. In total there were 140 valid responses. As discussed in the methodology chapter this is a measure of relative deprivation and refers to the area not the individual. A more sensitive measure was used for the interviews.

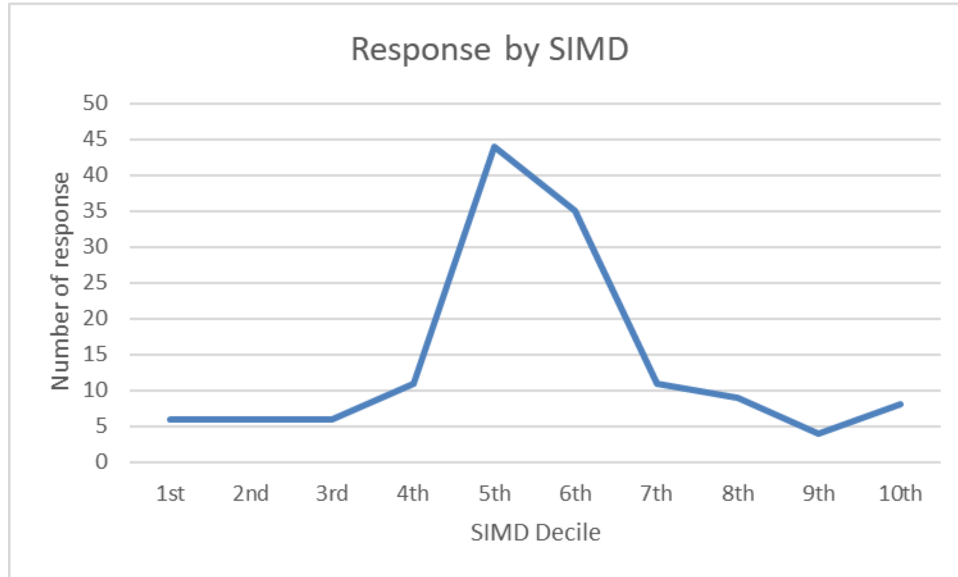


Figure 6: Responses by SIMD

Table 2 gives an overview of first choice by SIMD area. As this was a small number of respondents from the targeted population generalisations cannot be made. An unexpected result was that of the 18 pupils living in a decile 1-3 area (30% most deprived), 72.2% had university as their first choice. However, if consideration is given to the survey's target sample, this result is less surprising; existing literature discusses the role of prior educational achievement as one of the key barriers to the divide in uptake of degree education by SES (Paterson and Iannelli, 2007).

Table 3: First Choice by SIMD decile

	SIMD Rank (1 most deprived - 10 least deprived)										
First Choice	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**Total**
Degree	5	5	3	9	26	19	8	8	4	6	93
College HNC/HND	0	0	1	1	6	7	1	1	0	0	17
College other	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
Gap Year	0	1	1	1	1	5	1	0	0	1	11

Apprenticeship	1	0	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	1	7
Undecided/ Other	0	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	0	0	7
Employment	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	**6**	**6**	**6**	**11**	**44**	**35**	**11**	**9**	**4**	**8**	**140**

6.5 Summary

These results help to provide a context for the thematic analysis that follows in a later of section of the results. Whilst this represents a small sample of the qualified school leaver population it does indicate that whilst university was still the most common post-school destination for suitable qualified candidates, a proportion of those qualified did consider different options. It also demonstrated that there is some uncertainty and lack of confidence in making the entry requirements. The next chapter contains an overview of the demographics of those that made up the two cohorts of interview participants and then presents the themes from the thematic analysis.

Chapter 7 Thematic Analysis Results

7.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter will present the key themes from the data and provide an exploratory discussion on key elements which construct the themes and supporting data extracts. The first part will provide demographics on the participants of the study before moving on to the results of the analysis.

The themes presented are dynamic and their focus and boundaries moved with the participants over time whilst still retaining their core meaning. The elements constructing the theme will be discussed. Through this analysis the longitudinal elements of the themes will also be highlighted. The next chapter will provide a discussion and critically analyse what new insight this data provides as well as establishing links with existing literature.

7.2 Participant Demographics

The following section of the chapter provides background information on the participants including their post-school choices within six months of their leaving date, SES, and their destination changes over the course of the interviews.

All participants were between 16-18yrs of age at the date of the first interview. There were seven females and nine males. Of the 16 participants interviewed. Table 3 shows the participants first choices at the time of the first interview, broken down by SES. Even from the time between completing the survey and the date of the first interview there had been changes. For example, Lizzy had indicated university as a first choice at the time of survey, but this had changed to college by the first interview.

At the time of the first interview four participants had university as a second choice with college or an apprenticeship as the first choice but were undecided between the two. All four had applied to university. One participant planned to go to university in the future but were using their initial post-school destination as a building block for qualifications and skills and had not applied for university,

the remaining eleven participants had no plans to go to university and two participants had not fully decided between an apprenticeship and university. Of the eleven that had no interest in university two participants had not considered it as an option where the other nine had given it some consideration and decided against it (see Table 3 for first and second choices).

Table 4: Participants SES and post-school Choices at 1st Interview

Participant	SES	1st Choice	2nd Choice	Career Area
Sarah	Working class	HNC College	Apprenticeship	Radio Production
Tracey	Working class	Voluntary Work/Part-time Employment	Employment	Police
Steve	Working class	Apprenticeship	College	Management
Robert	Working class	HNC College	University	Music
Curtis	Working class	NC College	No back up -offer accepted	Forestry
Felicity	Working class	Apprenticeship	Employment	Tattoo Artist
Zach	Working class	Voluntary work	No back up option - offer confirmed	English and Acting
Jack	Working class	HNC College	No back up option - offer confirmed	TV/Film Production
Harry	Working class	Apprenticeship	University	Tourism

Milly	Working class	NC College	NC College	Childcare
Jordan	Working class	NC College	NC College	Electrical Engineering
Trevor	Working class	Apprenticeship	Employment/University	Merchant Navy
Colin	Middle Class	Apprenticeship	University	Accounting/ Physics
Lizzy	Middle Class	NC College	No back up option offer confirmed	Renewable Engineering
Pamela	Middle class	NC College	NC College	Child nursing
Bryonny	Middle Class	NC College	Return to school	Hospitality

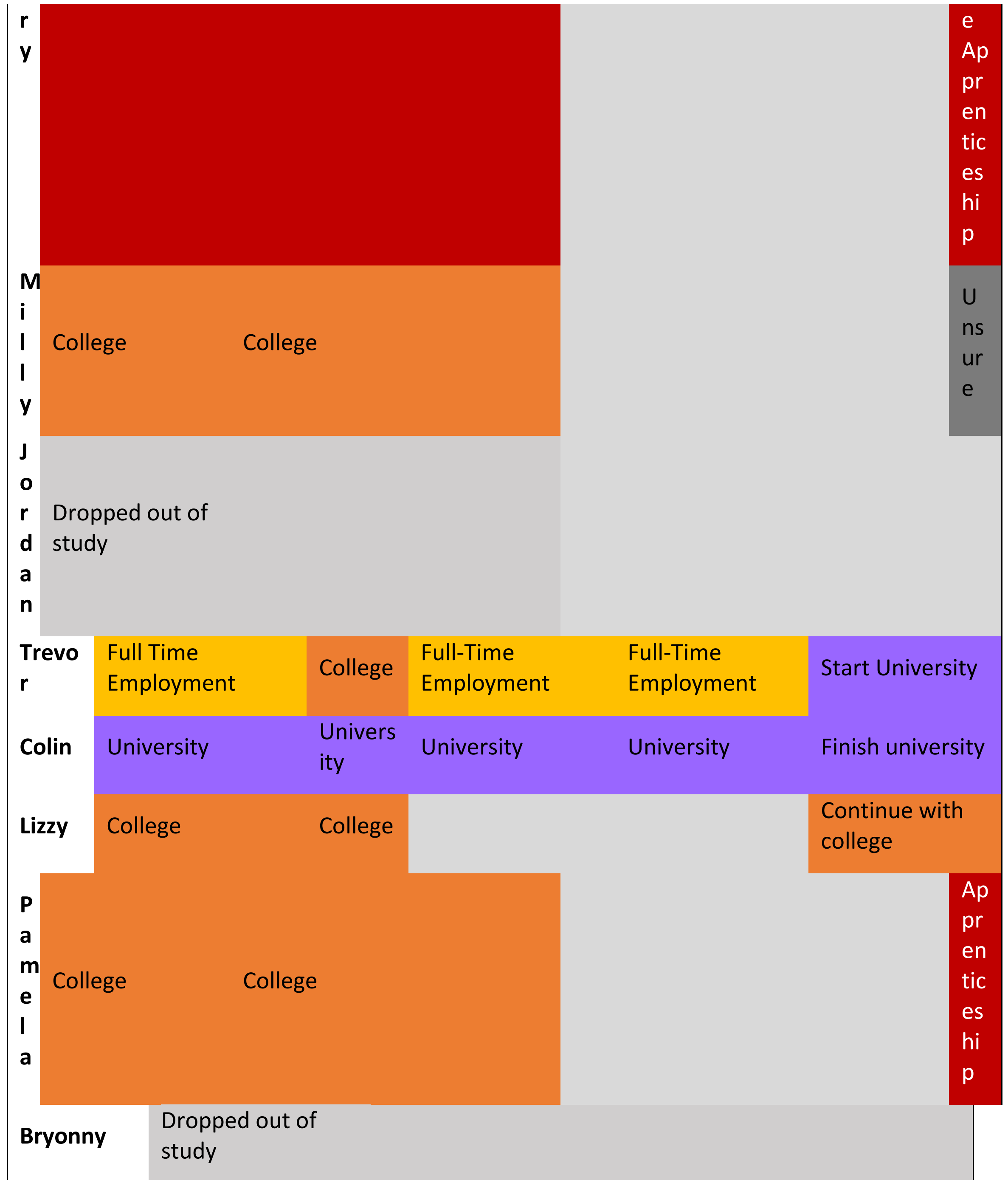
What a participant planned to do as their post-school destination and what happened sometimes matched but for other participants changed. Table 5 demonstrates the destination changes for participants over the time of the study. Of the participants remaining at the end of the interviews, six were pursuing the career they discussed in the initial interviews, four had made a change within six months of leaving school but from there had settled and were beginning to show signs of stability. A further three had made several changes and at the end of the interview two of these participants were still not clear on where their future career would take them.

The reasons for these choices and changes will be discussed fully below. By the end of the project two participants were at university with a further two participants that were applying/had applied to university and one other participant that was considering going back to college or university but had not yet applied.

Table 5: Participant Post-school Destinations

Participant	What happened 6months	What happened 1yr	What happened 18months	What happened 24months	Future Plans
Sarah	College	College	Full-Time Employment	Full-Time Employme-nt	Considering College/University
Tracey	Employment	Employment	University	University	Complete University
Steve	College	College	Apprenticesh-ip	Apprentice-ship	Complete Apprenticeship

Robert	College	College	College	College	Start University
Curtis	College	College	College	College	Continue with college
Felicity	Part-time employment	Part-time employment	Part-time employment	Apprentice-ship	Complete Apprenticeship
Zach	Part-time Employment	Volunteering	Dropped out of study	Dropped out of study	
Jack	College	College	College	College	Full-Time Employment
Har	Apprenticesh-ip	Apprenticesh-ip			Complet



7.3 The Development of the Themes

The themes were developed from the entire dataset. As discussed, separating the data into initial interview themes, six-month themes and so on led to an artificial splitting of the data as extracts from the final interviews in many cases built on the themes and theme components that had been constructed after the first set of interviews. Table 5 shows the total number of data extracts across at each interview wave. As expected there were more data extracts for the first

interview as it was longer than the subsequent follow up interviews (see Appendix X for table of interview lengths) and for the 18 month and 24 month interviews there was a smaller number of interviews.

Table 6: Coded Data Extracts

Interview Wave	**Number of Extracts**	**% Weighting of Data Extracts**	**Number of Interviews Composing Wave**
Initial Interviews (Wave 1)	5016	37.30	16
Six-month interviews (Wave 2)	2242	16.67	13
Twelve-month interviews (Wave 3)	2272	16.89	13
Eighteen-month interviews (Wave 4)	2238	16.64	9
Twenty-four-month interviews (Wave 5)	1680	12.49	9
Totals	13448	100% (discrepancies due to rounding)	60

7.3.1 Development of the Theme "University as a risky Investment"

After the first set of interviews the theme "University as a risky investment" was partially developed from relevant data extracts. This theme was strengthened with new data from subsequent interviews as participants reflected on their decisions and reasonings and whilst the weighting of data extracts mainly came from the first and six month interviews some components had more weighting of data extracts from subsequent interviews. For example, the element "parallel experience to university" in the first interviews was an opinion expressed by the participants that their alternative choice would provide them with the same benefits as going to university. As time progressed and they were living their plans they evidenced this component through their lived experiences. Another component of this theme was the "unique experience of university". This part of the theme did not become fully developed until the final set of interviews and became the component "university could be worth the risk". At the first set of interviews some participants were unsure about university and chose against it however over time their circumstances changed leading them to reconsider their decision about going.

7.3.2 Development of the "Theme Limitations and Manifestations of Personal Agency"

This theme was not fully completed until the final set of interviews and data extracts were taken from all stages of the interviews. This theme examined how the participants made their decisions within the context they lived in and the support and barriers they faced. One component of this theme was "the subtle nature of barriers". This component was built upon by data extract which evidenced the barriers participants face which at the initial interviews they were not always aware of or at least struggled to articulate them. For example, one participant during the course of the interview gained their autism diagnosis and another participant discussed at the eighteen-month interview how her parents were against her going to university. At the initial interviews "the

impact of covid" was considered as a stand-alone theme however this became a sub-theme of the above as whilst it had a degree of depth to the theme in terms of relevant data extracts, keeping it separate suggested that its impact could be separated out from the participants instead of the integral impact it had on their decision making. Even as a sub-theme it continued to develop over the course of the interviews as the lock-down lifted and restrictions changed, and participants returned to a sense of normality. In particular, the mental health impact element was developed in the 12–24-month interviews as participants reflected on their experiences as well as for those who had left school because of the pandemic and the impact on their mental health.

7.3.3 Development of the Theme Finding My Way

This theme was constructed from data extracts across the interviews but more weighted towards the 6 month and onwards interviews as it tracked the changes in participants plans and decisions. The component "decision making flexibility" was not constructed until the 6 month interviews as this reflected the participants' plans being actualised and that sometimes there was an element of compromise and plans not working in out. The "development and connection with skill set" was another component that started to develop at the six-month interviews and was not fully developed until the final interviews. It tracked how the participants developed their skill-set, the environment in which they did this and how they felt their skill set benefited them. The "gradual road to independence" was more weighted towards data extracts from the 6-month and 12 month interviews as this was the point where participants had left school and in some cases had moved away from home however there continued to be extracts from the 18 and 24 month interviews.

7.4 Reflection on Data Extracts Included in the Results

There is a variation in the number of data extracts that have been used in that some participants have been quoted several times and others not as many. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, two participants dropped out after the first interview and another participant after the second interview therefore

the number of extracts their interviews produced is less than participants who were interviewed five times. The same for the second cohort who were only interviewed three times. As discussed in the methodology the extracts were coded by intra and inter interview prevalence. That is a code may have been developed from a small number of the participants with multiple data extracts. Where other codes were developed from fewer extracts but across more participants. Finally, the data extracts provide examples of the component or theme being discussed and therefore have been picked to best illustrate the point, component, or theme in line with the qualitative nature of the research rather than providing a representative sample of the extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

7.5 The Nature of Career Decision Make: Some Important Reflections

At a simplistic level, based on the data, the career decisions of the participants can be broken down to the following components:

- What the participant was going to do
- Why they had made those choices
- How they participant made their decisions
- What the consequences of the decisions were

However, the process was complex and did not operate unidirectionally. Often there was some idea of the "what", which led to a research and decision-making process (the how) and then often back to a revision of the "what", which then allowed for the justification (the why). In addition, as participants were interviewed over a two-year period their justifications and influences flexed and changed within that time and sometimes a reason that was not discussed in the initial interview was presented further down the line.

It is also worth noting that whilst this study focussed on the reasons for not going to university, the participants focal point in their decision-making was not

necessarily around justifying why they were not going and for a few participants it had not even been considered an option.

It is also important to note that within a participant's narrative and across the cohort there were often seemingly conflicting narratives. Part of this conflict was that different participants took different strategies to make their decisions or were at different stages in their decision-making process. For example, a participant may have been actively exploring university but once their decision was made this exploration ceased. It was clear that participants viewed themselves as active agents in their decision-making process, even if that decision was not to do any further research. However, there was also an acknowledgement that their decision-making did not operate out of context of their environment and the support and barriers they came up against played a role in the decision-making. It is important to understand the processes behind these decisions and reasons for making them as this can aid understanding at an economic and educational policy level as well as for educational professionals involved in the transitions of school leavers.

The next section provides a more detailed analysis of the themes supported by key data extracts. The data extracts were 'cleaned' up for easier reading without detracting from the essence of the extract. This included removing repeated words unless they were essential to the quote. Missing words were inserted in brackets, to aid understanding. In addition, extracts containing names of places that could be perceived as identifying factors were removed a fictitious place name used instead.

7.6 Reflexive Thematic Analysis: Overview of the Key Themes

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews identified three overarching theme which encapsulated the different elements of the career decision-making process and the lived experiences of those decisions, as follows:

- ‘Manifestation and Bounds of Personal Agency in the Research Process’ (subthemes ‘COVID: uncertainty and disruption’ and ‘The rural dilemma’)
- ‘University as a Risky Investment’ (Sub-themes ‘University not the gold standard’ and ‘University could be worth the risk’)
- ‘Finding My Own Way’ (sub-theme ‘Active decision-making: a real choice’)

7.7 Theme 1: Manifestations and Bounds of Personal Agency in the Research Process

This section provides a detailed exploration of Theme 1. The core concept of this theme focused on how an individual exercised their personal agency and the sociological structures and context they operated within. This theme conceptualised how the individual was not making a choice in isolation but in conjugation with their key support network, geography, and broader circumstances. The key components of this theme as shown in Figure 7 were “The subtle nature of barriers”, “The intentional and accidental influence of others”, “Imperfect information” and “The rural dilemma”. The subtheme “COVID: Determination to see it through” was also explored.

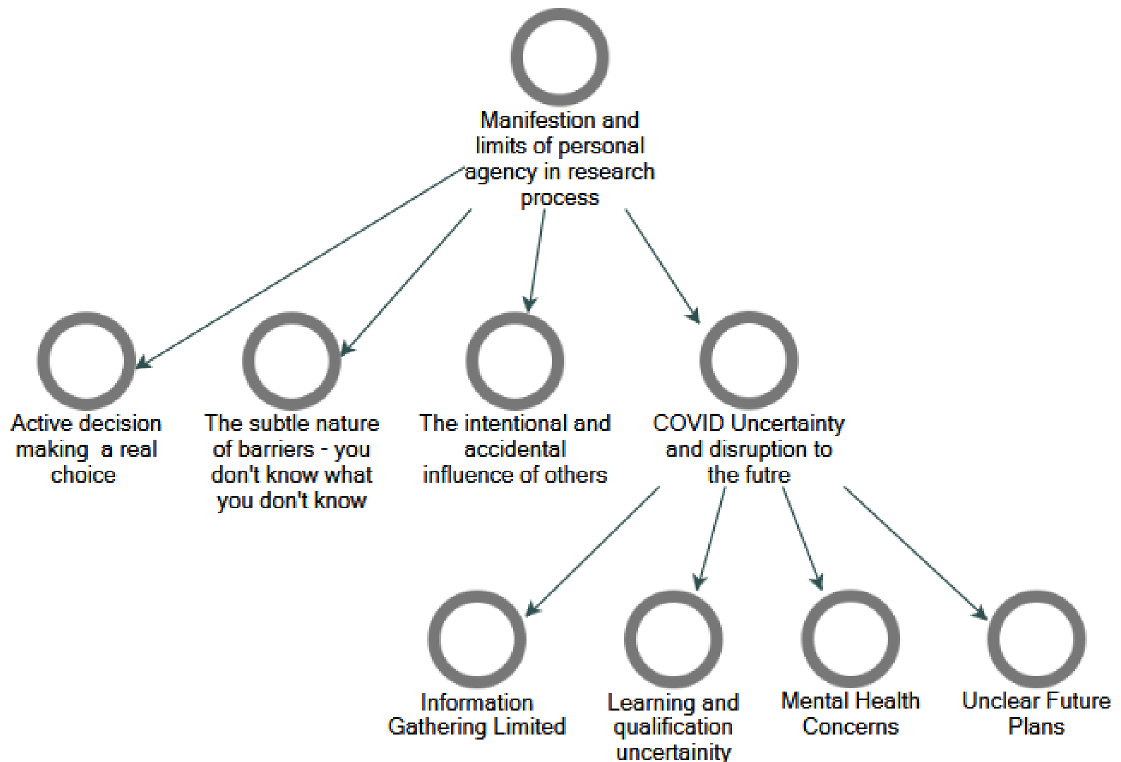


Figure 7: Theme 1 Manifestations and Bounds of Personal Agency

7.7.1.1 Imperfect Information

This component captured how the individuals engaged with and interpreted information sources and the value they gave to different forms of information. In addition, it showed that whilst they were making a decision informed by the information they had, sometimes this information was inaccurate or incomplete.

A key component of this theme was the way that individuals went about the research process for their post-school decision. It was clear that those that were considering university took an active role in the process of researching for university. They used different resources such as engagement with classroom learning, online resources (such as university websites) and wider networks to make an informed choice.

> *"So, I did a lot of research on how other people like Youtubers, I watched YouTube videos on student life on, so there's lots of different kind of YouTubers doing videos on it and stuff daily vlogs*

> *kind of thing and what they did during the day and how they coped with the different pressures that they found throughout the day. And then I would speak to one of my sister's friends as well" Trevor (Interview Wave 1).*

Trevor's quote shows that he was actively trying to find out what a university experience would really be like and not just looking at the benefits. Several participants discussed the benefit of using different resources to help them make their decision and whilst they spoke to others and got advice or guidance, they then spent time weighing up their options and maintained that the ultimate decision was theirs. However, there was a reliance on 'hot information' (Stark et al., 2022) such as the above-described YouTube videos and experiences of friends and family.

> *"So, my first idea was obviously to go straight to uni, but when my teacher mentioned about college and thought it might be very beneficial. And so, I went with that, and it's probably been the best choice. To be fair, I've really enjoyed it and I've got the most out of it" Robert (Interview Wave 1).*

This 'hot' information was not itself accurate or inaccurate but was more reflective of individual experiences and opinions and it was these vivid accounts that had the most influence on participants decision-making.

Whilst the impact of COVID will be discussed fully as its own sub-theme it is key to note here the direct impact COVID had on information gathering for the participants. Due to the onset of lock-down, participants in this study were limited in their research due to not being able to attend a university or college open day or other career events. For some participants this meant that they had never been to any open day, and this was a contributing factor to the decision-making process. What was also interesting was how little value some participants put on the role of open days as a way of finding out about what university might be like.

"I never went to any (open days) just because it wasn't, I wasn't really set on it, so I wasn't too bothered at a time to be honest" Trevor (Interview Wave 1).

Some participants had experienced open days, often as they had accompanied a friend. For those who were from a low socio-economic background they often found these open days intimidating, putting them off university.

"But I remember, I had gone tae an open day with school and they're like we don't give you any extra help we just do the lessons, and you need to do the rest. I don't like that" Felicity (Interview Wave 1).

There was a marked reluctance to research university as option once a participant had decided that they did not want to go to university. For some this had come after a lot of research but for others it had been ruled out at an early stage as "not for me". However, participants struggled to articulate why it was not for them and often admitted to not knowing much about university.

"Interviewer: Is university something that you considered at all?

Jordan: No

Interviewer: No, and what made it just not even be a consideration?

Jordan: I've never actually thought of it." (Interview Wave 1)

This is interesting as there seemed to be a split in the participants who felt they were being "pushed" towards university and those that seemed unaware that it was an option available to them. One explanation for this would be the level of qualifications that a participant was expecting to gain by the end of S6. There was a trend that those with four or more Highers and Advanced Highers were considered by the school as "university material" and defaulted into UCAS groups once in S6. However, for participants where they were doing their Highers over two sittings or were expected to achieve less Highers were not as encouraged to go to university by the school.

The qualifications required to get into university was an area of misinterpretation and confusion by some of the participants. Whilst many courses require four or more Highers at A and B passes there are a significant number of courses that do not have such high entry requirements and some articulation routes through college asking for two Highers (Gateway, 2022). Some participants seemed to be unaware of this and had written themselves off as not having the qualifications to go to university.

> *"Definitely feel the three Highers puts me at a kind of a limit to what I can apply for. Also, uni's expect at least four Highers by fifth year" Bryonny (Interview Wave 1).*

There was a high degree of assumed knowledge. Participants assumed the information they had was correct and there was little discussion with educational professionals and those supporting them checking that they understood different terms and processes involved in the research and application process. One participant reflected on their learning about university since leaving school.

> *"Well, I used to think it (university) was for smarter things like science, teaching, and things like that. But I only found out last week that there's like photography courses. I did'nae ken that was a course…the only kinda courses you hear aboot is English, maths, science. You don't really hear about the wee-ri yins. I think if I'd learned about them, then I had to have mair like more choices. Whereas all I heard about was the graphics and the art and the English" Felicity (Interview Wave 3).*

Their knowledge about university courses had come from visiting a friend studying at university and they discussed their frustrations of not knowing this information at the time they were considering whether to go to university. This assumed knowledge also extended to subjects they thought they needed, the sort of people that went to university and how they would be taught. This mainly affected those participants from a disadvantaged background. Whilst in some

cases there was a lack of awareness of what was not known in other cases participants were aware that their information was limited but struggled to find the correct information.

> *"Obviously, like friends and family are still trying to, like help me with it, but because we don't really have anyone that went through uni in my family. It's a bit more difficult" Robert (Interview Wave 5).*

This quote articulates that it is harder for someone who came from a background where no one had been to university to navigate the process. In the case of the participant above, after doing two years of college they decided to go to university and were determined to get there. However, for some this could be a barrier. Section 6.5.1.3 will talk about the range of barriers participants face.

7.7.1.2 The intentional and accidental influence of others

This component focussed on how the individuals used and interacted with other people in their context including family, school, and friends and how these interactions individually or collectively could impact on the participant's decision-making process. These influences could be perceived as positive or negative and, in some cases, there was a change over time in how these influences were perceived.

The participants in this study did not make their decisions in isolation. They sought out others to give advice and encouragement and sometimes received advice which they did not ask for. This component captures that balance between personal agency displayed by participants as they chose what advice to listen to and which was disregarded and who the participants felt were strong influences. This links strongly with the component "imperfect information" and "the subtle nature of barriers" as often it was the influencers that provided the information and if the support was lacking this became a barrier. Often this influence was supportive and helpful but not unanimously so.

Participants spoke about either school, friends or parents encouraging them towards choosing university as an option. The terminology used by participants

varied. One participant spoke of it as ‘encouragement’ to go to university where others discussed it being a ‘pressure’ or ‘an expectation’ to go to university. What was evident was there was a fine line between encouragement and pressure and how it was interpreted.

> *“They’re (the school) definitely encouraging university if I wanted to, they said I could like with my grades in that they said I could definitely go, and they said it is a really good experience and it would help later on in life” Steve (Interview Wave 1).*

There was a dialogue around pressure from friends in that their friends viewed not going as a waste of qualifications. In one participant’s case, this almost bordered onto a feeling of guilt, as they had friends studying hard to make university entry requirements where the participant had obtained the required qualifications but was not going.

> *“Because I have, I had qualifications they were trying to get and it was if I got them for nothing like that, they’re just sitting there but I'm not going. Like, somebody else could have them and they could get into uni, whereas as I've got them, I'm not using them” Felicity (Interview Wave 2).*

However, this view was not unanimous, as other participants felt their decision had always been respected by their friends and no one had ever challenged them about why they had not chosen university.

> *“No one’s really ever been like all you should definitely go or no, you shouldn't go there always just it's like with them. I've never been like “oh well why are you going to university?” They've never been like a “why are you not going?”, it's just like they've been like respected my choice as I’ve as I've respected theirs” Tracey (Interview Wave 2).*

Only a small number of participants had felt pressure from their parents to go to university. The narrative from most participants was that their parents would be supportive of their choice if they were doing something positive.

"They really, as long as I'm doing what I would want to do, as long as it's not within stupidity and being within reason that would be fine" Steve (Interview Wave 2).

One participant spoke about how his parents not going to university had an influence on his decision, showing that the support did not always need to be vocalised but occurred through actions and experience.

"Obviously, my parents didn't go to university and they're quite happy, so that's going to influence me to know that I don't need to go to university to be happy and be well off" Steve (Interview Wave 1).

In contrast, one participant spoke of her parents being actively against university.

"I think I've mentioned my parents are very, are quite anti uni. That was one of the one of the reasons I didn't go in the 1st place" Tracey (Interview Wave 3).

In the initial interviews, Tracey had discussed that she did not want to go to university as she felt there was no point when she was planning to join the police, however in subsequent interviews she revealed that this was her parents' perspective and that she did want to go to university. Aside from parents, some participants felt there was an expectation from the school that they should be going to university, and it was assumed that this would be the choice if the participant had the grades.

"Well, I've always been told right you go to uni, so I've never really thought about it. I've just been like, everyone says you're going, so you don't really, it's like school, like you go from P7 to first year, it just happens, and I've never really thought, wait like that is my decision. I can decide whether I go or whether I don't, and it wasnae until this year that I decided no, it's not for me" Felicity (Interview Wave 1).

Participants discussed how university was often held up as a “gold standard” with the view that it was the best option after leaving school.

> *“My parents, they suggested university from a young age to aspire to. I don't know, maybe it's like an expectation. Also school, expect, like not push it, but there's always like that kind of aspiration that after school you go to uni…especially even just walking around school there’s always like posters about unis everywhere and you always get emails like for after school what you might want to do and it's always kind of like unis and stuff like that so there's a lot of like influence through advertisement” Bryonny (Interview Wave 1).*

There was a feeling from participants of being second best, if you decided not to go to university.

> *“I think it's like a lot of people underestimate you like if you say you're doing an apprenticeship or something they think it's not any good” Colin (Interview Wave 2).*

Another participant felt that their choice was not viewed by the school as ‘good enough’ and as a result their decision was not being respected.

> *“Like if it's no up to, like, their (the school’s) standards of what you should be, it’s as if, like it doesn't matter it as much” Felicity (Interview Wave 1).*

For Felicity, this pressure made them more determined not to go to university.

> *“You feel pressured to go because everyone else is going. Like you just feel as if ‘cause everybody else is going, you need to go or it's your education’s led to nothing” Felicity (Interview Wave 1).*

However, two participants discussed that when they explained their reasoning to the school for not wanting to go to university, they then felt more supported in their decision.

> *"Int: You initially said that they (the school) were wanting you to go to university, but now they're supportive, so what's brought them round?*
>
> *Zach: I think it was 'cause they saw how like dedicated I was to doing this. They kind of realized that this is probably more important to do this first". (Interview Wave 2)*

Zach's narrative demonstrates that the choice for university is not binary. He was planning to do missionary work for two years and was then considering applying to university once this was completed. He felt taking this break from education and developing skills in a different environment would make him more successful if he did decide to go to university further down the line.

Whilst there were participants who felt pressured to go university in some way, some participants spoke of support for their choices. This was primarily from parents but also from teachers and friends.

> *"Mum's definitely just kinda saying like do what I want to do, don't feel pressured to go to uni by the school or anyone like" Trevor (Interview Wave 1).*

One participant differentiated between the 'school' as an institution and individual teachers. They saw the 'school' pushing individuals towards university, to make their targets where they viewed individual teachers as more supportive towards their decisions.

> *"I think at the end of the day its more the senior management in the school sort of pressuring pupil support to get us to go to uni, but pupil support are more or less saying do what you're happy with, that's what they mean. As long as you're happy" Colin (Interview Wave 1).*

Whilst some participants had felt pressured by the school others spoke of the support, they received from teachers to make decisions about their choices. This role of a professional going the extra mile was pivotal in many of the participants stories.

> *"She very much supports us through it makes sure that we've got a plan, and I've discussed about my options, and she could help me also guide my way like kind of choosing between college and uni" Bryonny (Interview Wave 1).*

Teachers were not the only source of support and guidance. Several participants discussed the benefit of speaking to their careers adviser and how it helped them decide.

> *Well, so the biggest influence would probably be the careers advisor. 'Cause I originally wasn't really sure whether I should stay on and try to apply to uni, or if I should like stay and then go to college or try and apply to uni this year or I wasn't really sure what I was going to do so I spoke to her and she so I told me about how you can go to college and there's all the same courses, just at a different level and whatnot. I thought it sounded just as good for me, so I've decided to go based on the conversation I had with her" Jack (Interview Wave 1).*

However, there was also some dialogue that not all pupils benefited from this 'extra' support and the feeling that the support could be unequally distributed both by teachers and career support offered.

> *"I was completely dismissed in sixth year. I didn't have a single careers advisor appointment where's my peers were getting multiple throughout the year. I don't have any guidance on that because I said I wanted to join the police. I didn't have any conversation okay what approach are you gonna take to that? And I don't have any conversations about my long-term goals or anything and these are*

conversations I'll literally I had with my boyfriend's family" Tracey (Interview Wave 3).

One participant spoke about how getting extra support from teachers was dependent on who their teachers had been and the relationship that had been formed with them.

"Like if ken that teacher and your like mair comfy with them you'll tend to ask for mair help than if you've never spoke to that person before in your life. So, if you're mair comfortable with somebody you'll be alright to ask for things, whereas if you've never been like if you don't know, speak to them. It's mair of a challenge, depending like who you are" Felicity (Wave 1).

The support offered by family, friends and the school extended beyond support for ideas and extended to guidance, advice, and practical support.

"I just feel like the amount of hours that the teachers are actually putting in towards helping us with this decision. Because if you're by yourself doing it, then I wouldn't have had a clue about how to apply or personal statements or anything like that. They have helped a lot" Robert (Interview Wave 1).

This support did not stop once a pupil had left school but continued in different formats as pupils widened their social network and made new connections and broadened their horizons.

"You do meet a lot of people and like just even taking in what they say about various things and various paths you might want to take it just it widens your choices massively. I've learned a lot more about various different things" Robert (Interview Wave 3).

Whilst over the course of the interviews participants discussed maturing and being better able to make autonomous decisions, they still also valued the input of others that they saw as being more experienced or respected.

> *“One of the guys I was working with, he kind of helped a lot with when I was trying to think of like, what I was kind of doing. And he's, he's one of the main reasons I actually applied for the (college) course…he was kinda saying (you) might as well do it like why keep doing the same thing and I'm still gonna have these thoughts in my head about ‘oh I could have done this, I could have done that’, whereas if I do this then it fills nine months, it gives me a qualification I can learn. Rather than just the practical side, I can learn actually why I'm doing a lot of things. I'm being told to do.” Trevor (Interview Wave 3).*

Whilst four participants were eligible for widening access due to SIMD decile, the impact it has was limited.

> *“At school, we had never the chance to do anything like that or similar. We took part in a top up programme with University of Glasgow however that was only to help your grades” Harry (Interview Wave 4).*

As the participants for the study were not choosing university it was beyond the scope of focus to fully assess widening access effectiveness and involvement with widening access programmes, however it is worth including in the results that the involvement seemed to have little impact on them and their decision-making.

The key conclusions here are that family, friends and educational professionals all played a key role in the decision-making process of the young person, whether this was practical support, advice or guidance or sharing of experience. Largely the participants felt supported, however as discussed, there were times where this support turned to pressure and in some instances was lacking.

7.7.1.3 The subtle nature of barriers

This component focused on the nature of barriers that an individual faced that made it more challenging for a participant to either research or access

university, as well as more broadly in their subsequent choices. Often these barriers were not articulated overtly by the individual until later interviews. It also encapsulated how individuals dealt with and overcame these barriers.

Some participants discussed that their qualifications acted as a barrier to getting into university. This links with the above reflections on imperfect information as for some of these participants their knowledge on entry requirements to university was not fully accurate. For other participants however, their level of qualifications limited the choices available to them at university, rather than being a complete barrier. So, whilst theoretically they could get into some courses, the courses available to them were either not of interest or not in a location that they wanted to attend.

> *"Well, my first option I wanted to be a crime scene investigator, but this was in like this was a few years ago would be that, but I just couldn't get grades for it cause of COVID" Pamela (Wave 3 Interview).*

For Pamela, rather than seeing what courses she could access at university with the grades she had, she decided not to go. The qualifications barrier extended to the subjects the participant had not just the level of qualification. Often this was a perceived barrier as it was believed by the participant that they needed a specific subject when in reality this was not an essential requirement for the course.

> *"Well, if I knew about the different courses, I feel like the different courses could lead to different careers and like a couple of years ago I did want to go into uni to do architecture like, all, I could see was that I needed to do physics. And I can't do physics so that automatically put me off but looking at it noo I didn't actually need physics and I could have went and done that" Felicity (Wave 4 Interview).*

Participants spoke about the lack of support they received once they had decided not to go to university, which in some cases made it more challenging to

pursue other options and impacted confidence. They discussed feeling like they had been forgotten about, second best and had to work out the other options for themselves.

> *"I think people…that were going off to university, they are getting loads and loads of support but because it wasn't like a thing that I wanted to do, and I just wanted to go to college and they just kind of like left you to your to your own and hope that you'd went" Milly (Wave 3 Interview).*

Another barrier that manifested not just at the school stage but also at college was that participants with disabilities struggled to navigate the system and get the support they required. For one participant this resulted in them leaving their college course.

> *"..it was simply that my lecturer and my learning development tutor just didn't know what they could and couldn't do, and they weren't, they didn't have the knowledge on ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and autism to be able to give me the correct support…but it started getting too stressful for both me and my lecture…I was constantly trying to explain to him that, you know, due to my disability, it's making me shut down, so I was really struggling with the motivation" Sarah (Wave 3 Interview).*

For this individual they received their official diagnosis whilst at college and discussed the difficulties they had experienced all through school because of not having the diagnosis. Concern with the learning environment was discussed by several participants. They spoke about issues with college and university courses they were undertaking. Some of this was partly due to the disruption caused by COVID which will be discussed further, however there was widespread discussion of disorganisation, impacting study and causing a reluctance to continue to the next stage of the course.

> *"And I'm also just thinking cause, it wasn't greatly, it wasn't, the organisation at the (college) isn't amazing and it might have, it might be changed by the time, next September rolls around, but I'm also a bit sceptical of going back and trying to do another year just because I didn't feel like it was very well managed. I didn't feel like I wanted to know, like, learned as much as I could have" Trevor (Wave 5 Interview).*

7.7.2 The Rural Dilemma

This section encapsulated how living rurally added an extra element of decision-making around the career decision-making narrative due to the limited HE options locally, from living in a rural part of Scotland. It also explored the complexity of the participants shifting and differing perceptions they had on living rurally.

7.7.2.1 Stay, Go, or Maybe Return

This component brought together the complex relationship the participants had with living rurally and the factors that impacted their decision as to whether to move away or stay locally after school. The narrative was not binary or permanent as many participants saw moving away as a phase in their life that suited their immediate situation but still held strong connections to their rural upbringing.

One such challenge was the limited availability of courses locally, therefore requiring participants to choose from locally available courses, consider commuting or moving away from the area.

> *"Well, obviously train would be the mode of transport to get to places. But seeing as it will be a full-time course. It wouldn't work really. Obviously, some people have made it work, but it would help if it was closer and there isn't many that do this course closer by. So,*

traveling one to two hours every day there and back, I don't think it would make much sense" Robert (Wave 1 Interview).

Robert highlighted that the time commitment required to commute would be unmanageable, essentially concluding that he had no option but to move away to access the course he wanted. One participant felt if they had been able to access a university course locally this could have made university a more viable option.

"Interviewer: If there was like a university more locally that that would have changed your mind at all about applying?

Steve: Possibly, yeah, there is obviously Anytown campus, but it doesn't offer a massive amount of something that I would be interested in. Yeah, I think if there maybe was a local one possibly." (Wave 1 Interview)

For some participants, the moving out, independence and social life was a pull towards going to university however for other participants it was a cause of uncertainty.

"'I'm not planning on staying in the village for all my life. But I don't want to leave right now…I don't feel too young to leave hame, I feel old enough that I could if that makes sense…but I just don't think I am ready" Felicity.

Whilst having mixed feelings about moving away may not be unique to someone living rurally, not having a viable option to stay at home and access a university locally makes the decision starker. In addition, many of the participants had not visited a university so the sense of unknown increased this sense of anxiety about moving away. This tied in with the participants' worries about what it would be like meeting and living with new people,

"Emm, I don't want to stay in student accommodation. You know, I've heard about people shoring accommodations. I've seen it. I've

been in some. I don't know. I'm quite, I'm so comfortable living at home that. I just. Moving into somewhere that's smaller, you know. It's you having to rely on other people to clean up after themselves where I know people will in my house. It's just it's not a stress." Tracey (Wave 5 Interview).

Another key reason for not wanting to move away was the family bonds and connections that participants described and the sense of community. Over the time of the interviews this bond remained strong for some participants, and they began constructing their careers around remaining locally and prioritising family and rural life over their career. They viewed that their career had to fit with their lifestyle and not the other way round.

"I'm really close to my family, so like I go and visit like I'm here every weekend, like at my mum's and we always like, she makes dinner and then she comes up to the to the flat and we have dinner together, you know, like it's I'm very, very close with them and it's something that if I was to move away I wouldn't be able to just like nip back for dinner or whatever it's just it's quite nice where I am" Lizzy (Wave 3 Interview).

For others, the desire to move away and gain more independence became stronger which links in with 'the gradual road to independence' which will be explored in section 6.7.2. As with all the decisions there were shades of grey rather than clear dichotomies of choice. To say the decision that participants made was to leave or stay would be too simplistic.

Linked to the concept of family bonds, was how the participants conceptualised rural life and how this concept changed over time. For some participants there was concern over the busyness of the city.

"I'd prefer a small village or something like that… I'm just not really a fan of like having been so close. I like, like going like walks and

stuff and it's more just kind of urban. You can't really get any kind of privacy." Curtis (Wave 5 Interview).

Curtis demonstrates how he valued the space and the privacy of living rurally. An aspect to this theme which developed over time was how participants who moved way developed a narrative based on the excitement of urban life and re-framed the peacefulness of rural living as "boring".

"It's a lot quieter and the longer I'm up here the less time I can spend down there without just be being totally bored cause you know it's such a small town and compared to Glasgow, which is like, you know, the biggest in the country" Jack (Wave 4 Interview).

This conceptualisation did not just extend to the idea of the social benefits of living in an urban area, but also the opportunities that this potentially afforded.

"But right now, I think being young and still kind of growing as a person and figuring out life and my career choices, and education choices being all over the place the city is the perfect place to be, it's busy it's hopeful it's fresh and it's constantly changing" Sarah (Wave 5 Interview).

This demonstrates an interesting dynamic with the relationship the participants had with moving from a rural location and how some participants viewed themselves as having 'outgrown' rural life.

Whilst some were fully content with their decision to stay locally, some participants were more conflicted. They could articulate the benefits of their choices but simultaneously discussed feeling left behind.

"I do miss being with my friends and I do wish I was in a city, but I can't outweigh the positives with the negatives. I think to me there's more negatives 'cause the I was speaking to one of my friends and the cost of it all. He says it's unbelievable and the amount of studying they have as well" Steve (Wave 3 Interview).

For some this feeling of being left behind led them towards action and to put a plan in place to move out, where for others their decision to stay remained constant.

7.7.2.2 Transport Challenges

This component focused on how the lack of public transport impacted the participants and their choices and had a bigger impact on those who stayed rurally. Transport challenges were a key issue for many of the participants who chose to stay even when accessing local opportunities.

> *"Unfortunately, they took off the direct bus to the college, so when I'm staying in one place its two buses and if I'm staying at another place, it's three buses. I'm currently staying at my flat with my sister and when I stay there it's two buses. It takes about an hour and a half, but when I stay at my mums it takes about two hours and a bit." Milly (Wave 3 Interview)*

Some participants were able to negotiate lifts to college or lived on a direct bus route while others had to wait until they could learn to drive and be able to travel independently. One participant who was trying to commute to Glasgow discussed the challenges she faced.

> *"But I feel like maybe if I was at, you know about university. "Do you wanna go for lunch after class? Or do you want to stay and look over this?' But I have to think about my train times home. I have to think about what time I'm traveling on the motorway as well 'cause I hate being caught in rush hour traffic. And there's nothing worse when I'm up at 6:00 AM to travel up and then travel back down and I'm in rush hour traffic. And so, I'm sort of missing out on that". Tracey (Wave 5 Interview)*

Tracey discussed the time and the stress that commuting caused especially if there was a delay that extended her commute time. In addition, she spoke about the cost of commuting, and how she felt she was missing many aspects of the

university experience. She discussed how she missed out on the social side as she would need to leave to get home. In addition, she also missed out on academic learning as she felt it was not worth a 3-4hr commute if she only had one tutorial that day.

In summary, some of the concerns around moving out were unique to the rural context the participants lived in, where some were concerns and anxieties many students have about leaving home, however both were interlinked. Concurrently other participants relished the idea to move away and experience city life.

7.7.3 COVID Uncertainty and Disruption

It became clear early in the analysis that a sub-theme affecting all participants was centred around the global pandemic of COVID-19. As the interviews took place between Jan 2021-February 2023, they paralleled the second lockdown and subsequent emergence from COVID. The components were dynamic in nature and captured an extremely specific phase in time.

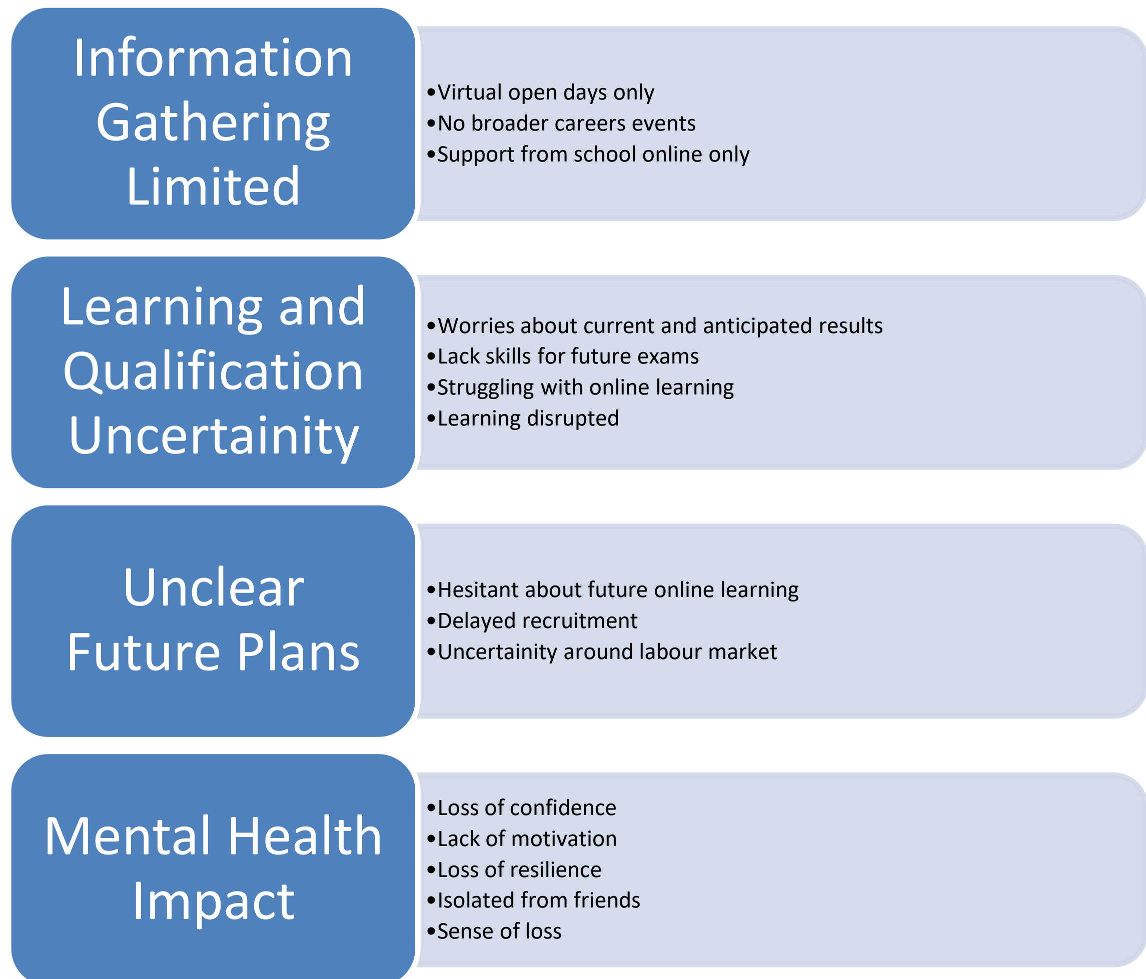


Figure 8: Strands of Impact from COVID 19

There were four aspects to the way this component manifested itself in the context of career decision-making (Figure 8). Three of these aspects (“information gathering limited,” “learning and qualification uncertainty” and “future decisions affected”) were centred on practical elements of the decision-making process that were affected by COVID. The uncertainty around these then fed into the “mental health impact” where participants discussed how they felt COVID had a negative impact on their mental health.

7.7.3.1 Information Gathering Limited

The lock-down in March 2020 and further lockdown in early 2021 resulted in the cancellation of open days and careers events. This meant several participants had not had the chance to access open days and find out more about university

through physically attending and had to rely on virtual open-days and online information.

> *“Obviously, I was hoping to be able to attend the open days and talk to people properly instead of just attending an online, online conference video. But yeah, it means that you don't travel to these places, and obviously you wouldn't want to moment. And but yeah, like. Obviously if it's in person, it makes it easier to talk to someone one to one rather than on a screen” Robert (Wave 1 Interview).*

This information gathering extended beyond just open days but to broader careers events, which also had been cancelled due to COVID.

> *“Before COVID we used to have open evenings and stuff and careers evenings and there would be like a wide variety, it would be very varied like the Royal Navy, the armed forces and there’d be like quantity surveyors. That sort of stuff and police, builders, electricians, local companies and then further afield as well” Colin (Wave 1 Interview).*

It is hard to assess, had the participants been able to access these events whether this would have had an impact on their decision to access university. However, many of the participants had not visited a university before so not being able to visit acted as a deterrent to going as it was considered an ‘unknown’. This links with the “rural dilemma” as even before lockdown the limited university provision within the region meant universities were “hidden” and unfamiliar to many participants, especially those from a disadvantaged background.

Finally, participants talked about how support for completing UCAS forms and other learning related to leaving school was disrupted due to the closure of schools. Therefore, pupils were often having to rely solely on information put up on TEAMS. This was dependent on the school as to how much information was

communicated this way. By the time of the final interviews, COVID restrictions had lifted and participants were able to fully access information and resources.

7.7.3.2 Learning and Qualification Uncertainty

This component captured the disruption and concerns due to the cancellation of exams and the impact this had on the participants who were planning their post-school transitions. It also explores the longer-term consequences of learning from home and disruption to learning.

Twelve of the sixteen participants expressed that COVID-19 had an impact on their qualifications. This manifested itself in two ways. Firstly, participants spoke of the cancellation of exams having given them a result that they were not expecting.

> *"…because we don't get to exams did we, I think I did I get the best that could have gone, but I was quite upset about the D in higher Biology because I knew if I'd been able to sit the exam then it would have been completely different" Tracey (Wave 1 Interview).*

The results were not always worse than expected, some participants felt that with some subjects, having the exams cancelled benefited them.

> *"I definitely feel like I wouldn't have done as good in music. I definitely feel like I maybe would have only gotten a C because we'd only done the practical exams, we hadn't quite done the theory side of it…I definitely feel like that because they had to do it with evidence it definitely boosted my level a little bit" Sarah (Wave 1 Interview).*

Secondly, participants felt that COVID-19 would also have an impact on future qualifications as having missed two years of exams they would lack the skills and confidence in an exam situation in the future.

"…structure and being organised and (I) haven't had the pressure for like revising for exams and having the pressure of organizing yourself for exams" Bryonny (Wave 1 Interview).

One participant who ultimately chose to go to university discussed the difficulties in adapting to exams after COVID.

"I feel like there's more added pressure within that, I understand, you know, you can do open book and stuff online, but the in person (exams), you're not in a comfortable environment, in my opinion" Colin (Wave 5 Interview).

The dialogue from them was that they needed time to adapt but also discussed a view that exams were not the best way to assess learning. Other participants discussed how the lockdowns and subsequent isolation restriction continued to impact their assessments beyond school and into college, often due to staff absence.

"Well, it has had a bigger impact on the college…because my tutor was in close contact…So we were off a week because he couldn't come into college. So, we missed that week and then the next week he tested positive. So that was 10 days. So that was another two weeks that we'd missed and then the block changed so we weren't doing that class anymore and we hadn't actually finished the assessments. So, we've still to do them so it's a little bit worrying that and then the other week he was still ill from having COVID, so we missed a couple classes again. So, we are a bit behind, I think it's definitely had an impact" Steve (Wave 3).

Another way that learning was affected was the isolated nature of online and subsequent socially distanced learning. Participants discussed it being harder to access support from tutors but also learning from peers.

"Because it was kind of near the end. So, we didn't really get to do anything. So we used to have like activities where in the last couple

of days we never go do that, online courses didn't really work well because it was barely anything, you didn't get to your friends or anything like that." Curtis (Wave 5 Interview).

By the end of the interviews, restrictions had been completely removed and learning had gone back to a much closer format of what it was like pre-COVID. However, participants spoke of a legacy of COVID learning with options for hybrid learning. This was generally viewed positively by participants.

"I think it's mainly the flexibility and like the travelling and I've just like I've never been a huge fan of being in person, just I prefer to be like in the comfort of my own home with my little online course and my laptop" Milly (Wave 3 Interview).

7.7.3.3 Future Decisions Affected

This component focused on how participants tried to navigate their post-school plans when recruitment was being delayed and there was the concern of online learning for university and college. It also captured the experiences of the participants as they made these decisions and transitions.

COVID-19 had an impact on the participants future decisions. For one participant, the potential of having to learn remotely and not have a social side to the degree was a key factor when balancing out the pros and cons of going to university.

"Yeah, definitely taken uni, like more out of the options I have. Even before I was kind of not too sure about where I wanted to go and then since that happened (COVID-19) there was a definite wipe on it, just could not getting the full experience at all really" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).

The conclusion this participant made was that his primary reason for going to university was for the social aspect not the study. Therefore, as COVID had eliminated the social element this made the decision not to go easier. However,

COVID at the time, was having an impact on recruitment for apprenticeships, with delays and pauses on applications, making it harder to find paid opportunities.

> *“After that, I'm hoping to apply for well I'm in the application process for the Merchant Navy for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. So that would be starting in June, because of COVID its now being pushed back to October” Trevor (Wave 2 Interview).*

Other participants also spoke of the pause in recruitment of many companies and the uncertainty it had through into their decision-making, pushing them either to stay on at school or consider more education rather than an apprenticeship or employment.

> *“It depends on what jobs are like closer to the time for me to make that decision but if I see that there’s not a lot of jobs at this moment because things are just sort of picking back up after COVID” Jack (Wave 2 Interview).*

There was a feeling that the uncertainty and closure of schools had made some participants feel less confident about themselves and their future.

> *“I was about to just about to apply (to university) and we got put into the next lock down and it really like knocked my confidence from it. So, I definitely think it's impacted on me and my choices 'cause I feel like I almost am not ready enough for it” Bryonny (Wave 1 Interview).*

COVID continued to be a factor in the decision-making process of many of the participants throughout the interviews. Colin discussed why he was thinking about leaving his course.

> *“…I was saying earlier, like the second semester course (I) had problems with a certain part of the course. It was the labs that I had the problem with. I've not done labs for. I think the last time I did a lab was when I was in 3rd year…not really been able to do them*

because of COVID and it's been. Sort of I've pushed back, you know. So, we're not like and that's one thing I said to him, you know, like we've not done labs for, for years because of COVID, you know, and then it is thrown in the deep end and that sort of stuff." Colin (Wave 4 Interview).

For some participants, there was also consideration about the type of job they wanted to be "future proof" should a similar event occur in the future.

"Especially with, like, the pandemic. That's another thing that worried me. Like, I don't want ever to, you know, not work for a certain amount of months or be let off (made redundant) or something like that because of the pandemic…I shouldn't have to think about that. But that's obviously something people have to think about nowadays with work. And. so that was another thing that sort of drove me towards marketing" Tracey (Interview Wave 5).

The conclusions are that COVID affected not just the immediate decisions and plans of young people due to cancellations and delays but has also had an impact on longer term future planning.

7.7.3.4 Mental Health Concerns

This component explores how the other three components contributed negatively to participants mental health and how this impacted the participants in a career context. It also encapsulates how participants viewed this as a lasting effect of the pandemic. This was partly from being isolated from friends and not being able to socialise.

"I was very unhappy like in COVID times in that like not being able to see friends in that. So, it was quite hard" Pamela (Interview Wave 3).

Another reason was due to the uncertainty surrounding their decisions and future and what learning and working might look like.

"...like I wasn't doing that great and it like start to stress me out" Lizzy (Interview Wave 2).

Participants spoke about their experiences of learning online and for most they found this a negative experience which affected their motivation and confidence.

"Umm it was really hard to study at home 'cause you've got to like kind of motivate yourself and like all the work comes through slower. And sometimes the Wi-Fi didn't work, which was really annoying" Milly (Interview Wave 1)..

Generally, participants found learning online disruptive due to not being able to find a quiet space to study, not having the right technology as well as poor internet connections, due to rural location and slower broadband speeds. This led to the frustration and a drop in motivation.

Even when schools re-opened the participants talked about not enjoying their final year, due to ongoing restrictions. This had in some cases resulted in them leaving school and not completing exams, thereby limiting university choices, and not having the support from the school to complete UCAS or college applications.

"I missed being in school because obviously my 6th year was terrible. I really didn't enjoy 6th year because it was after COVID" Tracey (Interview Wave 5)..

This component became more prevalent over the course of the interviews as more participants spoke of how they felt during COVID and when they reflected on the initial lockdowns. There was a feeling that socialisation and development had been stalled and after the emergence from lock down some participants struggled to adjust to being back in a social situation.

"A lot of students have also said to me that they still feel like they're pre-COVID age. Like a lot of students feel like they haven't had that

> *opportunity to mature and be a grown up, and yet they're kind of being thrown into society and being told like be a 20-year-old and they're like, I still feel 16. I still feel like 17 like this doesn't make sense. So yeah, it just feels like a domino effect" Sarah ((Interview Wave 4).*

There was a sense that the participants had missed an important part of their lives which they would never get back.

> *"Quite annoying because my sixth year, we didn't really have yin because of COVID, we never had prom. We never really got work experience, classes were no cut short, but they were nae as gid as what they could have been" Felicity (Interview Wave 3).*

What was clear was that COVID impacted the participants mental health in different ways and the impact of this was still being talked about by participants even after restrictions had ended.

7.8 Theme 2: University as a Risky Investment

The risk associated with university was a clear theme that was identified during the analysis and components of this theme and associated subthemes are indicated in Figure 9. There were concerns around accumulating debt and pressures from working and studying concurrently, concerns around enjoying degree level study, the risk of failure as well as the uncertainty of securing employment after spending four years studying. This was balanced by what participants saw as safer options such as an apprenticeship. This theme built over the two years of interviews and remained relevant although for some students this manifested as university being worth the risk.

The finance, interest and time were viewed as the input or investment and the indicators of success were job prospects, enjoyment of university, social connections, and degree completion. The risk factors were therefore:

- Risk of failure; academic and social failure
- Risk of not enjoying university
- Risk of underemployment
- Financial risk

When the risks outweighed the perceived benefits university was not chosen. However, these risk factors changed over time so whilst the initial decision might have been to not go to university sometimes this decision changed.

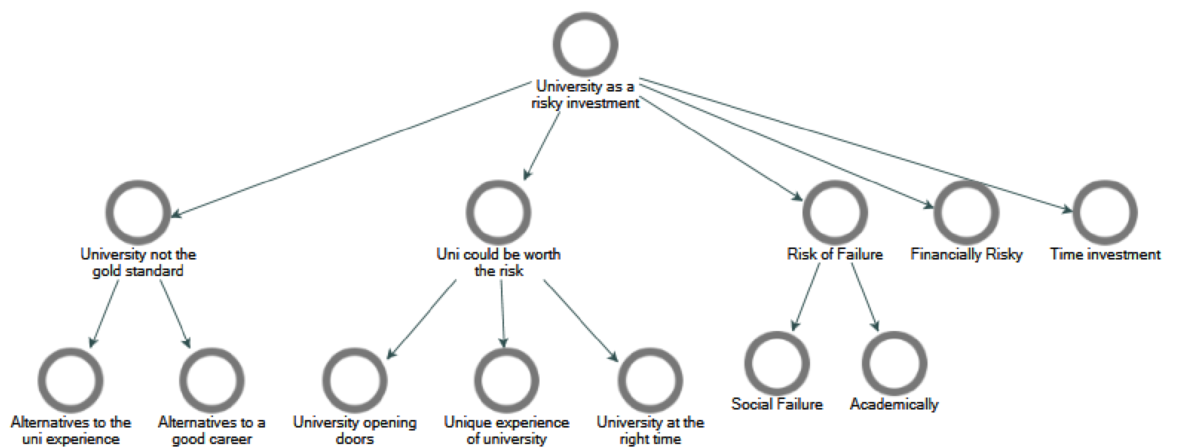


Figure 9: University as a Risky Investment

7.8.1.1 Financially Risky

This component focused on participants worries about affording university and their aversion to getting into debt. Finance was not the sole reason for deciding against university for any participant, but it was a contributing factor that counted against university, especially those from a disadvantaged background. Participants saw university as expensive and were reluctant to take out a student loan. They also had concerns about the financial pressures that working and studying would put them under. Some of the attitude around debt came from family views or limited information on the student loan system which links to the concept ‘imperfect information’ and the reliance on ‘hot’ information.

Although Scottish domiciled students do not pay tuition fees (Students Award Agency Scotland, 2022) there are still living costs to consider. There was a

general view held that university was expensive, and this view had largely been formed through anecdotal accounts of people they knew already at university combined with commonly held views of university. However, some spoke of information from school and parents.

> *"We touched on it a little bit in school. They kind of forget about that bit, we don't really explore that bit and so just come as a bit of a shock when you do start reading through and obviously coming to like the cost. If you are, even if you want to move out and move into halls and stuff like the finances is actually quite well becoming increasingly more expensive" Bryonny (Interview Wave 1).*

How much research a participant had done into the finance of university depended on how far down the process they had gone in considering university as an option and to some extent the school they attended. Some participants spoke of receiving information around finances where others had not or could not remember getting any. In addition, the terminology the participants used to describe the cost of university was often vague such as "it's costly," "it's expensive" rather than having a clear understanding of the cost through having sat down and budgeted. Whilst all participants were aware that student finance was an option as a way of affording university, not all understood that tuition fees in Scotland were waived.

There was a mix of attitudes towards taking out a student loan and accumulating debt. Most participants felt taking a student loan would be a necessity if they were to go to university and concerns were voiced as to how long it would take to pay back.

> *"I don't know what I want to do and I didn't when I left school. So I think for me to connect to a four year university degree where I don't know what I'm gonna like it. And another thing for me is I don't really. If in my case I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I didn't view the cost (of taking a loan) is worth it." Steve (Interview Wave 4).*

Several participants saw it as something negative that should be avoided. These participants largely came from a more financially constrained background.

> *"Like my papa, he kens what he's daeing with his money and he's always told me never get into debt. So, I feel like taking a student loan is getting into debt and I don't know something about that I just. I don't like it" Felicity (Interview Wave 1).*

However, it is important to note here that whilst university was seen as financially risky for many of the participants this view was not unanimous nor the only reason for deciding against university at this stage. One participant classed a student loan as a 'good debt,' seeing it as an investment to a better career, although they still voiced concerns about having a debt.

> *"So, it's a low interest rate, I understand that it's a good debt, but it's still a debt, and that's sort of what the downside to it is. I mean we've had meetings and stuff with finance people at school and they say it's a good debt…but I see debt as a bad thing. It's not a bad thing it's a negative thing, so… a good debt, that is things like, that help you progress in life like um, help you, like mature, I think that's what they said" Colin (Interview Wave 1).*

Those participants that were more comfortable with finance were the ones who understood how a loan worked, were not from a deprived background or had worked and had some savings behind them.

> *"If given the option, I'd rather not be paying student loans off but if I am obviously what I keep them like as low as possible. But it's not something that I'm overly worried about as student loans" Jack (Interview Wave 5).*

The discussion around having savings gave participants a sense of autonomy, safety, and independence and took an element away from the decision-making. The other reason for being more comfortable with debt was having parents who

had discussed finances with them, which links to the theme "the intentional and accidental role of others."

> *"Interviewer: And what was your parents' point of view on that (student loan)?*
>
> *Colin: Well, they just said about how almost every single person who goes to uni and college. They will need to take out a loan because obviously if you did pay for it yourself then you still got factor in the idea that you've got to live at the same time, you need to feed yourself and pay for books, equipment. So, it yeah it would just be, they've changed my mind about it." (Wave 2 Interview)*

Also, it is worth noting that some participants were continuing to college away from home, so were taking a student loan evidencing that the varying factors had different weightings for different individuals. However, linking to SES only one of the participants from the higher levels of deprivation chose to take out a loan and move away from home to pursue college. This demonstrated a change in attitude towards debt.

> *"I remember six months ago I said I would never take out a student loan. I'm pretty sure, yeah, that's a lie. I ended up taking out student loan. I ended up 'cause I didn't realize there was multiple kinds of student loans." Sarah (Wave 2 Interview)*

Sarah had initially been reluctant to take out a student loan as she had viewed debt as "bad" but had been working with an organisation that had changed her opinion on student finance and explained how it worked. This example demonstrates the influential power of organisations working with students.

However, the attitude to debt for some participants changed from acceptance to wariness. Another student from a low SES who had initially discussed being ok with taking out a loan to go to university, had decided to take an apprenticeship and discussed his concerns about whether university would be worth the debt.

> *"And I just kept thinking like, ohh, I'd get like in ten years to come I've got this, like student loan to pay you back later for to get yin. Is it really going to be worth it or can a dae something like 'cause I think I went to uni I'd have probably gone oot and have done something similar to what I would be doing the noo" Harry (Wave 2 Interview).*

Once again, the knowledge on how student loans operated was often vague and other than the one participant who had been advised it was a 'good debt', no participant talked about it as investment to a better career or a way of enabling participation in university. The perception generally held, was that a student loan was a negative aspect of university participation and contributed as a reason not to go.

Several participants spoke of the need to get a job to supplement the student loan and allow for a decent standard of living. This implied that they felt the amount of the student loan was not a high enough rate to live off. Participants highlighted this need to work as an additional pressure they would rather not have and the potential effect it could have on their studies.

> *"My sister was doing that a lot (working whilst studying), but then that had a detrimental effect on her studies" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).*

> *"It's definitely a lot harder than it was like when I started two years ago when I started, and it was harder for me to get a job then because I was only 16 and couldn't work in pubs or bars. So, I was doing waitering for a couple months on and off somewhere, then leave for a bit, then do another couple months or whatever it was." Jack (Wave 5 Interview).*

Financial pressure also extended to the perception, for two participants, that, as they would have taken out a student loan there was a need to be successful at

university. In this case success was defined as enjoyment of the course and successful completion of the degree.

> *"If I was different, I probably would have gone to University because, the debt really, the only thing about the debt it was that I couldn't justify not enjoying it" Steve (Wave 1 Interview).*

7.8.1.2 Time Investment

This component focused on the worry that participants had that they would be stuck doing something they did not enjoy for four years and the worry of investing that time to uncertain prospects at the end of the degree.

Four participants specifically spoke of the length of the degree being a deterring factor. Another three participants had concerns around the time investment, through the linked elements highlighted below, but did not specifically articulate the length of the degree. More specifically participants voiced a concern that after completion of their studies they would not get a job that would merit the effort of a degree after graduation. There was concern they would either end up underemployed or unemployed.

> *"I know quite a lot of folk that have been through uni, like finished it then cannae get a job through it whereas an apprenticeship. Well, you've basically got a job, at the end of it" Felicity (Wave 4 Interview).*

In some cases, this viewpoint had been shaped through friends or family members experience of university and their struggle to find employment, which links in with the role of "imperfect information" and specifically the bias towards 'hot' information.

> *"Some of her friends and she's talked to me about it, how they've done this big, hard, sounds like a very, very, hard course, difficult course that would get you something, and they've put a lot of effort for the last four years and they're now just working in a supermarket*

or something. Not that it's a bad job, but like they're not using the degree for anything, job wise" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).

It was clear for these participants that university would have been a means to an end rather than an ends in itself as they felt the experience of university was not enough to warrant the monetary cost. For some participants there was awareness of the relevance of the subject chosen to study at university, highlighting that some subjects it would be easier to get a job than others and that some careers had the potential to earn more money than others. However, no mention was made to university selectivity and its relation to career opportunities.

"It would probably be a waste of four years to be honest because I dae feel as if I would just come out and dae something like what I'm daeing the noo." Harry (Interview Wave 3).

There were two reasons participants gave for their perspective that employment may be hard to secure. One, was that the subject area being studied was specialist and only a small number of jobs available in that area. The second reason was that so many people had a degree that there was more competition for jobs.

"I've got friends that are going to the conservatoire, and I think things like music and stuff it's quite hard to get a career in that sort of stuff. I think it's quite a small field unless you're going into something like teaching, then maybe it's a lot easier… then I've got some that wanted to do music that aren't as talented and they don't want to go into teaching, but I think that in my opinion their gonna struggle to get a job when they're graduating so yeah, that's what the big problem is" Colin (Wave 1 Interview).

Linked to the concerns around job prospects and debt were concerns about enjoying university. The enjoyment was mostly focussed on the enjoyment and interest of the subject chosen.

"I don't really want to start a course and then find out it's something that I'm not well, not what I thought or it's not, I'm not as interested in it as originally thought I would be and then find I'm two years into the course and I'm not enjoying what I'm doing and I'm stuck there for another two years" Jack (Wave 2 Interview).

The feeling for this participant is that they would be stuck for four years as to drop out of university would mean leaving with nothing to show for the time they had invested in a degree. Another participant also expressed the concern around enjoyment of the subject and that if they did not enjoy it, they would have a degree that they felt would be in effect useless.

"And then at the end of four years and or if you spend maybe three years on this course, and then you decide when you're not enjoying it, then that's three years that you've kind of just not, you'll have something to show for it, but it's not where you maybe wanted to do for them. That's why I was kind of scared of that. I put in that time and effort to realise it's not what I want to do" Trevor (Wave 1).

This perspective reinforces the idea that the participant viewed the degree as being a means to an end and that the risk of the investment extends beyond finance. It also suggests a focus on the subject studied rather than the skills developed within the degree. Although not explicitly discussed by many participants the concern over enjoyment was a euphemism for a concern around failing or dropping out of university. For some participants, the dialogue was that if they thought they would enjoy it then that would justify going in terms of time and money invested where others felt enjoyment was not a good enough reason to get into debt.

"Whereas if I enjoyed it and had the debt it would be worth it because I would be enjoying what I'm doing" Steve (Wave 1 Interview).

For some participants it was the broader idea of university itself that was a significant deterrent to the prospect of going to university. This was expressed as a reluctance to stay in education for another four years.

> *"And I feel like it is, but for me I don't like. I know what I know for a fact. Like if I don't get a job in that in that sector then. I'd just I'd I'd feel like I wasted four years studying and for no reason." Tracey (Wave 4 Interview).*

The dialogue for the participants who had discussed not enjoying education as a reason for not choosing university was different to the participants who had concerns around liking the chosen subject of study at university. The reason being that the latter group of participants were weighing up university as a type of a cost-benefit analysis and expressed their view using terms such as "unsure" or "uncertain" suggesting that if they were confident, they would enjoy the subject this would be added to the 'benefits' side of their decision-making. In comparison the participants who expressed a dislike for higher or more education spoke in very adamant terms about university not being for them suggesting that their decision was framed through their identity and personality and homogenously grouping all education into the same category.

> *"I think really the biggest part of it was that I didn't really enjoy school really. It wasn't really school it was more the fact of the study in the exams the constant pressure of learning. There's obviously no one can change the way that I am, that I don't enjoy school" Steve (Wave 1).*

This decision-making stage was often characterised by an element of pressure to decide, especially if peers already had a plan in place.

> *"Well, some people have asked in S4 for even when we're first deciding what subjects to take. Some people are like, well, I need this this, this, and this and that will get me eventually into university…they've got a plan set up already. Look at what they need,*

> *but for others obviously like you just don't know what you want to do" Robert (Wave 1 Interview).*

This uncertainty often then manifested itself as putting off the decision to go to university with the justification that it would always be there if they chose to go down that route.

7.8.1.3 Risk of Failure

Another aspect to risk, was the risk of failure. This manifested itself as social failure or academic failure.

> *"You're putting yourself through four years of work and commit…you are committing to get results that you want. And if not then worse case, you get chucked out" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).*

Participants planning to go to college discussed how the courses were one-year long, so this was perceived as a less of risky investment, in that if they did drop out the loss of time and money was less. In contrast, university was seen as more of an 'all or nothing' decision.

> *"Depending how long the course of because I don't really want to spend my mid 20s in university still. I want to get on with work." Curtis (Interview Wave 4)*

The implication here was that several participants were not confident in their ability to succeed at university. This was expressed in terms of how they perceived learning at university.

> *"I could easily be at the bottom with the class and until I start building upon them skills. It might also mean that I have to work extremely hard for like, even going after hours and get an extra tuition on the side to just try and pass it" Robert (Interview Wave 1).*

Specifically, the workload, the participants learning style and the independent learning were cited as barriers. Participants discussed having learning styles that did not suit university. For one participant, it was that they were a hands-on learner and for another it was that they identified success at school due to being good at memorising information and having teachers keeping them motivated.

> *"It was really sort of to do with the content of the course and the course being a somethings that's, there's a lot more theory work, because it's a university course there is a lot more theory, sort of written down and, you know, writing essays and all that kind of thing rather than what it would have been in college, where it's like, yeah, you'll do an essay every now and Umm. then. And like you know, a few written segments every couple of weeks, but really, it's like that's about 75% practical running around for camera or whatever it happens to be that week. So yeah, it was the content of the course that sort of put me off of it as well" Jack (Wave 5 Interview).*

However, this did not mean the participants had written off education in every capacity, most were planning college or apprenticeships. It was specifically degree level learning that they were not confident in their ability to succeed. Social failure, or not fitting in was a concern for some participants. This largely manifested as a worry about fitting in.

> *There might be people who thinks they're like they're like slightly better than you there, and you might not think you have the skills to keep up with them. So, you might feel like a bit left out. So obviously if you're new to uni, you will be like quite quiet, and it might be like hard for some people to make friends" Lizzy (Wave 1 Interview).*

However, for one participant, they felt their identity of "not being academic" and working class meant she would not succeed in university. Whilst she could acknowledge that this should not stop her, she felt like it would make it hard to succeed and fit in.

> *"I definitely feel like someone who's maybe lower class would feel a little bit more intimidated to go to university, which in my opinion seems a little bit more middle or higher class. Obviously, anyone can go to university. It doesn't matter where you come from, but I definitely feel like it comes across quite intimidating, because you've got these grand old buildings a lot of the time that are really old and it seems to me quite scary to go into that" Sarah (Wave 1 Interview).*

For the participants that had considered university these elements were intertwined, and it was these that made their decision not to go. For some participants, these views held over the course of the two years and for some their view changed which will be discussed in the section "University could be worth the risk."

7.8.2 University not the Gold Standard

This sub-theme centred on the reasons participant gave for choosing their intended path. This was conceptualised as the alternative being equal to that of university as well as being a safer option. This component built over the two years of interviews and remained relevant. This sub-theme balanced against that of 'University as a risky investment' and included "Parallel experience to university," "Building skills and qualifications" and "Alternatives to a good career". Participants viewed their chosen option as being less risky than university and discussed a variety of benefits which are laid out in Figure 10. The combination of these elements which applied to each participant were once again unique to them.

Figure 10: Incentives of Alternative Choice

7.8.2.1 Parallel Experience to University

This component captured participants discussions on how they could gain the perceived benefits of university (social side and independence) through their chosen route. A big pull towards university for many of the participants was the social life and independence it afforded. However, participants spoke about their chosen option also fulfilling the social aspects of university. The view was that independence and social life could also be achieved without going to university. Three of the participants that were planning to progress to college had plans to move out; two into student accommodation and one into private accommodation so therefore felt they would be able to access the 'university experience' without the commitment of four years study.

> *"I would say so, two years compared to fours. Obviously such a difference. And but I'm yeah with like college where it's one year at a time, obviously a year. I think it's not much really. So it's definitely not the same impact as if you're stuck to a course for four years, but. No, it may be, but something to consider." Robert (Interview Wave 5).*

An aspect of this independence for one participant was that moving out to go to college provided independence but still with a support network.

> *"(My friend's mum) said 'I would still expect you to pay rent and you would still have to be an adult. I would just be giving you a room.' I was like, yes, that sounded quite good to me. Being able to move away without fully moving away and still having that support system" Sarah (Interview Wave 1).*

This viewpoint that a social life and independence could be obtained without going to university was not limited exclusively to the participants planning to go to college. Those participants looking to access apprenticeships and employment also felt they would have access to a good social life.

> *"…that would be staying in Glasgow for three years if I if I got in and that would be, see that's kind of the bringing the kind of university life into it, but then also gaining the qualifications into it so" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).*

One participant who was taking driving lessons, felt that having their licence would provide enough independence and allow them the social life without having to move out.

> *"…in a couple of months or so I'll be driving, so I'll have that freedom of just being able to go wherever. See whoever as well, so that, well, that was a factor. It was kind of like, oh well, I don't really need to go (to uni)" Tracey (Wave 1 Interview).*

7.8.2.2 Building Skills and Qualifications

This component explored how participants used alternative routes to build their qualifications and skills to keep learning. Participants saw their chosen option as a chance to build up their skills and qualifications. This manifested itself in different ways. The first was that two participants felt the number of Highers they had or were expected to achieve limited their choices for university. For

one of these participants although they were planning to leave school with two Highers and an Advanced Higher which would allow access to a limited number of degree level courses, they did not have their National 5 Maths and English so wanted to go to college to build on these lower-level qualifications.

> *"I've got gaps in my education so I definitely felt like I needed that filler even if it is just to give me that like extra It's gonna make a really weird metaphor, but like you know, like you've got a floor, you can have concrete and stuff like that. I just wanted like an extra level just to make sure that everything was definitely safe and secure. And that was all good. Just so that if I did decide to go to university that was filled in" Sarah (Wave 4 Interview).*

Secondly, for three participants it was about building up technical skills. For one of these participants, they were looking to study Music at university and whilst had the academic qualifications and had received university offers, they felt they had only just made the minimum musical grade that they needed to achieve. They discussed that they would feel like they would be at the bottom of the class so would rather take time at college to build up their technical skills so they could be more successful at university.

> *"So obviously I feel with his help I could possibly get Grade 8 by the summer holidays or definitely by the time I get to university. If I did go, I could be at that level, but obviously that's the minimum. I feel other people will be like a lot higher levels and know a lot more, so to not set myself at the back of the class and start off rough. Thought it might be best to go to college first" Robert (Wave 2 Interview).*

For three other participants the skills they wanted to achieve were practical and therefore college was the most suitable option.

> *"The first year of the certificate it teaches like the basics 'cause they're about, think they are like 80% practical whereas the HNC is*

80% theory. So, I think it's more like a practical job as well. So, I think I would be better getting the experience first before doing the HNC" Curtis (Wave 1 Interview).

In addition, participants planning on voluntary work felt this gave them the opportunity on building their skill set to support their career plan rather than achieving a particular qualification.

"So, I thought, well, I reckon be easier for me in myself to go with two years. Do my voluntary missionary work and then come back because then I'll be more kinda of, more confident in myself and who I am and more focused on what I want to do" Zach (Wave 1 Interview).

This concept extended to those considering apprenticeships as they also saw this as a way to build qualifications whilst earning.

"It would probably be a waste of four years to be honest because I dae feel as if I would just come out and dae something like what I'm daeing the noo. So, you obviously don't need any of that and I would probably just come out and dae the apprenticeship. Because even though I'd have four years of university your still no able like just going straight to your travel agent. You need to either become an apprentice to become a travel agent" Harry (Wave 3 Interview).

Participants who did choose college as a building block to university, whether they ultimately chose to go or not, two years on considered it a good investment of their time.

"It gives you much more one to one time, which is great. Other people that I have been chatting to they haven't had that at university or anything. We get a 45 minute to an hour a week 1-2-1 for our first study instruments. I've been lucky enough to be able to get even second study lessons this year for percussion, so that's it's

just more things to make me love college at the moment it's been, it's been really helpful for me" Robert (Wave 5 Interview).

Another aspect of this component which built over time was the value the participants placed in the experiences they were gaining, and this was often valued over the qualifications they were working towards.

"And I think that says a lot more on a CV than qualifications or at least from what I've realized, a lot of employers actually want actual hands-on experience" Sarah (Wave 5 Interview).

This ties in with component "development and connection with skillset" as it was often the experiences which helped to build their skillset. This will be discussed in more detail as part of Theme Three "Finding my own way".

7.8.2.3 Alternative to a good career

This component focused on the narrative that there are different ways to have a successful career and that the definition of a successful career is unique to the participant. Participants felt that their choice would lead them to a good career without the need to go university and were clear in their view that there were different pathways into obtaining the career that they wanted.

"And the more you like, look at it, the more it's not true. Like you don't need to go or university to get a better job, but that's what people make it out to be." Pamela (Wave 2 Interview).

Participants were not against university and could discuss the benefits of going but felt their chosen path was the right decision for them.

"I see it (university) more as an investment for the job you want, rather than a better job because I don't see it as a better job than anybody else's. Like I don't see uni as the only way to get it either. I know quite a lot of private tuition teachers that haven't been to uni so you can work around it" Robert (Wave 1 Interview).

Another participant felt that as a society young people were being pushed through the route of university to gain a high salary and that there should be more awareness of the alternative options.

> *"I think there's always other options. There are always different paths. And I think if we get ourselves, just as a society, if we get ourselves in a mindset that the only way to get a high-end paying job to do high school and college and then university and then whatever. That's not going to be, that's not the right mindset to be you definitely need to be open" Sarah (Wave 1 Interview).*

One participant, at the initial interview, felt they could achieve their career goals through starting in an entry role and progressing through a company, as her sister had done.

> *"your best going through specials having that first-hand experience because even if I did do a course that you need to do with the police (you) had to go through the whole the same process as someone who didn't like go to uni so yeah and just have a degree behind me but I still have to go through all the same courses, all same training and everything like that. So I think I would be better for me. it probably is better doing specials and getting that firsthand experience rather than just learning about it." Tracey (Wave 2 Interview)*

For another participant looking to pursue a modern apprenticeship they felt that earnings would be similar to what they would earn, if they had gone to university, once again emphasising the view that university was seen as a means to an end.

> *"I feel like parents / slightly older generation want their children to go to uni because they did and they don't know that there are so many other ways to become successful, I think that it's just some peoples opinion which there is nothing wrong with it but there are many other ways like college and plus you don't need to go to uni for*

a job that you enjoy , you might get a better paying job but it might not be one you prefer doing. Art is something I enjoy doing but if I went to uni and found a job through there I don't think I would enjoy it as much" Pamela (Wave 2 Interview)

For all the participants, the industry area they had chosen did not require a degree, was not available at degree level study or had alternative routes into it.

"Well, I always really wanted outside jobs. I didn't really want to get an office job, I think that's (forestry) a really outdoor job, so that helped (make my decision) as well" Curtis (Wave 1 Interview).

"If you study for another 10 years…you're still gonna have to start at that like a position one of a runner or somebody's assistant or something very basic. It's more about getting promoted than it is going out searching for the highest level straight away" Jack (Wave 2 Interview)

For some participants although a degree was not an essential requirement, university was the traditional route for gaining a career in the area and these participants had a longer-term goal of going to university. Participants discussed that earning a good salary was not the only priority for their career and that job satisfaction was also important.

"As long as I'm financially stable, I'm not really bothered if I have a lot as long as I can keep myself going without having to worry. That's all that matters to me" Felicity (Wave 1 Interview).

Interestingly, enjoyment of a job, and salary were often framed as dichotomous choices; that earning good money or enjoying the job were mutually exclusive, with enjoyment being the priority.

"Because like a good job is like obviously one that brings in good money. But it's also like a job that you want to do. To like if it's something. If you've got a job that like brings in good money, but like

you're not enjoying it like it's not really a job because like the time's just gonna go really slow" Lizzy (Wave 2 Interview)

As with the finance discussion for university, finances were discussed in general terms, and it was not clear whether a participant had an accurate grasp on what sort of salary would be required to achieve what they termed a comfortable life. Whilst there was the acknowledgement that for some jobs, a degree was beneficial it was not perceived as directly relevant to them.

"Maybe if I was going for some other jobs, it would be good to have that degree, to show that you've done that four years of work" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).

Finally, there was a feeling with some participants that the stress and pressure of university would not be worth the potential benefit of earning more money.

"But I don't know. I think it's a lot of stress because you've got all your classes. Plus social life plus hand in times, just everything" Felicity (Wave 3 Interview)

Another aspect was that for some they had the view that they preferred working to more education at that time and discussed the enjoyment and satisfaction of earning.

"Money wise, I found that through my gardening, I really liked working and just earning" Trevor (Wave 1 Interview).

The participants that were aiming to join an apprenticeship programme highlighted the benefits of earning and learning at the same time with a near-guaranteed job at the end of the training.

"I think where, I am just now, I'm really happy…If you come out of university, you still need to do your chartered exams, so although you may have exemptions, you're not automatically charted, so I think that I won't exactly be very far behind when I come to do that… And

> *because I'm enjoying my job and it's not like I'm underpaid, so I'm not really complaining." Steve (Wave Five Interview)*

The view was that an apprenticeship offered the benefits of university in terms of learning and building a qualification but with the added benefit that debt would be avoided and therefore was viewed as a less risky option. Whilst no participant explicitly discussed forgone earnings, the participants who were seeking apprenticeships discussed the benefit of being able to earn throughout the apprenticeship.

> *"No, really, no. I'd rather be getting money than paying money back. So, I would" Harry (Wave 3 Interview)*

7.8.3 University Could be worth the risk.

This sub-theme built up over the course of the interviews. As has been discussed the narrative of the interviews was not about being for or against university but more focussed on the participants making the best choice for them. This sub-theme captures the dialogue around those perceptions of university and how for some participants this ultimately led them to apply to university. This sub-theme also acknowledged the uniqueness of the university experience and accepted that whilst university was the right choice for some it depended on the individual's context and showed the decision to go or not was not always straightforward. At the final interviews, two participants had enrolled in university and three more were planning or considering it as an option.

7.8.3.1 University opening doors.

This component discussed participants' views of the opportunities that university could provide and how over time this became relevant for some participants. Participants discussed how if they were going to university it had to be the right degree and not just going for the sake of completing any degree.

> *"I think it is entirely specific on your situation, because I have a really good friend and she is really into her physics and that's what she wants to do and her dad's a physicist as well, and I'm pretty sure he deals with nuclear and she's always wanted to do physics, so she's going to Glasgow University to do physics and I think for her that is perfect. I don't think she'd be able to get that without going to university. And obviously you will be able to earn a really good wage using that knowledge" Steve (Wave 3 Interview).*

There was an understanding by some participants that choice of degree was important as it would have an impact on the career opportunities that would be available on graduation and that some degrees might provide more opportunities than others.

> *"I mean, I think it just depends on sort of what kind of degree do to be honest. I mean some degrees that you know are quite difficult to get jobs in and there's not much you can sort of do, not like very varied. Whereas if it is a STEM subject you've got, got a lot more and, umm, like varied choices" Colin (Wave 3 Interview).*

Whilst subject studied was important, there was no discussion around the importance of the institution where the degree would be studied at and the impact this could have on opportunities. In effect, no one had ruled out university because they could not access an institution of their choice. Participants also acknowledged that having a degree was a way of accessing 'higher level' jobs.

> *"Well, if you're going into a career that's needing it like a doctor that you're better to go into university and like you're better to go for the best qual, like the highest level you can. Do the most like advanced training or whatever you're able to, but then, like other careers like. Specifically, like more creative ones specifically. I don't think that getting the highest level of degree or whatever is sort of necessary to be successful in it" Jack (Wave 1 Interview).*

Higher level jobs were described as managerial roles and as well-paid roles with access to career progressions. Where in the initial interviews many participants articulated that a degree could be beneficial for some roles, few saw it as relevant to them. However, over the course of the interviews this perception changed for several participants, and they began to see the value that having a degree could bring.

> *"Like doing more kind of advanced well-paying jobs cause. Forestry progression, that's a lot of management stuff. I think that a lot of people would probably apply for that. I think having the degree would help" Curtis (Wave 5 Interview).*

There was also the view that a degree could help get you noticed by employers, and the view that in the current job market it was harder to progress your career by starting at the bottom and working your way up.

> *"But I think for certain careers and also certain people that it's not that easy. And especially nowadays it's not really that easy to work your way up like a lot of employers look for people with, you know university degrees, since it's a lot more common, people are going to university nowadays" Tracey (Wave 3 Interview).*

For some participants, this view was held as they believed having the degree demonstrated a certain skill set and level of experience, in effect the degree was acting a signal to employers.

> *"It shows I'm like qualified and committed and like hard working as well" Lizzy (Wave 3 Interview).*

This component illustrates the complexity of the perceptions that participants had about university and how these perceptions changed over time. At the initial interviews participants could articulate the benefits of having degree yet felt these benefits would not apply to them; they were for other people. So, in many cases the worry of failing overrode the knowledge of the benefits of university.

However, over time this perception shifted, and participants felt that they would benefit from university, making it feel like a less risky investment.

> *"Like obviously there's so many things like with law you can do so many things, so that's why I want to do that because it opened so many doors" Tracey (Wave 3 Interview).*

7.8.3.2 University at the right time

This component focused on how the decision to go to university is not binary and does not have to be straight from school. This idea of perception shift on risk, feeds into the narrative that participants had that university could be accessed when they were ready for it. Whilst at the end of the two years most of the participants were still not planning to go to university no one had categorically ruled it out as never happening.

> *"I think my opinion kind of changed from like "no, I don't want to go to uni its very fancy" to "I want to go to uni" to all of that changed quite a bit. My current stance on it is that there is no rush to go to university" Sarah (Wave 5 Interview).*

Participants who were content with how their existing plans were working out saw university as a backup option that could be taken if required. There was also the narrative amongst participants that they would go if they knew what they wanted to study and were prepared for the workload. They did not want to go just because it was expected or because they could not think of a better option.

> *"They think more about what they want to do at university compared to just going to university for the sake of it" Zach (Wave 1 Interview).*

There was narrative from participants that they felt a lot of pressure in their final year of school to make decisions about their future and in some cases this pressure made it harder to decide. Therefore, taking time after leaving school helped to ensure that if they did decide to go to university it was for the right course.

> *"Four years of studying was quite like a long time to be doing something that I'm not entirely sure about it. So, I thought a one-year course would be better to start off with just still so I can be sure that's what I want to do" Milly (Wave 2 Interview).*

For some participants through the interviews this change had occurred, and they felt ready to access university. Participants talked about missing learning. Concurrently they reflected that they would have never got to the position where they realised, they enjoyed learning without first having taken the time out from education.

> *"I just I wouldn't be happy stuck doing that and I miss learning. I miss education and I want to learn about something that's interesting to me and make something out of it. Like I don't feel as though I'm working towards anything right now, so I feel as though I'm floundering. Whereas I miss that feeling like in school you're working towards. You know a qualification, or you know you're working towards university and then university. You're working towards a career, and I really would like a career rather than just, you know, a job" Tracey (Wave 3 Interview).*

This idea of missing learning also, for Tracey linked in with university providing a goal and purpose which Tracey also felt was missing. The motivation, combined with a perception change meant that university felt more accessible. This could be due to an improved understanding of finances, or a better understanding of university would be like.

> *"Like I think if the debt was so horrible…like such a big thing like why would people even go to uni in the first place? Like it's obviously there to help and also you have to pay it back and hopefully with Law I'll have a job that you know provides me with the money to pay it back. But it's not as if like I'm gonna leave university, get a job and paying off this awful debt for the rest of my life. That's like…I'm not able to buy my food, shopping, or something like that. Like it's there,*

> *but it's not. It doesn't worry me, not much like…I just want to go and study to be honest" Tracey (Wave 3 Interview).*

The view that delaying university was beneficial, extended beyond the realisation of a love for learning and was also seen as beneficial in developing skillset. The point was raised by one participant that they were able to access third year of university after completion of their college course, so they felt they had not missed out or been delayed due to choosing this route.

> *"And then by joining university in 3rd year in terms of time like how long it takes you to get your degree in things, there's no difference between that. And if you've just gone straight from school" Robert (Wave 3 Interview).*

7.8.3.3 The unique experience of university

The final aspect to this sub-theme was participants discussing the uniqueness of university. This runs in parallel with the component "parallel experience to university" as it demonstrates that some participants were keen to have this experience even if it was not through university. However, for some this experience made it worth the risk.

Participants viewed university as a rite of passage, a time in their lives which built independence and friendships and was difficult to replicate in other environments.

> *"Being able to learn more independence because obviously when you're at uni you have to like, like cook your own meals and things and like. Do all the things around the accommodation that your parents would normally do. You'll probably make like good friends, like if you share a flat with people (you) will probably make good friends with them, my mom says like the people, she was friends with when she went to like, as in like the nursing school that she went to, she said it's like she's still really good friends with some of them, like some of the people she lived with" Lizzy (Wave 1 Interview).*

This unique experience brought in the social side to university as well as a chance for self-discovery, independence and being around like-minded people.

> *"…sort of boost of independence as well, 'cause you're away from home. Sort of its good for you, and you know, this sort of makes it worth it. As I said, it makes you independent and it also helps you find out who you are" Colin (Wave 1 Interview).*

The other side to the uniqueness of university was the focus on the learning environment. Whilst some participants were concerned about academic failure others saw it as a positive learning challenge.

> *"…also, just to prove to myself but like I probably could do it if I had my mind set on it… like it would be a lot of work, but it could be achievable. And then be being able to push yourself through it 'cause at the start it probably would be hard, but you just have to push, push for your course 'cause you know what you're working towards" Lizzy (Wave 1 Interview).*

There was also concept of doing the degree for enjoyment and curiosity, not just for career opportunities. This is interesting as it shows whilst finance is one aspect to the decision-making, enjoyment of the degree is also a critical part of the decision-making process which fits with the ideas discussed in "time investment". Participants did not want to go if they felt they were not going to enjoy and have the motivation to complete a degree.

> *"Though, you know, why not go to university to do something that I enjoy and obviously strive to get something, at the end of it instead of applying to something that will most definitely get me something" Tracey (Wave 3 Interview).*

7.9 Theme 3: Finding My Own Way

This section provides the detailed exploration of Theme 3. This theme captured the personal agency participants had in their career choices and how this agency changed over time. It reflected how they made not one career decision but a series of career decisions which were continually being refined as they experienced life. In addition to the subtheme of 'Active Decision-making a Real Choice', there were two key components to this theme 'The Gradual Road to Independence' and 'Skill set Connection and Development'. Figure 11 shows the key components of the Theme 'Finding My Way' and the relationship between the components and sub-themes with directional arrows.

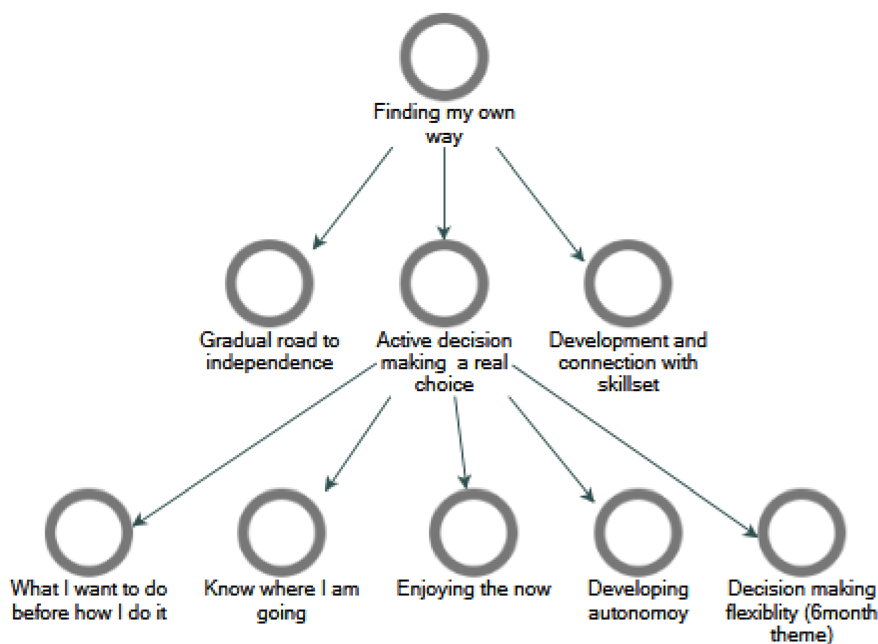


Figure 11: Theme 3 Finding My Own Way

7.9.1 Active decision-making – a real choice.

This sub-theme characterised the decision-making processes participants who had considered university as an option took. It explored the active role they were taking to find out more about university, as well as the point when participants had decided against university and their cessation from research into university as an option. However, it also brought in how this active decision-

making continued beyond the participants transition from school demonstrating the continual refinement of their career decisions.

This subtheme largely extended to participants who were taking a strategy to actively find out more about university and whether it was a good option for them. They had typically got further through the research process than those who had not considered university a real and in some cases had applied through UCAS and received offers for university.

7.9.1.1 What to do before how I do it

This component focused on the decision-making process the participants engaged with, for their immediate next steps on leaving school, and how they took an active role to research and make their decisions. Participants largely picked their industry/subject area then worked out their best route.

Thirteen participants discussed that the "what" came before the how. That is their first decision was to decide what industry or area they wanted to go in and then they would figure out how to get there. This suggests that the priority was to choose an area of interest rather than a subject which could be studied a university, giving a long-term focus on outcome. For some participants this then led to university being an option and further exploration where for others it removed university as an option.

> *"It was during lock-doon, I got like a tattoo gun for my birthday. Just to try it oot, I really liked it so I just keep practicing and I've taught myself how tae do it so I ken I've got an interest in it…well I thought about doing it in third year so I remember the qualifications I needed and I remembered reading that it wasn't a qualification you need really, it's not a course. It's an apprenticeship that you need." Felicity (Wave 1 Interview).*

Felicity's account demonstrates how she developed her interest to become a tattoo-artist and how, unlike other ideas, this interest stuck. This is significant as it demonstrates there is not a cost-benefit analysis of potential earnings but a

focus on an interest in the career which is not accounted for by human capital modelling of educational choice. Participants also discussed spending a time weighing up their different options. For most choosing not to go to university was an active choice for them.

> *"Well, I think I always could do it. I could go into university if I wanted to. I could like stay and get the right qualifications and get into university and that but I don't really think I need to for what I want to do. I think I'm gonna be able to get like the job that I'm wanting and like have the type of career that I'm wanting from my college qualifications" Jack (Wave 1 Interview).*

This component was present throughout the interviews as participants experienced their courses and they explored different ideas which either affirmed existing choices or resulted in an adjustment of the plans.

> *"And then I've had like, all these other incredible opportunities come up and I've actually been able to have like on hand work experience that I can now put towards…my college course" Milly (Wave 2 Interview).*

7.9.1.2 Know where I am going.

This component was focused on how participants conceptualised their future and engaged with longer term planning. It demonstrated a desire for a career and how this could be achieved without university. It developed as time progressed and participants had invested their time into a pathway, it reflected how they viewed their future in a more real sense than when they had still been at school. A clear view by all the participants was that no matter the path they chose they wanted a career not a job, so choosing not to go to university was not about lack of aspiration or vision.

> *"I really enjoyed working there and with them all and it is really, yeah, there isn't really enough progression and that I think that is the only reason if I could, you know, make the money I wanted to in*

there, I would I definitely would stay there" Steve (Wave 4 Interview).

Towards the end of the two-year period there was some sense of stability forming with regards to the participants careers. This contrasted with the first six months after leaving school where there was a lot of adjustment to leaving school.

"I think ideally doing basically what I'm doing now but hopefully just to a higher quality and sort of build more of a business around it because right now it's just sort of small jobs here and there. Ideally just wanting to scale that up. Because you can start a small production company (that) would sort of be the ideal thing in about 5 to 10 years" Jack (Wave 4 Interview).

Jack demonstrated this move towards stability and discussed where he saw his future. For some having a plan for the future was important, where for other participants they were happy to take each decision a step at a time.

"I've been looking a lot about it and I'm really not sure at all. I'm not really got like a planned for after it, just kind of see where it takes me and hope for the best (laughs)" Milly (Wave 3 Interview).

7.9.1.3 Decision-making Flexibility

Whilst participants were making active decisions about their future there was also an element of the decision-making that needed to be flexible in times when plans did not happen as expected and participants came up against challenges. This component captured how participants dealt with these setbacks and changes.

"But I definitely think I'm the type of person whose constantly gonna have career changes. I think I'm going to jump from, like, education to career, to different career, to education. I think I'm just that type

of person and sense of I can't just stay at one thing for a certain length of time" Sarah (Wave 5 Interview).

Throughout the two years Sarah had dropped out of her college course, considered university, decided against it, taken a job she enjoyed but was finding it stressful. Additionally, she had received a diagnosis of Autism so was processing what this meant for her. She dealt with these changes by identifying with them and accepting that for her, change and indecision would be part of what her career would look like. In contrast, for some participants there was a determination to see through their choice even when it was not going to plan.

"I have messaged, I've managed to get one of my five courses. It's just a case of waiting and I don't want to be stuck in a shop for the rest of my life" Felicity (Wave 3 Interview).

Twelve months after leaving school to pursue a career as tattoo artist, Felicity had still not found employment in the industry and spoke of her frustration of being messed about by employers. However, she stuck with her plans and after eighteen months of leaving school found someone to take her on.

"It was like everything just kinda paid off, the kinda just everything it was just wasnae an issue any mair" Felicity (Wave 4 Interview).

7.9.1.4 Developing Autonomy

This component explored the participants increasing ability to make decisions over time and as they matured. It involved their developing values and boundaries in a career context. Participants demonstrated a sense of autonomy in the decisions they made, and this autonomy continued to develop over the time-period of the interviews with the participants feeling more confident and able to make independent choices.

"I say it's been a lot more, I'd say it's more self-directed, to be honest. And I knew which ones I kind of wanted to go for. And had,

well, by the end of the interviews, I knew which ones I guess I wanted to put priority on" Trevor (Wave 3 Interview).

This developing autonomy was demonstrated by one participant from a constrained financial background. She had eliminated university early in the decision-making process but a year later revisited this decision and decided to go to university. She discussed how her decision not to go had come from the viewpoint of her parents who did not think university was a good option.

"So, neither of them went to university. I think it was just circumstances with them growing up and they really believe that you can make your way, or you get to where they are without going to university. But I think for certain careers and also certain people that it's not that easy. And especially nowadays it's not really that easy to work your way up. I think, a lot of employers look for places with people with, you know university degree, since it's a lot more common, people are going to university nowadays." Tracey (Wave 3 Interview).

Another aspect of autonomy was the values and boundaries that participants began developing over the time after they had left school. Whilst there were elements of what was important to them articulated in the interviews, this was further enhanced through their experiences and in some case impacted their future plans.

"So really standing up for yourself, putting in boundaries and just saying no and learning yourself as a person as well, learning what you're comfortable with. Because your levels might not be the same as someone else's levels, so I think that's really important" Sarah (Wave 5 Interview).

A final aspect of this autonomy manifested itself in participants valuing secure roles over those riskier decision which links in with the narrative of "university as a risky investment".

> *"So, I thought, there was still no assurance whether I'd get in at the end of the day, so I thought it was safer to stick with forestry for the time being. It wasn't too hard of a decision to be honest" Trevor (Wave 4 Interview).*

7.9.1.5 Enjoying the now

This component acknowledged the sense of achievement the participants felt about their current decision-making and that it was not just about the planning but living those plans and the satisfaction this brought.

> *"I'm living at home, so I save a fortune on things, and I don't have very much traveling because I work almost at Smalltown, so it's not exactly very far, and college in Largetown once a week, so I couldn't really fault what I'm doing at the moment. It saved me a fortune compared to going to uni" Steve (Wave 3 Interview).*

Participants who had chosen college spoke about the learning and skills they had gain from taking this route.

> *"The course has gone very well actually, it's in two main sections. We've got studio shows and we've got our own like personal project. The half that's in studio and the class with everybody else, that's all going really well. I really enjoy that, working with the whole class. But then I found the group projects and personal projects is where I've really enjoyed myself the most." Jack (Wave 4 Interview)*

None of the participants regretted their choice not to go to university upon leaving school. Whilst four participants by the end of the two-year period were applying or had successfully started university, they still described their initial decision not to go in positive terms.

> *"No. I'm glad I had that year out, otherwise I would be in a course that I didn't want to do. I also would not have the money to obviously go to university and would have not, as soon as I left, school wouldn't*

have been able to commute. Everything like that and so yeah, I'm glad things happened the way they did" Tracey (Wave 5 Interview).

7.9.2 The Gradual Road to Independence

This component captured how the participants career choice was a key milestone in the beginnings of a route to independence and adulthood. It became apparent early in the interviews that participants pathways to independence were inextricably intertwined with their career decisions. Their route to independence was also linked to their rural location but not entirely defined by it.

"Just like I'm 20 this year and I live a life down here that I don't like. I live in a farm. I don't want to live on a farm…It wouldn't be just for university. I think university is like an excuse to move up. But I think a lot of people that do go to university just want away" Tracey (Wave 5 Interview).

Whilst Tracey lived rurally, two years after leaving school, she was looking to move away from home to gain more independence and fully commit to her course rather than because she had to move away because of the distance from university. However, this view was not unanimous as some participants discussed delaying independent living for several reasons including finances, links with family and not feeling ready to move out. The narrative here was around getting the right balance.

"I'm quite happy, staying at home the noo so I am. I'm just turning 18 soon so I'm alright with that, all my pals are all here, I feel a little bit like with the job I'm on I wouldn't be able to afford to stay away or anything like that" Harry (Wave 3 Interview).

There was also dialogue on how independence manifested within the participants. It was not solely defined by moving out of the family home but extended to having financial independence through earning a wage. Participants

also described gaining their driver's licence as a marker of independence as this allowed for independent travel and the ability to pursue a broader range of opportunities.

> *"I quite like having that money to kind of like, I know that my parents will support me and everything. But you know, things are going up and with me staying at my sisters flat and we're both paying for things. So, I kind of it's nice to have that money behind me. So, it's a lot better if I can work as well" Milly (Wave 3 Interview).*

What was clear was the route to independence moved at different paces for different participants, but it was something they all valued and felt was important in whichever way it manifested itself and that a key to that independence was through having a career.

7.9.3 Development and Connection with Skillset

This component explored how relevant and important participants viewed their skillset in connection with their career. It captured how participants over time began to connect and develop their unique skillet and understood its value, which in school had initially been fragmented. However, despite this there was often a hesitancy when talking about their strengths.

Whilst participants were still in school the narrative was of an artifice in the role of skills. There was much more of a value on the role of qualifications. Whilst they could talk about the skills they had; they saw this as a hoop to jump through to get into their chosen career rather than as something that was of a value.

> *"It's just you always get told like not a brag about what you're good at. Don't brag, but then in sixth year you have to write what your good at and it's just like learning backwards" Felicity (Wave 1 Interview).*

As Felicity demonstrates a common narrative was that skills were not embedded in the curriculum and even the opposite; that participants were much more likely to downplay their skills as they did not want to appear as arrogant.

> *"I think it's sometimes really difficult to think of the skills that you have your own, 'cause it's it kind of sounds like bragging. Sometimes you're like, oh, not sure if I should say that" Milly (Wave 1 Interview).*

As time progressed the participants began to value what skills they were developing, although for some there remained difficulties in talking about them.

> *"So, when I first started it was just lines. About 2 weeks ago I've done my first like live portrait. And I think it's well, I think it's all right, so. I can see the progress I have made" Felicity (Wave 4 Interview).*

What was evident was that their skills development occurred through many formats including college, voluntary work, paid employment, hobbies, independence, and that all participants built on their skills.

> *"I don't feel like my skills are developing so much in the sense of my college course specifically, but more in the sense of just being a student in a city. I think my skills have definitely like changed and also like now that I'm 18 and I'm like more independent and having that independence, you just get a different skill set when you move out. I think that's just like a thing that happens" Sarah (Wave 2 Interview).*

Some participants perceptions changed over time and felt that experience and skills were more important to an employer than qualifications, demonstrating a connection and value of their unique skillset.

> *"Like, I think the experiences and stuff that you learn is like super-duper important…I find, that's what employers are looking for. A lot more of these days instead of, you know, 10 advanced Highers and you know and a university degree" Sarah (Wave 5 Interview).*

Participants also became aware of where there was a skills gap and how they could go about addressing this. This was generally viewed in a positive light as a training need and something they could develop and not a reason to give up on a career.

> *"I think it's always useful to be able to have good IT skills and good communication skills. Really, you can't really go wrong with having them. I mean, I think there obviously need to be more skills as I go into accountancy, but I've never had the experience in a job with that. So, I think when I get the chance at, I'll develop them" Steve (Wave 4 Interview).*

7.10 Conclusions

To summarise, the themes discussed in this chapter illustrate the complex nature of the career decision-making processes of the participants. It shows that young people do not make one career decision but a series of decisions and these are refined and, in some cases, change over time. The results clearly show that the decision-making process does not stop when the participants leave school. It also shows their career choices are inextricably intertwined with their unique context.

The results also demonstrate that participants are in most cases making a choice that is rational to them given their context and the information they have available. However, the information they rely on is often from vivid accounts and not always representative or accurate. The rural location of the participant did not in itself stop participants from going to university however it added an additional layer to the decision-making process as for most it would have meant a move away from home, which some participants did not feel ready for. SES again was not definitive of not wanting to access university however often this came with a more wary attitude about getting into debt and delaying earnings. Participants who would be first in family to go university also struggled with the application process and had less of an understanding about university.

Whilst COVID was not the only factor in the decision-making process its overall impact pushed young people away from university and to seek what was perceived as ‘safer’ alternatives. These findings are important as it demonstrates that COVID had a significant impact on the decisions of young people at a key transitional point in their lives and whilst restrictions have lifted and we have gone “back to normal”, the consequences of the pandemic may continue to affect young people for significantly longer than the physical lock-down. In particular, the findings surrounding the mental health concerns of participants demonstrated that young people are still feeling a continued impact of COVID, which could have further implications on their career and future economic participation.

Finally, participants were generally content with the decisions they made. Most were not planning on university at the end of study and were happy with how their plans were manifesting. The next chapter will provide a full discussion on the implications of the findings, with reference to the literature, theory and practical implications and impact of the project.

Chapter 8 Theoretical and analytical discussion

8.1 Introduction to Chapter

The following chapter provides an analytical discussion of the results contextualised with the theoretical, policy and empirical research. The discussion examines in detail the three themes and sub-themes with a focus on the balance between 'personal agency' and 'structure' a pupil has in their career as well as examining the role and influence of a participants support network and the impact of COVID. The findings showed that participants were making contextual decisions which were not free from structural factors and in some cases barriers. This finding has clear linkages with both Robert's (2009) theory of opportunity structures which considers these structural factors to be the main determent of an individual's career but also Hodkinson's (1996) theory of pragmatic rationalism as the participants were making decisions within these structure and demonstrating personal agency where they could and perceived themselves to be active agents in their choices. The key structures and barriers that were identified included rural location, socio-economic-status, perceived level of qualifications, economic and labour market changes, COVID and Finance. The discussion also provides practical implications and recommendations, limitations, and recommendations for further research before concluding.

8.2 Impact of Rural Location

A key finding of this study was how rural location impacted the decision-making of the participants. These big structural factors being the key determinant of an individual's career choices is a central component of Robert's (2009) theory of opportunity structures and the research found partial support for their role. Rural location *per se* was not a barrier however combined with other factors such as SES, financial concerns, or uncertainty in moving away from home it had the potential to become a limiting factor demonstrating that structural factors can have an impact on decision making but also on the experiences of young people in their post-school destination. This was evidence through the limited university provision in the local authority area leading to a starker decision on

whether to go university as commuting was often viewed as a poor compromise due to the poor public transport links between rural and urban areas. This links to the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as those choosing this option often had limited resources, leading to a partial engagement with the post-school option and therefore reducing the ability to build on cultural capital, however it also taps into understanding the complexity in the process of decision making and the number of decisions that were being made and refined.

However, remaining locally did not in all cases remove this issue as participants without a driver’s licence spoke about long commutes to the local college or work. Once again this was an issue that was more likely to affect those from a low SES due to the cost of learning to drive and having fewer support networks to provide transport to college. This research supports an earlier study by Ramage (2019) who found evidence of a ‘double deprivation’ effect. This effect demonstrated how individuals unable to leave a rural area were most likely to need a private vehicle, as jobs were less likely to be on a public transport route or fit with bus times, but these individuals were less likely to have access to one. However, it is important to note that for some participants, due to the industry they were accessing, living rurally was beneficial. It is also important to note that this discussion is specifically referring to rural location in its relation to career opportunities and not the broader experiences of living rurally.

A finding of this study was the limited experience participants had of universities; some had never visited a university. Whilst the participants did not overtly link this to living rurally, due to their location and the limited university education within the region, many had never seen a university before. This made the concept of going to university more challenging as they struggled to imagine what it would be like. This is significant as it supports a small but building literature base that rurally based pupils have less exposure to universities due to their location than their urban counterparts and that this connection is linked with university enrolment (Cullinan and Halpin, 2017). Cullinan and Halpin (2017) through data visualisation mapped location of HEI’s with home locations of participating individuals in Ireland. They discussed the uneven distribution of HEI locations and how young people from an urban area, where there are

typically more universities, have more exposure to universities than those from rural areas. The authors discuss “spillover effects”, for example organised school trips, family employed by the university and the university occupying a public space so is seen on a regular basis by young people. This all adds to a familiarity of university and therefore a greater likelihood of attending. They also noted that there was a positive correlation between participation at university and proximity of home location to the university (Cullinan et al., 2017, Cullinan and Halpin, 2017).

The ‘hidden’ nature of university was more likely to affect those from a more deprived economic background. Those from a middle-class background were more likely to have parental support, resources, and encouragement to go to university and more likely to have connections with university through family having already attended. This draws on Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus as middle-class students were more likely to be aligned the universities institutional ‘habitus’. This also opens a rhetoric of whether universities and schools should be doing more with pupils from a rural background irrespective of their SES, for example organising open day trips rather than leaving it pupils to self-organise or whether the onus lies with the pupil. If a pupil has never visited a university, how can they be expected to be comfortable to commit four years of their life there? Furthermore, due to the limitations of the SIMD at capturing deprivation in rural areas, in part due to non-homogeneous populations in a large postcode area, students from rural backgrounds are less likely to qualify for widening access programmes, in comparison to their urban counterparts (Lassele, 2021, Boliver et al., 2022). This study evidences the difficulties in accurately defining SES and would support the call of Lasselle (2021) and Boliver et al. (2022) for a system that more effectively measures deprivation.

Rural location also became a barrier when a participant wanted to access a course but could not, due to limited provision at the existing institutions. This builds on Elliot et al (2009) study of degree participation of non-traditional learners in Fife. A key finding of this study was that lack of local provision stopped university participation. In the current project this too manifested for

some participants, in choosing a local course rather than moving away and accessing their desired course. Alexander's (2013, 2016) research on the experiences of island graduates explores the "need to leave" a rural area. It discusses the importance of understanding the experience of students migrating from a rural to urban area in order to support them in their career development (Alexander, 2021) and calls for more research in this area. The current project touches on the dynamics of this migration. There were discussions of the positives of moving away and an outgrowing of the 'quiet rural life' which eclipsed previous concerns they had about moving away, and the dynamic of moving from somewhere they identified as 'small' to somewhere 'big'. There was split being those moving away as way to gain independence and those that moved for necessity. This demonstrates how the same decision could be made for varying different reasons and therefore helps to build on the concepts of bounded rationality (Simon, 1997) and that upholds the assumption that there is a goal in the mind of the decision-maker.

The above also touches on the finding of compromise and sacrifice in the decision-making which links both to concepts of pragmatic rationality (Hodkinson et al., 1996) and also to bounded rationality (Simon, 1986) in that sometimes there is no decision which ticks all the boxes so the decision has to focus on the best decision in a constrained set of circumstances. Altman and Altman (2017) on their discussions of bounded rationality discuss how often decisions are based on emotion and intuition. This was evidenced in the dialogue of those who wanted to stay as they did not feel ready to move or and had close links with family so were in essence sacrificing or putting their career/study second to other commitments. This demonstrates an active decision made but accepting an element of compromise which ties in with Alexander's (2013) research on island graduates. Whilst there is a growing body of literature on the migration of students accessing university education (Alexander, 2016, Alexander, 2021, Alexander, 2013, Bakke, 2018, Corbett, 2013, Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012) there is little literature that the author could find which has examined those experiences of individuals moving away to pursue college. This project begins to address this gap in the literature, but more research is needed to examine further the patterns and reasons for students choosing to study at a FE college

out with their home location as it goes against the narrative of those from a deprived background staying local to reduce cost.

8.3 Role of SES and connection with 'habitus'

The above discussion on impact of rural location and its ties with the theoretical framework has already tapped into aspects of where the combination of SES and rural location caused a barrier to accessing university education. This section further explores the theoretical implication for the role of SES when deciding whether to participate in university. The key finding was that it was not SES *per se* that stopped participation but the belief systems and structural boundaries which combined and led to the decision. This weaves together the concepts of bounded rationality and habitus. That is, the decision was being based on beliefs associated with a working-class background (Archer et al., 2003) which from a Bourdieusian perspective contribute and are integral to the individual's habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), which includes cognitive schemata. However, these beliefs cannot be fully explained by the concept of 'habitus' as there were variations in the belief systems of participants from a working-class background. Moore (2004) highlights that this within group heterogeneity is problematic when considering the concept of habitus and this study would support this finding as not all individuals from the same class background made the same decision. This connects with the two main issues that make up the next part of the discussion. Firstly, how SES is defined and measured and whether the issue is related to financial constraints or a beliefs system and how SES impacts the decision to go to university.

8.3.1.1 Measuring SES, Class Identity, and relation to Theoretical Framework

This study used multiple indicators to define SES, as especially in a rural area where a postcode can cover a range of housing and circumstances and again a school catchment can include pupils from a broad range of backgrounds the SIMD is not a sensitive enough measure. Conclusions by other commentators (Reay, 1998, James et al., 2008) is that SES can be problematic to define and a call for a use of multiple indicators. For example, there was a participant in the study

whose mum classified as a professional but as the sole earner in the family meant they were financially constrained but potentially brought with them middle-class values. This suggests that there is potentially a continuum for class status rather than categories. However, in terms of categorisation a continuum makes defining class more complex than offering distinct categories with specific criteria. Separately from his theory on occupation structure Robert's (2019) has proposed a revised framework of social class categories arguing that the existing divide of 'working' and 'middle' is no longer fit for purpose and reclasses them based on educational pathway. Whilst this is not a continuum it provides a better fit as it provides some conceptualisation of the interplay between chosen route and social class and provides a more sensitive measure than a simple divide between 'working' and 'middle' class which suggests little heterogeneity within the groupings.

In terms of participation in widening access programmes, four participants were eligible due to their SIMD classification. If this classification was widened to include eligibility for free school meals almost ½ the participants would have been eligible for widening access. This links to discussions by several commentators on moving to a better process for assessing eligibility to a contextualised offer (Harrison and Waller, 2017) and the use of free school meals as more accurate indicator (Boliver et al., 2022). Furthermore, this study found that widening access had limit impact on an individual's decision to participate in university. Much of the research for widening access has focussed on the effectiveness of the programmes and those participants who do ultimately apply to university (Harrison and Waller, 2017, O'Sullivan et al., 2019). This project suggests there is room for better communication to pupils about the scope and purpose of widening access programmes.

How SES is measured is important as this is what is used to determine levels of participation in higher education and using different measures can fundamentally alter these categories. It is also important as if policy makers are keen to reduce this inequality it is important to understand if person is not going to university because of a financial barrier or due to their belief system as this would impact the support required. Also, it is important to understand that

their SES may be incidental to their decision, and they are choosing a different pathway as that is their preference. A finding of this study was that low SES did have an impact and made it more challenging to access university, these participants still felt they were making an informed and active decision. This final point build strongly on the theories of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) which focus on individuals making decisions within their unique context. To some extent this also brings Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of 'habitus' which underpins Hodkinson's theory of pragmatic rationality and brings in the unobserved heterogeneity in decision making between individuals.

8.3.1.2 Social Identity, Fitting in and Cultural Capital

Much of the literature on working class participation in university has discussed the strong identity that working class individuals have (Reay, 2018) and the effect this has on them when they continue to university. From a theoretical perspective this combines with Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital which postulates that these individuals are lacking the capital needed to succeed in a university environment and therefore provides some theory on why there are differing levels in participation. There was mixed support for these findings.

Whilst there are those with a strong working-class identity there are also individuals who whilst still financially constrained, especially currently with the cost-of-living crisis, who did not articulate a strong class identity. However, for these participants their identity, their values and belief-system connected more covertly with that of someone with working class beliefs and values which manifested in the decisions they made, such as aversion to debt (Callender and Jackson, 2008). In addition, individuals attending a rural secondary school are more likely to come from a mix of backgrounds due to the large catchment area (Lasselle and Johnson, 2021) which has the possibility of 'diluting' social identity by class.

However, there was also a finding of broader concerns about fitting in both academically and socially. This extended to being academically on par with peers and making new friends. Whilst this may not be a worry unique to those

from a deprived background, a qualitative study by Reay (1998) found that working class individuals demonstrated a lack of confidence in the university application process. Family was also shown to have a role to play, and this differed between class background with the notion of 'automatically' proceeding to university for middle-class students but not for working class students. These findings fit with the current study as working-class participants generally felt they would be alone in navigating university systems and had a limited understanding of university accommodation and activities such as Fresher's week. These findings connect with the role of cultural capital and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concepts of education being a way to preserve social status rather than as a levelling field. However, whilst there is still a gap in education participation by class (OECD, 2022), the findings in this study was that these factors were only part of the decision making process and other factors were influential.

8.3.1.3 Finance and Human Capital

A further discourse that related to SES was on that of student finance to afford the cost of university. Becker's model (1975) on human capital and educational choice proposes that when making an educational choice an assessment will be made based on net lifetime earnings from completing a degree and if this is more than the net lifetime earnings of entering the labour market or alternative pathway then the choice to complete a degree would be selected. However, whilst participants in this study theoretically understood the adage that more qualifications mean higher earnings there was much concern that this would not apply to them.

Students also showed an aversion to taking a student loan but even this was not solely linked to those from a low SES and was often linked to unclear information on the student loan system. However, there was a narrative from those participants from the most deprived backgrounds around debt being viewed as negative and a limited understanding of how the loan system worked. A practical recommendation that could be taken up by universities and schools would be to offer more discussions around the financing of university through student loans

and how they work to try and shift the perspective of it being a 'bad' debt so prospective students can make an informed choice. Callender and Jackson (2008) assessed the attitude to debt among high school and FE leavers when considering university. Their findings demonstrated that working-class individuals were more likely to view university as a burden rather than an investment and found that fear of debt had an impact on university choice with individuals from a working-class background more likely to choose a university close to home. Whilst Callender and Jackson (2008) found that debt did not impact the choice of qualification its study stopped short of assessing whether debt had stopped an individual applying altogether. In addition, media articles (Shearing, 2022) are also beginning to question the financial cost of university and the level of debt students are likely to leave with, perpetuating the worries around debt. The findings from this study were that it was a big deterrent to applying, when participants viewed that they could move into an apprenticeship and begin earning more quickly.

Another concern around finance for the participant was struggling to afford university and potentially having to work whilst studying, the pressure this would put them under and the negative impact they felt this could have on their studies. Returning to Becker's (1975) theory, one of the assumptions is no constraints on borrowing. However, there is growing concern that current student loan levels are not high enough, especially more recently considering the cost-of-living crisis (Brown, 2022). However, whilst this issue may be coming to a head, it is not a new issue. A review of income, expenditure and debt conducted by Warhurst et al (2009) in higher and FE students found that working-class university students had higher levels of income which was tentatively attributed to having to work more as they were less able to rely on financial support from parents. Working-class students on average had higher levels of debt than middle-class students and higher levels of expenditure. A comparison with non-students noted that 40% had decided against university for financial reasons. However, some of those from a less deprived background also thought they would need to work whilst at university. These findings combined with results from the current study show that pupils are very aware of financial pressure before going to university and would suggest some limited support for a

human capital model (Becker, 1994) in that there was consideration given to university as a cost-benefit analysis but the decision was more complicated than this.

An interesting finding was that some participants had taken a student loan to access college. They viewed this decision positively in terms of getting the university experience without university and only accumulating two years' worth of debt instead of four. However, assessing this from a return-to-investment perspective this arguably could be the worst of both worlds as the individual has a student loan but will not gain the returns that a university degree offers if they choose to exit with an HNC/HND. However, as discussed much of the literature on returns to educational investment compares university qualifications to leaving school with high school qualifications and there is much less of a literature base which compares this and post-secondary qualifications that are not a degree. A recent OECD (2022) report suggests the gap between returns to a degree and other post-secondary qualifications are smaller, however more research is needed as this assesses the returns at a macro level by country. It would also be worth understanding if its more common for rural pupils to move away for college due again to limited local provision or of if this pattern is also commonly seen for urban-based individuals as well.

8.4 Economic, policy and labour market changes

The last decade has seen some considerable changes and challenges with regards to the labour market and the economy. The Developing the Young Workforce Agenda (The Scottish Government, 2014b) had a focus on addressing youth unemployment in Scotland. This has resulted in a rise in the number of government funded apprenticeships being offered in recent years (The Scottish Government, 2019a). Combined with this was the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and at a school level the introduction of Scottish Apprenticeship Week (Skills Development Scotland, 2023d). In addition, there has been a call for apprenticeships to be viewed as equal in status to university education (Social Mobility Commission, 2019, Wheelahan, 2014, Aird et al., 2010). It is unsurprising that a finding of this study was that participants felt

apprenticeship offered the same access to career opportunities as university in terms of earnings and progression. However, there is concern among some commentators that not all apprenticeship being offered are high quality (Roberts, 2020) which was a finding supported by this study. A narrative from participants was that there was inconsistency between apprenticeships with regards to pay and training. This feeds into the dialogue of McGurk and Allen (2016) and Roberts (2020) about issues of apprenticeship quality in England and raises concerns about young people being paid below national minimum levels. Given the findings of this study, this concern of apprenticeship quality, pay and how the term ‘apprenticeship’ is being used, warrants further research within the Scottish context.

Concurrent to the narrative of university being the best way to a high paid job there is a seemingly conflicting narrative of the underemployment of graduates (Chevalier and Lindley, 2009). This view is not without merit as recent return analyses have shown a huge heterogeneity in returns to degrees with subjects like economics and medicine, which are studied by few creating a positive skew to average returns (Walker, 2020, Britton et al., 2020a). Both studies concluded that for some subjects the individual would have earned the same or more by not going to university. When it is considered that the participants in this study, generally, were interested in careers with smaller returns then from a monetary perspective the decision not to go becomes clearer. If we provide an extreme example, in that a participant was considering studying medicine at university but instead chose to do an apprenticeship in childcare then it would be clear that they would have been financially better off going to university. However, this was not the case. For one participant they had gone to college to build up technical skills in forestry therefore a comparison between earnings from a forestry degree to earnings from an Advanced Certificate in Forestry would be a more realistic comparison. Furthermore, these two qualifications would tend to lead to different job roles so a monetary comparison only provides a unidimensional assessment and ignores preferences, work/life balance and job satisfaction demonstrating that whilst human capital (Becker, 1975, Becker, 1994) provides a useful starting point it is limited in its ability when looking at young people’s career decision-making . Whilst the participants may not be

looking at statistical figures to determine this, the narrative they gave is that university is worth going for “high level” jobs but not for others. This narrative by participants gives a fairly accurate, if simplified summary of what these new analyses are saying.

This concept of not wanting a “high level” job is important to highlight as it demonstrates what is important to the participants. They spoke about the importance of job security and having a good work- life balance, enjoying their work and demonstrated an awareness of the importance of good mental health. Highly paid jobs were seen as synonymous with elevated levels of stress, long hours, and a poor work-life balance. Overall, these participants valued their time over money which provides some insight into how young people make decisions and that it was not a cost-benefit analysis with a focus on future returns to educational investment. Chan (2016) made the point that individuals place different values on HE to institutions, for example focussing on personal benefits such as university as a ‘rite of passage’. However, there is potentially a role for universities to demonstrate the wide variety of degrees available, which would provide middle level returns, and not just the highest and lowest return degrees, which were the examples often provided by participants.

In addition, having a technical skill over a degree is not a foregone conclusion of better economic prospects. Becker(1975) highlights the link between ability and how these can differentiate an individual. Therefore, an individual may have a degree and another individual may have a technical qualification, but it is what they do with it that defines their career and earnings which brings in those non-academic attributes. For example, the individual with a degree may settle for a middle level job where the individual with the technical qualification may go on to start their own business and be better off financially than if they had gone to university. In addition, returns to education largely centre on the labour market rather than self-employment/business so these individuals’ returns may not be captured within these models (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). This therefore brings in the role of personal agency, aspirations and ambitions which connect with social cognitive career theory and self-efficacy (Lent and Brown, 2019).

More broadly, the participants in this study were making critical decisions at a time when they were being provided with an overwhelming amount of potentially conflicting information. This was further exacerbated by the impact of COVID (which will be fully discussed in the next section 8.5) and the current cost of living crisis. This relates to the above point on 'imperfect information' but takes it from the level of the individual's knowledge through family, to that being provided by the school and government sources. Participants often felt there was a dialogue from school pushing them towards university and extoling its benefits. However, they were also being told about the benefits of apprenticeships and being able to earn and learn and not get into the debt associated with university. In addition, careers advise is impartial so explores options with pupils, but would not recommend a choice, as the ultimate decision lies with the individual (Skills Development Scotland, 2023c). This dialogue highlights the complexity of the decision-making process in the economic and policy context. This feeds into the broader 'careership' theory (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) as the young people are making decisions both within their unique context but also within the broader political and economic context, even though they may not have an awareness of how this is impacting on the information they are being provided with and how this impacts their decisions.

This study would argue that Scotland's economy is at a crossroads in terms of the labour market with a convergence of the traditional and modern, the advent of digital 4.0 (Skills Development Scotland, 2018) and moving from a system which values only university education to one which provides equally good pathways to employment, whether this is work-based learning, college or university. However, the information provided to school leavers needs to be clearer and more equally distributed.

8.5 Impact of COVID

A clear theme that was developed through the analysis was the extent of the impact of COVID on the participants and how this affected them. At the time of writing there was limited literature on the way that COVID affected young

people transitioning from school with most of the research being focussed on mental health and adaptation to lockdown (Jörgensen et al., 2022). This aspect of the study builds on Robert's (2009) theory of opportunity structures as it demonstrates the profound impact that covid had on young people's choice. This study was uniquely placed to capture the impact of COVID which will be discussed in the following sections.

8.5.1.1 Information Gathering Limited

A key impact of COVID was that the participants were severely constrained in the research of their choices after leaving school. Due to the lock-down in March 2020 several participants were unable to access open days and find out more about university through physically attending and had to rely on virtual open-days and online information. This information-gathering extended beyond just open days but to broader careers events, which were also cancelled due to COVID. This relates to the discussions on rural location (8.6) as even before lockdown the limited university provision within the region meant universities were "hidden" and unfamiliar to many participants and COVID served to exacerbate this situation. It is hard to assess, whether had the participants been able to access these events if this would have had an impact on their decision to access university, however one participant specifically discussed COVID being the tipping point that made them decide not to go to university. This is arguably at odds with Robert's (2009) updated theory which discusses how in the event of labour market uncertainty there is a tendency to extend education and delay the entry to the labour market, however this further demonstrates the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic.

The digital divide during COVID often made headlines with the narrative that individuals from a disadvantaged background were more likely to struggle to connect online. This included not having appropriate devices (Coleman, 2021) and rurally, slow internet speeds caused issues for learning (Lai and Widmar, 2021). Therefore, the individuals needing the most support were the ones least likely to be able to access it. This study extends these findings to include limited support in the university application process. Where other studies have focussed

more on learning in terms of qualifications and subjects this study shows the impact was broader. Not only was information limited but there was between school variation in the support and information provided and this led to uncertainty in the process of applying for university. This lends further support to Robert's theory (2009) as the limited support was shown to have a bigger effect on those from a disadvantaged background as they were more likely to have to rely on the school for support with UCAS forms as they did not have family at home that could support them.

8.5.2 Learning and qualification uncertainty.

Due to the cancellation of exams in both 2020 and 2021 (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2020) participants found their results were not as expected. Some felt it had negatively affected results limiting their choice of subjects to study at university, adding to the narrative of perceived qualification barrier. There were also concerns that missing exams would have a long-term impact on their ability to cope with future examinations which fed further into the concept of university as a risky investment. One participant who ultimately chose to go to university discussed the difficulties in adapting to exams after COVID. The dialogue from them was that they needed time to adapt but also discussed a view that exams were not the best way to assess learning. This suggests that other participants concern of not being prepared for exams, were not unfounded. This is an important finding as it demonstrates that the impact of the exam cancellation and home learning had an impact beyond the initial lockdown period and in addition fed into participants doubts about ability to succeed at university.

Another way this continued learning manifested for participants once at college was the disruption to lectures and tutorials. These manifested as cancelled lectures, practical elements of the course not taking place, isolated nature of learning and it being harder to access help due to staff shortages and the online and subsequent socially distanced learning. Peer-to-peer learning was also found to be restricted. It is commonly understood that the transition to college/university is viewed as an exciting step in an individual's career and

move towards independence but simultaneously a challenging time due to leaving the security of the school environment. However, removed much of this excitement and added to the challenging nature of the transition. This demonstrates the continuing impact that COVID had even after the initial lockdown ended and before restrictions were fully removed and the subsequent challenges that learners faced. Importantly it talks about the emotions participants felt and not just the practical implications. Whilst COVID could be seen as a barrier if looking through the lens of Robert's (2009), the findings here extend the finding of Hodkinson's et al (1996) 'careership' theory which goes beyond just decision making and examines how individuals navigate their career over time. It refutes the idea of a career have a 'trajectory' as this would suggest a clear uninterrupted path where this study has shown a some of the challenges the young people faced during the pandemic and how they addressed them.

One legacy from COVID, generally viewed as positive was the continuation of hybrid learning due to its flexibility. Emerging literature on the role of hybrid learning appears consistent with this view, that if established well within an institution, it can provide diverse and additional learning opportunities (Aisha and Ratra, 2022, Alstete et al., 2023). However, it also caveated that it needed to be able to adapt to learner needs. This is a critical point as hybrid learning was not unanimously considered a positive development amongst participants. One participant discussed the difficulties of online learning for their apprenticeship, due to still living at home and not having a suitable set up, as well as feeling isolated from colleagues. Therefore, whilst there are benefits of hybrid learning it is also important to understand the challenges young people in the workplace may face when considering how the learning is formatted and support that is on offer. Hamilton and Hamilton's (2022) work on support preferences give some insight into how informal social media networks could help reduce learner isolation. Whilst Hamilton and Hamilton's (2022) study focuses on college students, much of the research so far has focussed on hybrid learning within a university context. Although there are likely to be overlap in learning situations, this project specifically sheds some light on the challenges that young people face in other learning contexts.

Furthermore, another finding was that online learning was being used avoid face-to-face learning and social situations. This could be viewed in a positive light that the move towards online and hybrid learning provides more flexibility and suits different learning styles. However, there is also a worry that this avoidance of social situations could cause longer term problems when seeking to enter employment and having to work with colleagues. There seems to be lack of literature on this phenomenon and this area warrants further research to assess whether it is an isolated issue or a phenomenon that is becoming more common post-COVID.

8.5.2.1 Future decisions affected.

Another finding of this project was how COVID impacted on the participants future decisions. It impacted future decisions in two main ways; when to leave school and what to do after leaving school. The reasons for why they made these changes included the removal of the social side of university, the need to "escape" after covid, staying on at school for 'safety' and leaving for mental health reasons. The impact of the latter was leaving with fewer qualifications than if they had stayed on, limiting the choice of university and subjects available to them. This shows the variety of decisions made by COVID and how it impact the participants in different ways and demonstrates the combining role of psychological and sociological factors and the unique context of each individual linking with Hodkinson et al (1996) and demonstrating the impact of the choices.

From a sample of 16 individuals this shows that almost half had their decisions impacted by COVID. There is little in the literature that discusses the role COVID had on university participation. Stark et al (2022) undertook a convenience sample of school leavers in Germany and factors influencing their decisions to go university during the pandemic. However, this investigated other factors such as the cost of university and perceived ability to succeed, rather than the direct impact of the pandemic. This project however demonstrates that COVID had a direct and lasting impact on university participation for participants, which are unlikely to be unique to this study. Whilst the project was uniquely placed to

research this at the time it was happening, it would be worth further research to investigate the long-term effect COVID had on school leaver decisions.

The impact of COVID was not limited to decision-making choices and therefore goes beyond bounded rationality which is focused on how humans make decisions (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986). At the time of the lockdowns there was an impact on recruitment for apprenticeships (Skills Development Scotland, 2021), with delays and pauses on applications, making it harder to find paid opportunities. Participants also spoke of the pause in recruitment of companies and the uncertainty this caused in their decision-making. This pushed them either to stay on at school or consider more education rather than an apprenticeship or employment. There was a feeling that the uncertainty and closure of schools had made participants feel less confident about themselves and their future. COVID continued to be a factor in the decision-making process of the participants throughout the interviews. For some participants, there was also consideration about the type of job they wanted; they wanted it to be “future proof” should a similar event occur in the future. The conclusions were that COVID affected not just the immediate decisions and plans of young people due to cancellations and delays but has also had an impact on longer term planning.

8.5.2.2 Mental Health Concerns.

A final effect of COVID was the impact that it had on the young people’s mental health. This was partly from being isolated from friends and not being able to socialise. Another reason was due to the uncertainty surrounding their decisions and future and what learning and working might look like. Participants spoke about their experiences of learning online during the lockdowns and for most they found this a negative experience which affected their motivation and confidence. It is worth noting here, to avoid confusion that the experiences of learning online were different from their feelings about hybrid learning after restrictions had lifted.

Generally, participants found learning online disruptive due to not being able to find a quiet space to study, not having the right technology as well as poor

internet connections. This led to the frustration and drop in motivation for completing schoolwork. Even when schools re-opened the participants talked about not enjoying their final year. As discussed above, this had in some cases resulted in them leaving school, due to their mental health, and not completing exams, thereby limiting university choices, and not having the support from the school to complete UCAS or college applications. Whilst they reported leaving school being a positive choice for them and all three went on to college, there could be possible long-term impacts for their mental health and career opportunities.

Fisher et al (2022) found that a decline in grades, attributed to COVID was significantly linked to reporting of depressive symptoms and Yin et al (2022) found that into the second year of the pandemic 1/3 of students displayed high levels of anxiety. Their studies fall short of discussing what the impact of these mental health concerns were and being a snapshot survey, it does not assess whether they caused anyone to drop out of school. Even for the participants who carried on with school, discussion about how the pandemic had negatively affected mental health became more prevalent over the course of the interviews as more participants spoke of how they felt during COVID and when they reflected on their experience of the initial lockdown. This is a concerning finding that COVID had a such a significant impact on these participants lives.

In addition, there was a feeling that socialisation and development had been stalled and after the emergence from lock down some participants struggled to adjust to being back in a social situation. There was a sense that the participants had missed an important part of their lives which they would never get back. This is consistent with Yin et al. (2022) who highlighted that a theme from their study was around regret and what had been missed because of the pandemic. What was clear was that COVID impacted the participants mental health in several ways and the impact of this was still being talked about by participants even after restrictions had ended.

8.5.3 Summary

In summary, whilst COVID was not the only factor in the decision-making process its overall impact pushed young people away from university and to seek what was perceived as 'safer' alternatives. These findings are important as it demonstrates that COVID had a significant impact on the decisions of young people at a key transitional point in their lives and whilst restrictions have lifted and we have gone "back to normal", the consequences of the pandemic may continue to affect young people for significantly longer than the physical lock-down. In particular, the findings surrounding the mental health concerns of participants demonstrated that young people were still feeling a continued impact of COVID which could have further implications for their careers and future economic participation. The findings give some support for the theoretical framework, in particularly bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986), pragmatic rationality (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) and the theory of opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009). Additionally, this study has made a contribution to the UK research base on the impact of COVID on high-school leavers.

8.6 Multi-faceted decision making and theoretical implications

A key aim of this study was to assess the decision making of the participants over the two years of the study and the impact of these decisions. There are different ways longitudinal change can be examined. It can be assessed by the difference in their initial plans and their actual plans and reasons for these changes. However, we can also look at how the participants progressed with their plans irrespective of whether there was a change of pathway or not. Both will be examined in this section with reference to the theoretical framework. In addition, assessing longitudinal change in a career context could not be fully assessed without looking holistically at the participants lives as this was inextricably interwoven with their career choices.

8.6.1 Complex Decision Making; A Real Choice

A finding of this study was that individuals did not make one decision and that choice was not permanent. They continually refined their decisions over time, with the information they had and events they experienced. This has interesting ties with bounded rationality (Simon, 1997) and more specifically the concept of the “generation of alternatives”. Lorkowski and Kreinovich (2018) discuss that it is the complex decisions that humans struggle with, and that apparently rational decisions can seem irrational to the observer and vice versa. A finding of this study was that participants were making many simultaneous complex decisions and this decision-making had begun before the start of the study and continued after the completion of the study. Firstly, individuals need to consider it as a viable choice. For some it was real deliberation so extensive research had taken place. However, if it was disregarded as a viable choice then the choice to participate in university was not even considered as an ‘alternative’ for consideration as a final choice and therefore little research had been conducted in to. There were other participants that had given university a cursory consideration before ruling it out. This is of key interest as much of the literature on working class university participation has focussed on those that participate in university and face additional challenges as well as their labour market outcomes (Findlay and Hermannsson, 2019) and also experiences once they participate (James et al., 2008). The narrative of university ‘not for me’ was picked up in a study by Forsyth and Furlong (2003a, 2003b) looking at socioeconomic disadvantage in Scottish school leavers. The authors discuss a participant who chose university after having the view of “university’s not for me” challenged, suggesting that this viewpoint can be shifted. However, this viewpoint translates to a barrier in exploring university as an option and for these participants they spoke of not knowing much about university but had already ruled it out as a choice.

This instance also raises two critical points of debate. Firstly, the concept of whether it is considered a problem that suitably qualified participants did not consider university. And if this is a problem, why is it a problem? Are all students who make default choice to go to university equally challenged on their

decision-making? The stance of 'university not for me' becomes more of an issue when this viewpoint is associated with SES. University participation has been used as a key vehicle for social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). If, therefore, the issue here is around equality of HE participation, which the data continually shows is linked to socio-economic background (Stevenson and Lang, 2010) then these barriers need to be removed so there is equality of access. However, there also arguably needs to be a shift away from the concept of "university as a gold standard" to all routes being equal in status (World Bank, 2018).

Furthermore, these participants were aware that university existed – they discussed hearing about university at school but decided it was not for them and decided not to pursue the idea further this links back to the earlier point about whether from a bounded rationality perspective university is being generated as alternative. This then links with the second point of responsibility and autonomy. Is there a responsibility of the school, careers adviser, parents to ensure a young person has considered university as an option or are they autonomous young adults capable of making their own decisions and learning from the consequences (whether positive or negative) of their actions? Paixao and Gamboa (2017) reported in their study of decision-making that high self-determination was correlated with high motivation and low career indecision. In the instance of these participants, they demonstrated little indecision in their chosen area, and it was not that they had not completed any research, it was just that university did not factor into that research. Additionally, Skills Development Scotland (2012), who have careers advisers in all publicly-funded secondary schools in Scotland operate an impartial service, therefore whilst university is an option that would be discussed it would not be presented as the only option. This suggests a policy shift towards a system where all options are considered valid. However, this appears to be in conflict, as some schools are presenting university as 'the best' or only option. Indeed, most of the participants in this study felt that university was presented to them as a "gold standard". Burgess (2023) recently examined 'non-conforming' students decision not to go to university and found they had to navigate their own way to finding

information on alternatives choice due to limited information provided by the school and this study would support the findings of Burgess.

8.6.2 Perceptions of University

A prominent narrative from the interviews was that participants were not for or against university. They could highlight both advantages of going and disadvantages of going. What was important was how these perceptions balanced and fitted with the individual's context. What also should be highlighted is that the participants often had a viewpoint, but sometimes they did not act on this viewpoint. For instance, they might see university as helping to get a better job, but this did not always translate to participating in university. In the same way a participant might have concerns over taking out a student loan, but it would not be enough to stop them taking one out. Furthermore, these viewpoints often changed and flexed over time. This is interesting in relation to bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) as it shows that there is a difference between holding a view and acting upon that view and how strongly these views are held.

A finding was that participants were generally worried about the learning environment at university. They interpreted "independent learning" as receiving no support and being left by themselves to work out any problems academic or otherwise. This was the take home message some participants had after attending an open day. This fed into the concept of "risk of academic failure" and "risk of social failure". This connects with Bourdieu's (1986) concept that educational systems effectively maintain class boundaries rather than break them down. That is, individuals from middle-class backgrounds are better equipped through their cultural capital to successfully navigate an open day or have prior knowledge from family that academic support is available. In contrast, someone from a lower-class background is less able access this knowledge and as such seeks a different educational or career pathway. With the lower uptake of individuals to university from low socio-economic backgrounds (The Scottish Government, 2023b) ensuring open days are accessible could be a crucial point for widening access.

In addition, since the interviews took place there have been media reports on students suing universities for not teaching (Lytton, 2023). Whilst this would not have affected the participants of this study it potentially will affect prospective students and builds on the growing public narrative of “university not the gold standard” with concerns over student accommodation and underemployment (Shearing, 2022, Brown, 2022). However, the media paints an extreme picture. Whilst there is more independent learning at university than at school, there is also support for students. This study would suggest that getting the message of support across to non-traditional students could be key to encouraging prospective students to apply. The reason being, that those from a non-traditional background or from a rural context may feel more unsure about the university environment and therefore would benefit from having a better understanding of the university learning environment and support available. Whilst literature has broadly discussed the “university not for me” (Marks et al., 2003) narrative and “fitting in” (Reay, 2018) with links to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, Bourdieu, 1984), less attention has been given specifically to how individuals frame and visualise academic learning.

8.6.3 The role of preference and perceived qualification barrier in decision-making.

The literature still shows an attainment gap between the most and least deprived and it is widely acknowledged there is work required to reduce this gap. However, this study shows that the picture for working-class participation is more complex than this. Due to the variation in degree requirements for a university whilst an individual may have had the qualification to get into some university courses this did not mean they had the qualifications to get into their preferred course. That is, their choice was on what they wanted to do, rather specifically on going to university and when that option was eliminated it took away the requirement to go to university. In contrast, one participant from a middle-class background talked about the value of applying to university, even if an individual did not quite make entry requirements. This demonstrates

different choices to a similar situation. This arguably again brings in Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, demonstrating an understanding of the university systems and requirements. However, it also brings in the concept of pragmatic rationality (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) and highlights the complex nature of decision making and hidden factors both psychological and sociological. Whilst on the surface the decision may see similar, the factors influencing the decision are unique to the individual. Furthermore, sometimes this barrier was perceived rather than real and the participants held 'assumed knowledge' which was not always accurate. Sometimes this information came from teachers, which whilst well meaning, was not always accurate. This highlights the need for professionals working with young people about to transition from school to be careful in the accuracy of the information they share.

In addition, a finding was that whilst participants were aware they had the qualifications needed to access university, they actively chose a lower-level course to what they were qualified to do. This is does not constitute a situation unique to this study. As discussed in the literature review, recent school leaver destination figures showed that 18% of school leavers with Higher qualifications and 3.3% with Advanced Higher qualifications were choosing non-advanced courses at college (The Scottish Government, 2023b). The reasons for their choosing a lower-level course were varied and included using college to build qualifications and confidence, the only course available to gain the required qualifications, and, the shorter length of course in relation to university allowed participants to get a 'taster' before deciding if they wanted to commit to further study and avoided their worry of being 'stuck' in a degree. This suggests that some of the decision-making around course choice was well informed even if it was at a lower level. However, externally sometimes these decisions did appear irrational to the observer (Lorkowski and Kreinovich, 2018) and a finding was that it is only the individual making the decision that has a full understanding of why they have made the decision and the information they've used to make it. This brings in the concept of 'pragmatic rationalism' (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) that whilst from the outside a decision may seem illogical to the individual it is logical within their unique

context and values base. It also provides support for Roberts (2009) view of opportunity structures, in this case geography, still being valid in the current day.

Another finding was that participants doubted their ability to succeed at university which led to doubts in applying. This corresponds with Archer's (2003) research which conceptualised a difference in parenting styles of middle and working-class children. Working class parents viewed their child as an expert able to make their own choices with little intervention where middle-class parents were more likely to encourage their children down a specific pathway and challenge their decisions. Two years on whilst this participant had done very well attainment-wise in their course, they felt they had picked the wrong subject but now felt 'trapped' as to change would mean going back to first year. This interestingly corresponds with other participants concerns about being 'stuck' in a subject for four years. This could then feed into the 'hot' information (Slack et al., 2014) when negative university experiences are spoken about, therefore perpetuating this viewpoint.

8.6.4 Lifelong career decision-making

For participants within this study all experienced change as they had to leave school. However, what varied between participants was how much their initial plans changed from what actually happened. Hodkinson et al. (1996) followed the lives of young people on a government training scheme and provides one of the few longitudinal qualitative studies in a career context. As discussed in his 'careership' theory (see section 0) several types of career transitions are highlighted. Included in these are ones that are forced but expected such as leaving school. Therefore, in the literature there is often a focus on the career choices and decisions that lead up to this key transition point. However, what was clear from this study was that these initial decisions were very much the starting point on the young person's career journey and equally pivotal decisions were made throughout the study. Sometimes these aligned again with a potential transition point (end of a college course) but not always. However, the evidence through the narratives of the participants support Hodkinson and

Sparkes (1997) concepts of pragmatic rationalism and context-based reality. The participants overall were making a choice rational to them and their context and what that pragmatism looked like also flexed and changed as time progressed and experience developed fitting in with the aspect of 'careership'. That is, that career is not a trajectory that can be defined but moves at different speeds and directions (like a boat) depending on the external factors, but the young person can still make choices and remains in control of their career and future.

Growing independence was inextricably linked with the participants' career, and this manifested in several ways. The most obvious was for those participants who moved away from home and discussed having to solve problems by themselves. However, even if a participant lived at home, they still discussed having facets of independence, for example, through bringing in their own income. Existing research has identified the protracted nature of education and the road to independence for young people being long giving support to the updated theory of opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009, Bynner et al., 2002). Even at the end of the two years, participants were still in an 'active' phase of career exploration even if some were starting to settle on an industry/area. The current study makes an active contribution to the longitudinal literature with a career focus, rather than a monetary focus on returns to education.

8.6.5 Time pressures

One of the deterring factors of university was the time pressure participants felt they were under to make their choice. This is interesting as bounded rationality (Simon, 1986) would suggest that individuals make sub-optimal decisions when put under pressure. However, for these participants they opted to give themselves more time to think by not making an immediate decision to going to university and delaying the decision made a 'better' choice. This was particularly the case if they had got to their final years of school and did not know what they wanted to study. This applied as much to those from a middle-class background as those participants from a deprived background. The participants who did not know what to study were choosing not to default to university even though they spoke of this being the expected choice and had

friends who were doing as much. This is an interesting finding as it suggests a strong role of personal agency within the participants that for many of them, they were going against what was expected of them. Roberts (2009, 2019) discusses opportunity structures (see section 2.1.4.1 for discussion on this) and maintains they still hold to this day. If we tip this on its head, it could be that the path to HE for some has been one of these structures - that it is easier to go with it than push against it. However, these young people are pushing against this structure suggesting that young people do have more autonomy and choice than this theory would hold. This is reinforced by Burgess' (2023) study on non-conforming students that are going against the institutional habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) of progressing to university.

The current career guidance framework for schools has career guidance offered from P7/S1 in line with the career education standards (Education Scotland, 2015a) to encourage young people to think earlier about their choices so they have a good understanding of their options and next steps by the time they come to leave. However, arguably this work is light touch with only three interventions in the broad general education stage (S1-S3), and that more is needed to make an impact. Whilst adolescent brain development is beyond the scope of this study, building literature in this area may be able to contribute further to the challenges of getting young people to consider career options at an earlier stage (Albert and Steinberg, 2011). However, there is also evidence that would support that a better university subject choice is made when time out of education is taken (with the exception of a gap year) (Joy, 2018). This evidence provided here partially supports and extends these findings.

Another finding was that life experiences sometimes resulted in a shift in perception around university where it moved from being 'too risky' to 'worth the risk' and result in university participation. Key changes for these participants included were missing learning and wanting a goal to work towards, and incidentally through delaying university brought additional networks. This opportunity to build their 'social' capital (Bourdieu, 1986) before university served to move university from a "risky investment" to "worth the risk". However, as with most of the findings in this study, the situation was more

complex than this and sometimes delaying university was the result of influence from parents. This aligns with the literature that individuals without university-educated parents, and therefore by proxy more likely to be from a disadvantaged background, are more likely to delay entry to university (OECD, 2018). Therefore, this study would conclude that there can be both positive and negative reasons for delaying study even if the outcome is viewed as positive.

8.6.6 Contentment with Career Decision-making Over Time

The first point to make was that the participants when reflecting on their choices expressed little regret. There was reflection on school subject choice and whether better subject choices could have been made as well as thoroughness of career-decision making research, and whether more research should have been undertaken, but overall participants were content with the decisions they had made.

The only notable exception to this was the one participant who had felt pressured into going to university and whilst academically doing well on his course and enjoying the social side of university was continually looking at other options. However, at the end of his second year he had decided to stick with university due to the time already invested but described feeling stuck doing the course. This chimes with Sinclair et al's (2014) study which looked at "career compromise". Whilst this research focused on peer pressure rather than family pressure, it was found that individuals who pursued a career not of their choosing demonstrated lower work satisfaction and other negative long-term effects. Somers et al (2019) also found a wage penalty in those mismatched between field of education and employment. Therefore, this study supports the argument that an individual is less likely to be content in their choices if they felt their personal agency is limited and that this is likely to have longer term negative consequences. It also brings back the earlier discussion and the stance "university not for me". Whilst educational professionals and family may feel they know what is best for their young people, it is crucial that the preferences of young people are listened to and respected and that participants 'own' their decision.

Whilst participants' plans often changed from their original intentions, they viewed these changes and challenges positively as a learning experience which helped them get to the position they were currently in. One participant who spent eighteen months trying to find an apprenticeship to become a tattoo artist described feeling the sense of achievement when she finally began training. There was the narrative here that she valued the role even more due to the challenges and let-downs she faced in the pursuit of it. In addition, she and others maintained their view that their pathway would lead them to an equally successful career. Most studies have assessed 'success' by returns to earnings on a career (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014, OECD, 2022) and, as discussed, most of these focus on high school qualifications versus a university degree. Not a single participant in this study got to the end of the interview period with only their high school qualifications. Most were still actively learning, building on the concept that there are many ways to a 'successful' career and that 'success' is not solely determined by salary which demonstrates the limits of human capital and its focus on income and years of qualifications (Becker, 1975, Becker, 1994).

8.6.7 Experiencing further and higher education; reality versus expectations

Several participants experienced a perception shift in what further and HE is like once they began attending. Out with the disruptions caused by COVID participants were surprised by the quality of education they received at college. This mainly applied to those that had moved away to a city college so were also gaining a "student experience". Also, once at college, participants became more open to university either through experiences with university students (in this study this was exclusive to those attending colleges in the city) or through lecturers and the course, even if this did not articulate to applying to university. This again demonstrates the role of 'hot' information (Slack et al., 2014) in informing perspectives.

A comment was made about the perceived college status. The local college was viewed as a place for students who were unsuccessful at school where the city college was framed as a steppingstone to achieving career goals and more akin

to university. This dichotomy between the ‘local’ and ‘city’ college is interesting. It chimes with previous work that sees leaving a rural area as synonymous with success (Corbett, 2013, Ramage, 2019). It also, however, suggests that there is a stigma around college which was a finding of Snook’s (2012) review of learners which saw college as a place for “non academics”. However, positive experiences from learners could be critical in breaking down this stigma through their role of delivering ‘hot’ information. Indeed, one of the participants that had chosen to go to college said this was partially due to a positive account from a previous student. However, the fact that the experience of college, including access to equipment and the learning environment, came as a surprise suggests that students do not know enough about college before they go.

The use of colleges as an articulation route is a key part of Scotland’s widening access agenda (Gallacher, 2017). One participant was planning to progress to university after completion of their HND. They viewed this decision as a positive choice as it took the same amount of time as a traditional degree, but they felt they had got more 1-2-1 support at college than they would have at university. This relates to the perception of university having an unsupportive learning environment but shows the value of how an articulation route can work well. In contrast, Gallacher (2017) discussed that individuals taking non-traditional qualifications/routes for entry to university found their qualifications were only given partial recognition, making it more challenging for these individuals to access university. However, as this participant had the qualifications to do the degree course before starting the HNC it gives little evidence in the way as a support for the widening access agenda. Seven other participants were also completing or had completed HNC/HND’s by the end of the period of interviews and only one was actively planning to progress to a degree. What is interesting is that the Scottish Government group HNC/HND in the category of HE when recording school leaver destination. Cynically this could be seen as a way of inflating the proportion of individuals moving to ‘HE’ or is The Scottish Government claiming that the benefits of completing an HNC/HND are equal to that of a degree? If so it would be interesting to understand why colleges are seeing cuts to budgets (Riddell, 2016), if this is valued so highly.

8.7 Skillset Development

Participants discussed how they felt their skillset developed over the course of the interviews. Participants overall were more confident in articulating their skillset and understanding its value by the end of the interview period. In addition, they were able to articulate skills that needed further development.

The overwhelming narrative from participants whilst still at school was that the key focus for progressing to their chosen career was to build qualifications. They discussed once in their final year having to start talking about their skillset. Whilst participants could articulate their skill set, they found this hard to do. They described having to 'dumb' down skills throughout school, so they did not appear arrogant to then have to become an expert overnight in articulating their skillset to potential employers and for personal statements. Even though the Curriculum for Excellence (The Scottish Government, 2019d) has four pillars (successful learner, responsible citizen, effective contributor and confident individual) a recent review of the curriculum concluded that that successful learner was focused upon to the detriment of the other three (OECD, 2021). The current study provides support for this and there may be a need to advocate for more focus on skillset at an earlier point in school.

However, over the course of the study as pupils matured and gained new experiences, they spoke of connecting more to their skill set. They were able to identify gaps in their skills that they wanted to develop as well as being able to discuss skills they had built, how they had built them and why they were important. The type of skills being developed also was widespread and included technical knowledge, interpersonal skills, and networking skills. This all taps into the concept of human capital offered by the OECD (2001). Whilst in practice human capital is narrowly defined, the OECD (2001) expands the discussion and include the types of skills and knowledge which makes up human capital. In skills they include communication, numeracy, literacy, intra and inter-personal skills.

This skills development occurred through different avenues: part time jobs, voluntary work, hobbies as well as formal learning experiences. Technical skills

tended to be specific to career development, were linked to industry specific knowledge and were more likely to be developed in a formal learning environment such as college or through apprenticeship training. However, the basis for these skills may have originated from a hobby. For example, the participant who gained an apprenticeship as a tattoo artist had self-taught for several years before gaining the apprenticeship. There was some awareness that university was also a way of building skillset. However, this was articulated as a benefit of having a degree that employers would understand a certain level of skills and education rather than been able to discuss specific skills that would be developed at degree level study.

Interpersonal skills (such as communication, teamwork and problem solving) tended to develop in more informal settings through living with others or colleagues in a part-time role whilst also attending college. The literature has focused on the possible detriment of working part-time whilst concurrently studying (Findlay and Hermannsson, 2019). Whilst this is certainly not to be dismissed and its possible negative implications have been discussed in section 8.3.1.3, participants also discussed positively the skills and experience gained from part-time employment. Often the part-time employment was related to the industry the participant was interested in, so in addition to skills development they also made connections in the workplace which in turn broadened their networks, a key to social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, this evidence supports the view that if a balance between study and work can be struck this could potentially benefit students over not working at all, both at a university and college level.

Finally, all participants demonstrated a building of their skillset no matter which path they took, linking with current policy. The policy landscape in Scotland is putting a focus on the development of skill set to address technological changes in the workplace (Skills Development Scotland, 2018). In particular, there is a focus on the development of meta-skills (categorised into self-management, social intelligence and innovation), which aims to develop human capital. Whilst participants did not identify specifically as having any “meta skills” some of the skill set they discussed came within this remit. What differed was the

participants' ability to confidently talk about their skillset, although overall there was a substantial improvement in this, from the first interview in school. Overall, the participants skillset had become something real and important to the participants rather than a tick box exercise to gain them entry on a course. There has been limited research into the skillset of school leavers and how they identify and connected with their skillset over time. This study has added to the literature in this area although more research is still needed.

8.8 Support Networks & Information

This section discusses the role of key support networks in the participants lives and how they supported and influenced the decision-making of the participants. Information gathering has also been included in this section as much of the information a participant gained was through networks and connections. This discussion aligns with the theme "Manifestation and Limits of personal agency".

8.8.1 Influence of family and friends

The literature shows a consistent influence of parents and close family as influencers (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018, Archer et al., 2003) in a young person's career decision and this study's results were consistent with this and provides some additional insights into how this articulates. Whilst overall the support was positive it was not unanimously so. Participants spoke of their parents/guardians being a sounding board, someone they could talk their ideas through with and who listened to and supported them with their plans. They were also there to provide advice and guidance.

Largely this study found unconditional support from parents/guardians who would support them with whatever route they wanted to take. This feeds into the parenting style discussed by Archer et al (2003) who discusses the role of 'child expert' where parents, often from a disadvantaged background, accept and unconditionally support their child's decision. In contrast, one participant from a middle-class background spoke about being pushed towards university. Again this is consistent with Archer et al's (2003) findings that middle class

parents direct their children more than working class parents. It also is consistent with concepts of bounded rationality that suggests human will behave in a self-sacrificing way towards those they care about (Altman and Altman, 2017). Part of this could be due to the interplay of financial support that parents paying for accommodation costs feel they have more of an influence over where their child goes and what they do than a parent who cannot afford the same financial support. Frequently media has cited the role of the “bank of mum and dad” and The National Student Money Survey (Brown, 2022) estimated that parents on average give £149.50 a month towards their child’s university education. It is also where there is disparity between the most and least deprived, with some parents unable to contribute (Chowdry et al., 2013). Another finding was that some participants were concerned about financial pressure they would put on parents by going to university and feeling that financial support from parents was not an option for them.

However, whilst some spoke of being encouraged to go to university, and this was normally from parents who had been themselves, it was not unanimously so. This is generally consistent with the literature which discusses the advantages of parental education on their children’s educational attainment and prospects (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018, Tamayo Martinez et al., 2022). However, it also highlights the nuances in parental support as some working-class families were keen for their children to aspire more and not all middle-class families were pushing their children to university. It is important to highlight this as one of narratives from the literature on parental support is the class divide, however this is too simplistic. Indeed, there was evidence of some parents being against university due to values of ‘working your way up’ that have been associated with a working class background (Archer and Hutchings, 2000).

This example also shows how a parents’ influence can act as a barrier in their child’s career plans. It also demonstrates the conflict that the participant felt between wanting to keep her parents happy but also wanting to pursue her own goals. This chimes with Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997) concept of pragmatic rationalism. This young person was making a choice which whilst seemingly irrational to those surrounding her, as academically she was a strong university

candidate, her initial decision was based on external influences and pressures. This is also interesting as a note to educational professionals and careers advisers. The dialogue from the participant whilst at school was that she did not want to go to university, and it took a year before she was able to discuss that this was not her viewpoint. Whilst participants did not want to feel pressured into making a choice, a healthy challenge of their decision-making to understand underlying motivation for their decisions is important.

As this study took place over two years it was able to track the changes in the young people's decision-making over this time. What was noticeable was that as time went on there was more development towards autonomous decisions with less input from parents although they did still have a role. Some participants at the end of the study were still living in the parental home meaning stronger connections to family through proximity and the same could be said for those participants that had moved out but still lived locally. Those that were living independently felt they had matured and were better able to make decisions by themselves and sort out their own issues, partly due to parents not being directly on hand to help but most maintained they knew they could fall back on parents to help. This is an interesting finding as Altman and Altman (2017) discuss from a bounded rationality perspective how decision-making limitations are not completely hard wired and better decision making can be developed. However, this is not specifically put into the context of the career decision-making of young people, so this study adds to this idea by showing the changing nature of the decision-making as young people progress in life and how this is influenced by their life experiences.

In this study friends and wider networks were found to provide a source of support and influence. Participants spoke of talking about their ideas through with friends and being able to support each other through the decision-making process, building on findings of Kim et al (2022) who investigated the link between career decision-making self-efficacy and friendship. There was also a role of informal networks with newly made friends putting in a word to their boss to help the participant secure a part-time job. Friends were unlikely to directly impact a career pathway through verbal communication, however, one

participant discussed that they had initially applied to university as that was 'what everyone else was doing'. Later they decided against university and when asked if they felt they were missing out or left behind, they discussed how many of those who had applied were rejected or had chosen to study from home, so they did not feel they were missing out. Whilst they discussed no direct connection with withdrawing their application due to friends also doing the same, it highlights their behaviour was not isolated in their peer group.

This participant was from a deprived area, and this provides an interesting insight into the attitude and behaviours of the young people and how they are influenced by their community and surroundings. This links in with a report by the Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) that highlighted the role of communities in aspirations and attainment. Whilst this study was based in England the findings resonate with the example presented here. Furthermore, Sinclair et al. (2014) discusses the fear of being isolated and social excluded so individuals may adjust behaviour/career choice to that of their friends to exclude this. This is interesting as whilst no participant discussed choosing a course/subject because of their friends, support network and connections were important in the choice of location for several participants. Some participants chose to remain at home due to family and friend connections. This then by default limited the courses available to them. Others chose a particular city which was familiar due to family/friend connections there. Participants discussed that this familiarity and support provided a transition to independence and gave access to courses which otherwise would have been an overwhelming transition. This ties in with Alexander's (2016) research who found that choice of university location often had connections with home and family.

A finding was that the participants networks expanded and became more prominent in their career development. This is of key interest as from a Bourdiuesian (1986) perspective those from a disadvantaged background is the limited networks and cultural and social capital that they have. Participants spoke of diverse ways they built up these networks. These networks included official sources like college where participants discussed a strong focus on employability and being able to go to industry events and talk to professionals,

which led to building information about that career and sometimes career opportunities. Sometimes, these connections resulted in conversations that steered a decision. One participant spoke about a work colleague encouraging them to apply for college and return to education which they did based on this conversation. These networks were also a way that participants built their skill set which was explored in 8.8 and serves as a reminder of how interconnected all their decisions were. This also highlights how pivotal one conversation could be for a young person and the importance for educational professionals to be mindful of this when speaking to pupils about career pathways. Both the role of wider networks and friendships has received less attention in literature, which has largely focused on parental influence (Cullinan et al., 2017, Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) yet was found to be a key part of the participants' support network.

8.8.2 Role and influence of the school

There is narrative in the literature which focuses on teachers that have dismissed pupils from a disadvantaged background of not being capable of university (Archer et al., 2003, Archer and Hutchings, 2000). This project found that the influence of the school and teachers was more complex than this. Firstly, there was a separation noted by pupils of the school as an institution to that of individual teacher's views. The school was often viewed as being more formal and target driven where teachers were seen as givers of support.

Most of the participants accounts were that the school was encouraging them towards university over other options and they were more likely to be feeling pushed into university from the school than from other influences. Berkowitz et al. (2017) found that a 'positive school climate' could disrupt the effects of low SES in relation to HE participation. This 'school climate' could also be likened to institutional habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). However, their review of the research showed a wide range of definitions of what this 'positive school climate' looked like. This would suggest that most of the pupils were in a school that was supporting them to consider university. However, this project showed that there was a fine line between encouragement and pressure. What is

interesting is that participants felt they received less help than someone who was going to university and often felt their decisions were not fully respected. The Sutton Trust (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018) made a recommendation that apprenticeships should have a UCAS style hub for applications as the landscape was complex and fragmented and school staff often had little knowledge of apprenticeships. Whilst this was a recommendation for England and not Scotland there are certainly lessons that could equally apply so that school staff have the knowledge to equally support the pupils in whatever route they choose.

Furthermore, one participant described the pressure they felt under to attend university, made them more reluctant to go. This is interesting as this participant came from a disadvantaged background and attended a school with a low proportion of pupils progressing to university. However, she felt the university was the expected choice. This demonstrates the complexity of the environment in which a young person is situated, and it is too simple to suggest that pupils from a disadvantaged background are not fully aware of the choices available to them. At a later interview, after a visiting a friend who was at university, she voiced the opinion that the school had not given her enough information about university and blamed the school for not supporting enough to help her with university. This presented a conflicting narrative on her initial interviews. This would be highlighted as a note of caution for researchers that are interviewing individuals retrospectively as the participant had reframed their narrative to fit with their current viewpoint.

Mark et al's (2003) qualitative study of mature students who had initially rejected university made the point that some of them did have the grades at school but were not encouraged to apply. Whilst most of the participants discussed university as being the 'default' option within the school, other participants discussed that they had not ever thought about it as an option, and this would seem to be consistent with the above study. One explanation for why only some participants were encouraged was that these participants were viewed by the school as a borderline candidate for university due to the number and grades of qualifications they were expected to receive. An alternative explanation is that there are variations between individual teachers and

between the schools. There was a narrative from participants about teachers who went the extra mile to support them with applications, provided support, advice, and encouragement. However, the point was also raised that not everyone got this 'extra' support and it depended on the pupil's ability to develop a rapport with teaching staff. There are key lessons from this example. This extra support was viewed positively and whilst pupils do have a designated pupil support teacher this was not always who the support was coming from. Further research could assess how much of an impact this support has and provide a better understanding of how widespread it is and how many pupils benefit from it.

This 'extra' support was not limited to teachers. Some participants spoke of receiving career guidance and those that did generally found it positive and helpful with more than one participant citing their careers adviser as one of the main influences and helping them to explore their options outwith university. The evidence presented here would therefore build on the literature that cites the importance of access to good quality careers advice (Hooley et al., 2014, OECD, 2019). However, not all participants received careers support. One participant highlighted how all her friends had multiple appointments and she had none. Currently SDS operates a targeted career service so not every pupil would receive an appointment unless they were to self-refer. SDS's (2022c) recent career review made a recommendation that all pupils should receive a careers appointment before they leave school in comparison to their current targeted approach. This would suggest an acknowledgment of the disparity in this approach, and how just because an individual may appear to have a career choice made, does not mean they do not need careers support and guidance. However, what happens after this appointment is key as Choi et al (2015) found that career development in adolescents only occurred when they had taken part in two or more career activities, so one intervention whilst a step in the right direction might not be far enough reaching.

8.8.3 Information Gathering

A further finding in this study was how participants navigated and used different information sources. Participants discussed varying methods of information gathering to aid their decision. For some they were making an active choice whether to go to university or not and therefore had spent time looking at the costs and benefits. In addition, information gathering did not stop once the individual had left school and new networks and resources were used when weighing up next steps to take, or whether to continue with the current course of action. Whilst there has been acknowledgement in the literature that access to information can be unequal between those from deprived and privileged backgrounds (Archer et al., 2003), there is less literature on how this information gathering manifests and influences decisions. This section links strongly with bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) as one of the concepts is that individuals are making decisions with incomplete information. This section looks at how the young people gathered information, how they used the information and what information they paid most attention to.

There was a seemingly conflicting nature of the research process as even participants who were actively engaged in research, did not always use all the avenues available to them. For example, one participant who had invested a good deal of time talking to different professionals about their careers, finding out from others about their experiences of university and had applied to university did not see the merit in attending an open day. The explanation they gave was at this point they were certain they were not going to go to university. They were not the only participant not to attend an open day. Whilst during the pandemic this was not an option, it illustrates that even before the pandemic participants had limited exposure to universities and sometimes this was by choice. Participants did not overtly link this to living rurally due to their location and the limited tertiary education within the region. However, many had never seen a university before, making the concept of going to university more challenging as they struggled to imagine what it would be like linking in with the discussion on the impact of rural location (see section 8.2).

Participants were much more likely to make decisions based on the views of vivid anecdotal accounts rather than on factual information. This information itself was neither accurate nor inaccurate but reflected individual experiences of the people providing the account. Sometimes the accounts were positive, and others were negative and were not all focussed on university. For example, one participant reflected about a teacher who had spoken of another pupil's positive choice to go to college before university. Several commentators have discussed the concept of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' information (Slack et al., 2014). 'Hot' information refers to accounts from an individual's social network, 'warm' is information from wider acquaintances and 'cold' information is from official sources. Slack (2014) discusses how 'hot' information is viewed as trustworthy and therefore holds more weight than cold information. However, much of the research into the role of 'hot' information in the context of HE is around how individuals select university. This is in combination with literature which discusses how those individuals from a deprived background have less access to this type of 'hot' information (Cabinet Office, 2008, Archer et al., 2003) than those from a middle-class background due to limited networks. This therefore, puts them at disadvantage as they may be more reliant on the school or official sources of information which they are less likely to trust (Slack et al., 2014).

This research adds to the literature on the use of 'hot' information and the key role it plays in the young person's decision-making. This project did not find that middle class participants had more access to 'hot' information than those from a deprived background. The difference would be on the nature of the 'hot' information. To provide an example, referring to the view of university being financially risky (section 7.8.1.1) the negative attitudes towards debt were more likely to come from a deprived family, whereas middle-class families were more likely to speak about how student loans operated. However, when considering their attitude to student finance and debt participants also spoke of it being the 'norm' and this idea that therefore, if most students take a loan, it cannot be 'that bad'. The role of 'group norms' has been well documented in psychological literature (Hitti et al., 2011, Steinel et al., 2010) but largely overlooked in its role in career decision-making although there has been some research into the

influence of friends and career choices (Kim et al., 2022, Sinclair et al., 2014) which intersects with information-gathering with influences in section 8.8.1

Whilst there was a prevalence for young people to listen to 'hot' information this was not the only resource they used to aid in their decision-making whilst at school. There is a key point to make here that people had dual roles, in that they were often the information providers and in doing so became the influencers in the young person choices. This could also be said to apply to the school as an institution, as participants spoke of resources and learning provided by the school. Therefore, that the quality, content, consistency, and frequency of the information provided all aided participants in their decision-making. Some participants discussed the high-quality information they received from the school and the value they placed on this, where others could not remember school input. This partly could be attributed to COVID limiting information gathering and as such it would be beneficial to carry out further research now restrictions have been fully lifted. However, there was a feeling from participants, that this information was often biased towards university, and they would have liked more information on different career pathways to make a choice. Participants spoke of the careers adviser being the main source of information for alternative pathways. This potentially shows a disconnect between the school which is focussed on qualifications and targets on pupil numbers moving to HE and the impartial system of career guidance delivered by SDS (2012).

Another important finding was the role of 'assumed knowledge' in the participants decision-making. Whilst the young people were making decisions rational to their context, sometimes this was based on inaccurate information. This was partly that they had incorrect information/knowledge or simply did not have full information and sometimes they had been given incorrect information by another person. For example, one participant was unaware that tuition fees in Scotland for a first degree are funded by SAAS (2022). This highlights the need for educational professionals to ensure they are checking knowledge with pupils and not using terms that pupils may not understand. This idea 'assumed knowledge' in reference to school leaver choice, has received little attention in

the literature, although arguably is not a new concept. This 'knowledge' would correlate with Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) discussions on preservation of education for the elite through the role of cultural and social capital. In this case manifesting through family knowledge which helps children navigate the university application process successfully and to share experiences. However, empirically based literature has given this less attention. Henderson et al (2019) explored the impact of first-in-family graduates in a longitudinal study. However, the focus of this was on completion rates and subject choice and institution and the additional hurdles they are having to overcome rather than those that have dismissed university as they have incomplete/incorrect information.

Finally, in the case of decision-making all participants were making decisions based on 'imperfect information'. This gives strong support for the key concepts of bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) which argues that humans make decision with limited information and cognitive limitations on ability to process available information. This also extended to the fact that there is only so far someone can plan a career due to the number of unknowns and factors outwith the individual's control. So, whilst someone might want a career in a certain industry, they cannot guarantee they will get the specific job they want in that industry as firstly they are planning into the future (for university this would be at least four years) so cannot fully predict the labour market (and are unlikely to go searching for statistical predictions on this). They also cannot guarantee they will get a place at university and then have the job opportunity they want come up, at the salary they want, and be successful at interview, as someone else makes the decision on the successful candidate. These uncertainties are before factors such as rural location and SES are brought in. If looked at from this perspective, it is unsurprising that many of the participants viewed 'university as a risky investment'. Furthermore, many economic studies work on the ideal assumption of perfect information, which for a study relating to educational choice is likely to be problematic, as in the most well-informed individual does not have a crystal ball into the future, so job outcome are never guaranteed.

8.9 Practical Implications and Recommendations of Research

This section provides a summary of the practical implications and recommendations to educational professionals and establishments, some of which have already been highlighted in the discussion.

8.9.1 Practical Implications

There are several practical implications of this project. The project was uniquely placed to assess the impact of COVID on the participants' career decision-making. It evidences that there are potential longer-term effects of the pandemic than the physical lock downs and restrictions, which could have a negative impact on their careers. This information can be used to ensure there is continued support for those that were undergoing key transitions at the time of the pandemic and contributes to the emerging and building research on the effects of the pandemic.

This project has also contributed to the literature based on challenges faced by pupils living in rural areas and the interaction with SES. Whilst globally this base is building (Corbett, 2013, Bakke, 2018, Bakke and Hooley, 2020, Rosvall et al., 2018) and some studies have touched on the role of geographical factors (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003b, Forsyth and Furlong, 2000) there is still limited research in this area that is based on school-leavers in Scotland, Laselle's & Johnson (2021, 2021) recent work on rural deprivation being a notable exceptions and even less on Scotland's rural school-leaver transitions. The evidence gathered from this study can contribute to building a picture of the challenges that rural school-leavers face which has policy implications around widening access.

Furthermore, there has been a lack of longitudinal research on school leavers transitions. By following the young people for up to two years this study has increased understanding of how career plans and reality intersect and the complexity of the career decision-making process as well as how it is intertwined

with the participants lives as a whole and how they transition to become economically active members of society. This is important as it can aid career practitioners when working with young people and policymakers in policy design.

Whilst some studies have acknowledged that there are young people with the qualifications to go to university but are choosing other routes (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003a, Archer et al., 2003) the research is limited, tends not to be recent and is fragmented. These individuals are on the periphery but not centre stage. This study has focused exclusively on the career decision-making of these individuals and has begun to shed light on why they are making these choices. This research is timely given the beginnings of a broader shift in opinion on the value of some degrees (Walker, 2020, Britton et al., 2020a). It demonstrates how not going to university can be a rational choice and that these young people often express similar aspirations and ambitions to those choosing to go to university.

Specifically, this project has also built understanding on why someone with the qualifications to go to university might choose a lower-level course at college and the varied reasons for this, an area that has largely been under-investigated in the literature but is noted as being not uncommon in the attainment statistics (The Scottish Government, 2023b). This has practical implications as in some cases the reasons were well thought out by the individual but for others their decisions were based on an incomplete understanding of the information available to them, so highlights the need for better support for young people transitioning from school. It has also demonstrated some of the opportunities available through work-based learning and why participants may see these as an option equal to university due to being able to earn, gain qualifications concurrently and have no debt.

Therefore, this project helps policymakers, educational professionals, and parents to understand how these young people are making key career decisions in order to provide them with the best support available and ensure they are making an informed choice.

8.9.2 Recommendations for Educational Professionals

This project has shown the key role of ‘hot information’ which can manifest from family and friends but also from educational professionals. Given the weighting that young people give this information it is therefore crucial that those supporting young people are aware of the information they are providing, its accuracy and how it might be interpreted. There was also the finding of ‘assumed knowledge’ where participants had incorrect information, but no one had checked their understanding. Therefore, a recommendation would be for educational professionals to ensure a young person and their parents understand the basics of the university system, how to apply, what the acronyms mean, what the different classifications of degree mean. This also extends to an individuals’ qualification level. There were some participants who thought they did not have enough qualifications to go to university and were unaware of the variation in entry requirements between courses. It is crucial that young people have a full understanding of what options are available to them even if they decide against that option.

In addition, this project demonstrated that whilst some participants spoke of a teacher ‘going the extra mile’ the nature of this extra support whilst invaluable was not evenly spread and available to all pupils. A lot depended on the individual relations a pupil made with teachers, suggesting there is inequality within schools as well as between different schools as discussed in section 8.8.2. A recommendation would be for schools to assess how these informal support networks manifest in school and how they can be utilised effectively and fairly.

Furthermore, participants discussed feeling that the support offered in the school was more weighted towards those going to university. They felt that once they had decided not to go to university, they were left to work out what to do by themselves and some discussed feeling like second best. This could be partly attributed to staff having more knowledge about the university application process than other routes such as college and apprenticeships. Montacute and Cullinane (2018) who reported such findings suggested an ‘apprenticeship portal’ like that of UCAS. Currently apprenticeship.scot offers a website which

advertises apprenticeships in the one place and UCAS has recently expanded it services to do the same. Currently both still require any applications to be made direct to the company, however as of 2024 UCAS will allow students to apply for an apprenticeship alongside their degree (UCAS, 2023). Therefore, a recommendation of this study would be to ensure that school staff have adequate training in place, so they are able to support young people in whatever pathway they choose.

In addition, some participants spoke of the imbalance in the career support on offer with some participants getting several appointments and others getting none as discussed in section 8.8.2. This research underpins the need for more transparency of career support in school and clear appointment options to ensure that pupils and parents are fully aware of their entitlement and how to make an appointment. It also points to the need for a more joined up approach with the school so all teachers are fully aware of the careers service on offer and can help to more comprehensively identify pupils that could require an appointment.

There was a finding that participants in general had only a vague understanding of how student finance works and often this information came from parents/family. In addition, their attitude to debt also tended to come from family values. An implication of the current research is that more education and information is needed on university finance for both parents and pupils to ensure they have a clear understanding of the student loan system. Whilst there is information available on the internet around student finance, the evidence from this study shows that signposting is not an effective method to get the information across. The dissemination of information needs to be done through formats that young people are more likely to access such as bringing in past pupils to talk about their experiences.

There was a finding that participants did not have a good understanding of how the student loan system worked or accurate concepts on the cost of university. Clear information and education around student finance needs to be provided. It also needs to happen before pupils are in their final year, as by this point, they

often have already formed a view on student finance which is hard to change. Furthermore, with the cost-of-living crisis participants were concerned that the finance offered (Brown, 2022) would not be enough to cover their living costs without also having to work. Whilst there can be benefits to working in terms of skills development this needs to be balanced against the detriment it can cause to study (Findlay and Hermannsson, 2019, Warhurst et al., 2009). Therefore, a recommendation arising from this research is that there should be a review of current levels of student finance.

With regards to skillset, the evidence from this study shows that that pupils are not confident or fully aware of their skillset whilst at school. Therefore, a recommendation is that more work needs to happen at a school level to embed skills into the curriculum and have a more balanced approach to the four pillars of the Curriculum for Excellence (The Scottish Government, 2019d). In addition, this work needs to start at an early age and not just in the senior phase of education, with young people being encouraged to confidently discuss their skillset. Current policy (Skills Development Scotland, 2018) would suggest this skills development is an important agenda for the future of Scotland's economy in the 21st century.

8.9.3 Recommendations for universities and colleges

A clear finding of this study was the limited level of local provision at a university level but also a college levels. Participants discussed not having a full range of courses available within the local area adding an extra decision-making layer as to whether to stay and compromise on course choice or move away to access the desired course. Although far reaching, a long-term recommendation of this study would be to assess and potentially increase university provision in rural areas which would allow more familiarity with university for students (through school trips and 'spill over effects' such as being around university premises and seeing students (Cullinan and Halpin, 2017)), therefore aiding in enrolment and creating a more equal system. This recommendation also extends to college provision as some participants had to move away to access the college course they wanted. A more immediate recommendation is to provide more

support for rural students to access universities before S6, so they understand what a university is like, and it is not an "unknown".

Building on this, a finding of this study was that participants were worried about the learning environment surrounding university and lack of support they would receive. For prospective students who have never visited a university and are considering moving away from their home and community, to also be worried about isolation within their studies, adds another deterring factor to applying. Universities need to consider the image they are presenting, especially to those from a non-traditional or disadvantaged background, if they want to break away from the notion that education is preserving inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) rather than a vehicle to break them.

A final recommendation for universities is to assess their measures for widening access and ensure they do not inadvertently miss eligible young people from rural areas due to postcode insensitivities. This study found defining the SES of individuals from a rural background a challenge due to lack of sensitivities of the SIMD and followed the practice found in other research by using multiple indicators (Duta et al., 2021). This recommendation for more sensitives measures for rural students is not in isolation and is called for by other researchers (Lasselle and Johnson, 2021, Boliver et al., 2022). Furthermore, those participants involved in widening access had very little recollection of the programme or its purpose. Therefore, a final recommendation is to ensure parents and pupils are clear on what the purpose of such programmes are and not to assume understanding.

8.10 Limitations and Scope for Further Research

This research project has provided a rich data set which has built on the knowledge base of the challenges young people from rural areas face. However, there were some limitations of the study.

The study was impacted and altered by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a strength and limitation of the project. Whilst the project was able to

adapt and be uniquely placed to gather data, the restrictions also caused limitations. Originally the aim of the study was to recruit participants from different geographical areas and compare the challenges faced. However, this was stopped by the pandemic as fewer schools were willing to participate in the research and it was felt by the researcher that it was not appropriate to contact schools when they had other priorities. However, the project could be replicated in other areas, to build the literature on the link between SES and rural location. This, as well a comparison with urban areas, is a recommendation for future research. Another limitation was that due to the lockdown the first round of participant recruitment did not generate enough participants which meant a second cohort of participants had to be recruited. Due to time constraints the second cohort could only be followed up for a year instead of two years so the data for them was limited in comparison to the first cohort. Furthermore, it was difficult to identify how much of an impact COVID had on the participants decision-making and how unique this population subset is. Whilst being a qualitative study there is no focus on a generalisation to a wider population, the results do need to be viewed in the context of the timeframe when the study took place.

Due to the small number of schools involved, because of COVID, this also impacted the reach of the initial survey and resulted in a much lower response than was anticipated. This meant that responses from the survey could only be used to provide very general descriptive information on school leaver decision-making rather than being the basis for a full statistical analysis. A recommendation for future research would be to carry out a further survey to assess how many individuals are in the subset of those who have the qualifications to go to university but choose not to go. It would also be beneficial to carry out this analysis longitudinally as this study showed that intention to go to university did not always result in participation and vice versa.

Another limitation of the project was on the assessment of skillset. This project focussed on participants’ reflections on their skillset and their own accounts of how they connected with their skillset and how they felt it developed. Whilst this was valuable and provided key insights into how participants view their

skills, a more formal assessment of skillset would have strengthened the research project. Although, Chyruk and Benzoni (2015) discuss the difficulties of assessing skillset in human capital modelling, a recommendation for further research would be to carry out a large-scale research project assessing school pupils' skillsets.

This study followed participants over a two-year period, and this generated a huge amount of data and has provided valuable insights from a longitudinal perspective of young people's decision-making. However, at the end of the interview period many of the young people were still in an 'active' phase of career exploration with only some signs of settling into an industry. Conducting further research on this group of participants another five or ten years on would be incredibly beneficial in building a fuller picture of their decision-making and longer-term consequences of their choices.

Another area for further research would be to critically assess the returns to investments on college qualifications such as an Advanced Certificate, HNC and HND and compare these to returns to an equivalent degree program in a Scottish context. There is an imbalance between the literature on returns to education focuses on university qualifications and there is not the same research base for returns to college education nor training through apprenticeship. Whilst the CVER has a wealth of publications relating to this context in England (Britton et al., 2020b, Cavaglia et al., 2022) little of the research focuses on Scottish learners. The Scottish Government (2019c, 2023a) has published longitudinal educational outcomes for their apprenticeship programme and a return on investment for both college and apprenticeship routes (2022b, 2022a). Within Scotland more information is need on earning and non-monetary outcomes of different education routes not just returns for university and this research needs to be disseminated as the over-riding narrative of the participants is that the school was promoting university as 'better' than other post-school options. This would allow young people to be better informed about the choices they are making.

8.11 Conclusions

This chapter contains a critical assessment of the findings from the study and connected them to the relevant literature and theoretical framework. It contains an exploration of the intersection between personal agency and the barriers a young person may face in their decision-making and how living in a rural area adds to this complexity. It has examined support networks and the role they play in the young person's choices as well as the influence they can have. It has also assessed the longitudinal changes and what happens in the first two years of a young person's career, how this connects with their skillset and how plans map into reality. It has demonstrated that the career decisions a young person makes extends beyond financial considerations The key theoretical contributions that underpinned this study have been discussed throughout the discussion and this section brings their contribution together.

This project took on an inter-disciplinary approach and went beyond economic theory of human capital to assess how other theories could aid understanding as to why young people with the qualifications to university are choosing different routes, or in some cases delaying university. The above discussion shows that the decision-making landscape for young people is complex, with many intertwining factors. The discussion provided some practical implications and recommendations as well as limitations of the study. The next chapter will provide some concluding remarks on the thesis.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

This project has made some significant findings and advances on the research of individuals choosing not to enter university from school and has met its intended aims and answered the research questions set out in the introduction.

To refresh, the research aims were:

1.To investigate the choices of qualified young people domiciled in Scotland, which seeks to uncover the process of decision-making which led them to choose

an alternative post-school route from university, for example college or an apprenticeship.

2. To examine in detail the perceived consequences of their career decision-making and the role of social origin, rural geographic location and COVID.

3. An exploration, based on the lived experience of the same group of qualified young people, the role of a broad range of attributes valued in the labour market beyond formal qualifications and how these attributes develop over time.

It explored the literature and assessed what factors were already known to affect career choices and how these factors affected career choice as well as an understanding of where there were gaps in the literature. It brought together different theoretical perspectives which sought to provide an understanding of the complex situation the young person is in. Human capital theory postulates that there are positive returns to years of education with the assumption of perfect information and capital markets. However, this study clearly demonstrated that these young people do not have perfect information when making their decisions. The information they had often conflicted, for example, on one hand being told university was the best choice, whilst also being told that many graduates cannot find jobs, whilst also hearing that apprenticeships give the opportunity to earn and learn without the debt. This has clear links with bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) which holds that individuals do not have access to all information when making a decision. This is particularly relevant in the context of career decision making when decisions have a bearing on the future. Furthermore, the study has demonstrated how young people interpreted and used these information sources to make their decision and the importance they put on different strands of information. It also highlighted how the people in the participants support network often were the givers of information and the inextricable relationship between the two. Whilst the literature has acknowledged the role of ‘hot’ information (Slack et al., 2014) it has focussed less on other information avenues. In addition, there is some evidence that choosing ‘low value’ degrees have little or no return (Britton et

al., 2020a, Walker, 2020) and in these cases the young people are making a fully 'rational' choice not to go to university if examining choice from a monetary returns perspective.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the decision-making of young people was complex and that many factors combined and influenced their choice not to go to university. These factors included their attitude to debt, the participants perception of their qualification levels, industry area of interest, their support network and the opinions of their support network which are not fully accounted for within human capital theory.

This complexity of factors links to the theoretical framework discussed and provides a theoretical contribution. First of all we will consider Becker's (1975, 1994) human capital and modelling of educational choice. Given participants prevalence to rely on 'hot' information participants could not be said to model their decisions in the precise way that Becker proposes. However, there is some factoring in of potential earnings and time investment and Becker (1994) acknowledges the nature of the investment of university being high risk due to its long payback period and illiquid nature. Building on this, the awareness that participants had of 'low value' degrees suggests that subconsciously there is a 'rational' part to the decision-making.

There was considerable support for the concepts of bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) and pragmatic rationality as the findings showed the individuals to be generally making "smart decisions" (Altman and Altman, 2017) with regard to their context. The findings were that the information they were using was often incomplete and sometimes inaccurate, but participants were generally trying to make a well-informed decision. Specifically, bounded rationality focuses on the role of decision making, and whilst it acknowledges both the role of psychological and sociological factors much of the research associated with bounded rationality focuses more on the cognition and process rather than the sociological factors. Hodkinson et al's (1996) pragmatic rationalism however gave credence to these sociological factors as well as the role of stakeholders, however this study was limited to young people

undertaking a YTS. This study has found support for the concepts discussed by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and found they hold for a different participant group – that is a group of individuals qualified to go to university but were choosing a different post-school route. Thes participants were making choices that were situated within their environmental context and were not immune to influences by their support networks. Specifically, it has aided in the understanding of what factors influence decision-making and how they influence the decision.

Furthermore, decisions were being based on the incomplete information participants had which includes their beliefs around enjoyment of university and ability to succeed. The latter being a component of human capital modelling in the form of qualifications and attributes (Burgess, 2016), however at the point of leaving school these are still being built on. When concepts such as 'fitting in' are considered we are then moving towards a 'Bourdieusian' perspective (Bourdieu, 1986) on levels of social and cultural capital which, feed into decision-making and tie in with Roberts' (2009) opportunity structures confining individuals in their choices. The combining of these theories demonstrates how the young person is at the centre of their career context in which economical, and sociological factors all play a role.

Additionally, it contributed to the literature base on challenges faced by pupils living in rural areas and the interaction with SES. It has demonstrated that rural location in itself is not a barrier but for some participants when this is combined with SES it can limit choice and act as a deterring factor towards university participation. Whilst globally this base is building (Corbett, 2013, Bakke, 2018, Bakke and Hooley, 2020, Rosvall et al., 2018) and some studies have touched on the role of geographical factors there is still limited research in this area that is based on school leavers in Scotland (with Laselle and Johnson's (2021, 2021) recent work on rural deprivation being a notable exception) and even less on rural school leaver transitions in Scotland. These big structural factors being the key determinant of an individual's career choices is a central component of Robert's (2009) theory of opportunity structures and the research found partial support for their role. Whilst geography could act as a barrier to opportunities,

especially if the individual was from a working-class background, however this was not pre-determined and for some individuals they were actively choosing to remain locally whilst others relished the chance to move away from home.

By taking a longitudinal qualitative approach to the project and carrying out empirical research, which whilst not unique in economics (Starr, 2014) is certainly not common practice, it has provided a fresh perspective and provided new evidence in relation to the research questions. Due to the qualitative approach this study was uniquely placed to assess the impact of COVID on the participants career decision-making as the pandemic occurred. There were four ways that participants were impacted, these were, limitations to information gathering on their career choices, learning and qualification uncertainty, unclear future pathways, with these three contributing to negatively impact mental health. This provides new evidence on the role that COVID had on school leavers in Scotland about which, at the point of writing, there was little research done.

The longitudinal aspect to this study also aided in meeting the second aim. It provided an understanding of how the participants' plans, and reality intersect. It demonstrated the complexity of the career decision-making process as well as how it is intertwined with the participants' lives as a whole. It showed that participants did not make one career decision but were continually making decisions and refining them over time and as their experiences built and information changed. It has built an understanding of how a young person develops and connects with their skillset, providing practical recommendations for schools, though it also acknowledges more work is needed here. It has demonstrated that a young person's skills develop through a variety of formats, networks and learning experiences and do not stop because they have not gone to university.

This study has focused exclusively on the career decision-making of individuals that have chosen not to go to university and has begun to shed light on why they made the choices they made and how this connected with their SES. This study found the participants viewed university as a risky investment but that this risk could shift over time to being worth the investment. These participants were an

under-researched and hard to access group. Whilst some studies have acknowledged that there are young people with the qualifications to go to university but are choosing other routes (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003a, Archer et al., 2003) the research has been limited, tended not to be recent and was fragmented. These individuals were on the periphery and this project has brought them to centre stage. There has only been a limited amount of further empirical research on Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997)'careership' theory and this study builds this base and adds support with a different participant group. Furthermore, this study has built understanding on why someone with the qualifications to go to university might choose a lower-level course at college and the varied reasons for this, an area that has largely been under investigated by the literature. It also has built on the understanding of the value that participants gave apprenticeships. This research has been incredibly timely given beginnings of a broader shift in opinion towards a system that values all routes equally in status (World Bank, 2018, The Scottish Government, 2014b).

9.1 Final Remarks

This research has shown that whilst the participants chose not to enter university directly from school none of them regretted their choices at the end of the study and were happy with the process they went through to get this point. Those that did progress to university felt taking the time out had helped them make a better choice than if they rushed from school and felt they would also perform better academically. Those that chose an apprenticeship felt they were benefiting from earning and learning simultaneously. Even when events did not go quite as planned, participants viewed this as a learning experience and saw that perseverance was necessary to gain what they wanted even if this meant going against the viewpoint of others. The project has also built upon and added support for careership theory (Hodkinson et al., 1996, Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), bounded rationality (Simon, 1997, Simon, 1986) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, Bourdieu, 1984, Bourdieu and Nice, 1977, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and that by combining these theories it begins to create a fuller explanation for the decision-making choices of young-people. Whilst this project demonstrated the limits of human capital theory (Becker, 1975, Becker, 1994) in

explaining the decision making there was some evidence that young people were considering the financial and end goal implementations of there choice.

As have been discussed, there are practical implications from this project to help address the issue of the gap in university participation for example. However, that does not mean that university is by default the right choice for someone with the qualifications to go. There are alternative choices, such as apprenticeships or college. What is required is more funding and more research into these routes and a removal of the stigma that someone who is choosing them is doing so only because they cannot access university. In conclusion, participation in university should be a choice available to every qualified person irrespective of their background but equally so should college or apprenticeships.

Appendix I: Online Survey

Online Survey (to go to all S5 leavers and S6 pupils)

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the career decisions of pupils who have the qualifications to go to university but are planning on choosing another route. This is a research project being conducted by Elysha Ramage a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Glasgow. You are invited to participate in this research project because you are an S5 or S6 pupil who is planning to leave school in May 2021.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalised.

The procedure involves filling an online survey that will take approximately 10 minutes. Your responses will be confidential. I am looking for participants to take part in further interviews and to ask them questions about their career plans. If you are interested in taking part in further research, there will be the option to leave contact details, otherwise no identifying information will be collected. Your answers will be used to gather information on what pupils' plan to do when they leave school. The survey questions will be about your plans for when you leave school, your qualifications, and some background information.

Your data will be stored in line with University of Glasgow guidelines. The results of this study will be used to recruit participants for further interviews. In addition, it will contribute to my Ph.D. theses and potential the production of conference papers and journal articles.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Elysha Ramage at e.ramage.1@research.gla.ac.uk. This research has been reviewed according to The University of Glasgow ethic procedures for research involving human subjects.

Top of Form

Question Title

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

- you have ready the above information
- you voluntarily agree to participate
- you are at least 16 years of age

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "disagree" button.

Bottom of Form

Questions

1. What is the highest level of qualification you currently hold?

    a. Advanced Highers
    b. 3 or more Highers
    c. 1 or 2 Highers
    d. National 5
    e. National 4
    f. Other (please give details)

2. What is the highest level of qualification you expect to achieve by the end of the school year?

    a. Advanced Highers
    b. 2 or more Highers
    c. 1 Higher
    d. National 5
    e. National 4
    f. Other (please give details)

3. What is your first choice for when you leave school?
    a. University (degree)
    b. College (degree)
    c. Associated degree pathway
    d. College (HNC/HND)

e. College (other programme please give details)
f. Graduate Apprenticeship
g. Modern Apprenticeship
h. Full-time employment
i. Part-time employment
j. Volunteering
k. Gap year
l. Other training
m. Undecided
n. Other (please provide details)

4. What is your second choice/alternative plan for when you leave school?
   a. University (degree)
   b. College (degree)
   c. Associated degree pathway
   d. College (HNC/HND)
   e. College (other programme please give details)
   f. Graduate Apprenticeship
   g. Modern Apprenticeship
   h. Full-time employment
   i. Part-time employment
   j. Volunteering
   k. Gap year
   l. Other training
   m. Still unsure
   n. I don't have a 2nd choice/alternative plan.
   o. Other (please provide details)

5. What would stop you pursuing your first choice?
   a. Unsure if I will make the entry requirements.
   b. Not fully decided between first and second choice
   c. Nothing – I already have an unconditional offer/job offer.
   d. Other (please give details)

6. What is your home postcode?
7. What are your parents'/guardians' occupation?
8. What is your parents/guardians highest level of qualification?
   a. Post-graduate degree (i.e., PhD, MSc)
   b. Undergraduate degree
   c. Further education qualification
   d. Vocational qualification (for example through an apprenticeship)
   e. Highers/A-Levels or equivalent
   f. Nationals/GCSE/Standard Grades or Equivalent
   g. No qualifications
   h. Other

9. If required would you be willing to take part in a 1-2-1 interview to discuss your career choices further?
   a. Yes – please leave contact details:
      i. First Name:
      ii. Last Name:
      iii. School Attended:
      iv. Mobile Number:
      v. Registration Class:
      vi. Email address:
   b. No

Appendix II: First Interview Schedule

Thank you for meeting with me today. As discussed, you are free to withdraw your consent at any time. This interview will be audio-recorded. Remember there are no right and wrong answers. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Background Information

Firstly, I have some background questions for you.

What year are you in at school?

Do you plan to leave school in May 2021 (May 2022 2nd cohort)?

Family

Who do you stay at home with?

What is your home postcode?

What do your parents/mum/dad/guardians do for work?

What are your parents' highest levels of qualification?

Did they complete university?

Qualifications

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your qualifications.

Please tell me what subjects you are taking now?

What level are these at?

What are your predicted grades?

(S6 only) What were the results of your S5 subjects (subject, level, and grade)?

Were you pleased with your results?

If so, what made it a good result. If not, what was it about the result you weren't happy with?

What impact do you feel COVID-19 has had on your results? Any impact on your future?

Post-School Plans

Thank you for those answers. I would now like to ask you some questions on your plans for when you leave school and how you made those plans.

What are your plans for when you leave school?

Do you have an offer from college/job/apprenticeship?

Is it a conditional or unconditional offer?

What are the conditions? Do you feel confident you will meet them? What makes you say this?

Talk me through how you decided on these plans (prompt questions below)

What forms of information did you use to help find out more i.e., websites?

How easy was it find the information you needed?

Who have you discussed your career plans with?

Tell me about these discussions.

What or who would you say were the main influences? How did they influence you?

Do you have a Plan B or another competing plan?

Perceptions of University

Thank you for that. I would now like to understand more about what you think of university.

Was university an option you considered? (For those with 3+Highers) or (For those with 2 Highers) Is university an option you are considering in the future?

Can you tell me more? (For those with 3+ Highers) What factors or influences put you off going? (See what comes up without prompting)

I am going to ask about some factors that other studies have shown as an influencing choice to go to university to find out whether these were something you also had thought about in your decision-making process. Again, there are no

right, and wrong answers and you may not have considered any or all of the factors.

Finance

What thought did you give to finance and the cost of going to university?

How do you feel about student loans or getting into debt? (Accommodation, loans, fear of debt)

Do you see university as investment to get a better paid job?

Friends and Family

What conversations did you have with friends around university as an option?

What were their views on university?

What were their views on your choices?

What conversations did you have with family around university as an option?

What were their views on university?

What were their views on your choices?

School

What conversations did you have with the school about university?

What were their views on university?

What were their views on your choices?

Social Life

Would 'fitting in' at university be concern to you?

Did you have any concerns over moving away from home?

Did you consider living at home whilst at university?

Course/university options

Did the length of study for a degree impact your decision at all?

Do you feel your school subjects and grades have limited your choices at all?

Could you have accessed a course whilst living at home?

Perceptions

Do you feel university is an option for everyone who has entry requirements?

Do you see university as relevant to you? (Not for me)

Do you feel a degree would be beneficial to your career?

What could have changed your mind about your decision to go to university? (Prompts - financial aid, nothing, more information (about what?))

What do you see as the benefits of going to university?

What do you see as the costs/negatives of going to university?

What do you imagine university to be like?

Information about University

What opportunities did you have to find out more about university and what it would be like? (Prompts - chances to go to open days, HE conventions, input from Focus West/Widening access)

Tell me what you know about university (prompts- for example about what or how you would be studying there, what about the social aspect, how would you have felt about living away from home)?

Skill set

So now I would like to talk about your skills, that is the things you are good at. This could be skills to do with school or outside of school.

What sort of skills do you think you have?

Please could you name your top-five skills?

What made you pick these skills?

Did you find that easy, hard or in the middle?

What makes you say this?

What skills do you think would be good to develop for ___?

What sort of skills do you think employers are looking for?

What makes you say this?

Do you feel you have the skills that an employer would want?

How do you feel you could develop your skills further?

How confident are you at discussing your skills?

What makes you say this?

Future Plans

Almost done. I have a few questions to ask you about future plans.

Where do see yourself in 6months, 1yr, 18months and 2years time?

On a scale of 1-10 how much thought have you given to your future?

What puts you at a _____ (fill in the number chosen)?

Additional

Is there anything you feel I have not asked you about your plans that you feel I should have done?

Follow-up

I am looking for participants who would be happy with me following them up over the next two years. This would involve three phone interviews (10-15min duration) in 6months, 12months and 18months time and a final 1-2-1 interview in 24months. Would you be happy to participate in this?

If yes please can I check I have the best contact details for you.

Do you have any questions?

Many thanks for your participation today.

Appendix III Follow Up Interview Schedule

Follow Up Interview Schedule

- **Thank you for taking the time to speak to me today.**
- **Some general ice-breaker questions.**
- **Confirm they are ok to speak and re-iterate how long the call will take.**
- **Re-cap on customer consents and data security.**

Contact details

1. Can you confirm the best contact details for you – has anything changed?

Update on career plans

2. So last time we spoke you told me that you were planning to _________________, can you tell me how these plans are progressing?
3. In terms of your plans, what has changed and what has stayed the same?
4. What factors have affirmed your plans?
5. What factors have changed your plans?

Update on future career plans

6. At the last interview, your longer-term plans were _________ what has change and what has stayed the same with these?
7. What factors have affirmed your future plans?
8. What factors have changed your future plans?
9. Is there anything you have learnt in the past six months that you wished you had known when you were still at school?
   a. Can you tell me more? Where did you find this information? How might this have changed your plans?
10. COVID Impact?

Update on skill set

11. You identified the following as your top skills ______________. Would these still be the skills you would pick as your top skills?
12. What makes you say this?
13. What additional skills do you think you have developed?
14. How do you see these skills being useful to you in your career?
15. Anything else you would like to tell me about your career?

16. Any questions for me?

Thank you for your time. Set a date for 12month/18month/24month follow-up.

Appendix IV: Consent Form

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Not Going to university: context-based rationality with links to social class and rural location in the career decision-making of Scottish school leavers

Name of Researcher: Elysha Ramage

Supervisors: Jeanette Findlay and Kristinn Hermannsson

Please tick as appropriate

Yes ☐ No ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to the all interviews being audio-recorded

Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to being contacted six, twelve and eighteen months after the first interview for follow-up interviews

Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my access to career interviews arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

I agree that:

Yes ☐ No ☐ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

Yes ☐ No ☐ Other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes ☐ No ☐ Other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant ………………………… Signature …………………………………………

Date ……………………………………

Name of Researcher ……………………………………Signature ………………………………………

Date ……………………………………

……………… End of consent form …………..

Appendix V: Participant Information Sheet

College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Not going to university: context-based rationality with links to social class and rural location in the career decision-making of Scottish school leavers.

Researcher Details: Elysha Ramage e.ramage.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisors:

Jeanette Findlay: Jeanette.findlay@glasgow.ac.uk

Kristinn Hermannsson Kristinn.hermannsson@glasgow.ac.uk

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the career decisions of pupils who have the qualifications to go to university but are choosing another route. This is a research project being conducted by Elysha Ramage a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Glasgow. You are invited to participate in this research project because you are an S5 or S6 pupil who is planning to leave school in May 2021.

Your participation in the study

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalised.

This is a longitudinal research project. This means that I am researching career decisions over two years. I would arrange interview at six months, one year, eighteen months after this interview. In two years,' time there would be one final interview.

The procedure involves a 1-2-1- interview which will take no more than one hour. The interview will be audio-recorded. Due to the current COVID-19 crisis, all interviews will take place within COVID-19 regulations and guidelines. This could mean that the interview may take place through Microsoft Teams if this is deemed the most appropriate method.

This interview asks questions about your plans for when you leave school, your qualifications, some background information, your future plans, your perceptions of university and your skillset. You do not need to answer any questions you do not want to, and you don't need to give a reason for not wanting to answer them. You can indicate this by asking me to skip to the next question.

Confidentiality

- Please note that whilst confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this. If this was the case, I would inform you of any decisions that might limit your confidentiality.
- Your personal details will be kept separately to this recording and transcription and an identifying code will be given. Any extracts of data that are included in the study will be identified by a pseudonym and any identifying details such as your school or home-location will be removed. Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed, due to the limited size of the participant sample.

How your data will be used

- Your data will be stored in line with University of Glasgow guidelines. It will be used to produce my Ph.D. theses and potential the production of conference papers and journal articles.
- It will be stored securely for the duration of the project. After the project has completed all personal contact data will be destroyed and only the data with pseudonym will be stored for 10years in line University of Glasgow guidance.

The findings of this research can be accessed upon request at:
e.ramage.1@research.gla.ac.uk

This research is funded by the University of Glasgow

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee

To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

____________________End of Participant Information Sheet____________________

Appendix VI: Privacy Notice

Privacy Notice for "Not Going to University: context-based rationality with links to social class and rural location in Scottish school leavers" PhD Project – Elysha Ramage

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow *will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to the research being undertaken for the PhD Project Not going to University and Social Class This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.*

Why we need it

We are collecting your basic personal data such as name, email address and phone number in order to be able to contact you to arrange interviews for the research project described above. We will also collect your postcode to ascertain rank on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. We will only collect data that we need in order to provide and oversee this service to you.

Legal basis for processing your data:

*We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. In this instance, the legal basis is: c*onsent.

What we do with it and who we share it with:

- *All the personal data you submit is processed by staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom.*
- All the personal data you submit will be held electronically and securely using The University of Glasgow system.

How long do we keep it for?

Your data will be retained by the University for the duration of the project which is due to end on the 31st August 2025. *After this time, data will be securely deleted.*

What are your Rights?*

You can request access to the information we process about you at any time. If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Where we have relied upon your consent to process your data, you also have the right to withdraw your consent at any time.

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the webform or contact dp@gla.ac.uk.

*Please note that the ability to exercise these rights will vary and depend on the legal basis on which the processing is being carried out.

Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at

dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) https://ico.org.uk/

☐ I consent to the University processing my personal data for the purposes detailed above.

I have read and understand how my personal data will be used.

Signed:

………

Date:

……]

Appendix VII: Field Work Journal Extract

P001

This participant came across as more and more as having found their way. In the six month interview they had discussed being unsettled and unsure where to go as they had been rejected from the merchant navy and in the 12month interview thought they had found a bit of direction but were still considering several options. In this interview they discussed how they planned to pursue a career in forestry and had dropped the other options.

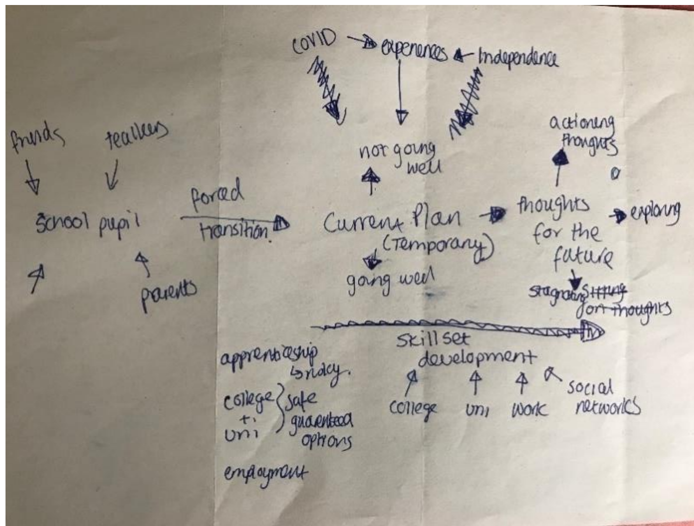
They discussed how this was an idea back from childhood which they had dismissed but come round to again. Reflecting on how this had come about – their work was planting trees and forestry based which had led them to taking the HNC course and from there they discussed applying for the year internships and it being viewed as a “safe option” as they had no definite answer from either the merchant navy or the RAF. The participant felt they were self-directed in this choice and had made a conscious decision around the February time that they did want to fully apply themselves to the course. They discussed having found a better balance and routine.

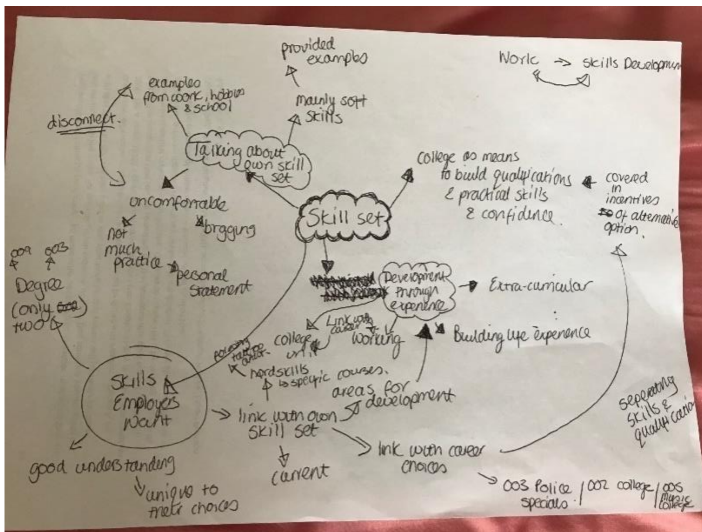
The placement they gain was fully paid for a year and they discussed how they may return for the HND – they spoke about this being beneficial if they were to move companies however, they also felt that if they were offered a job with the company they would probably take it as it would be well paid and offer good opportunities and progression.

They spoke about their skills development – a lot focused on becoming more independent and managing time as well as developing theoretical skills through the course. Once again university was not entirely ruled out but it was certainly not seen as “in the plan”.

I think it is interesting that their career has gradually aligned to their skills and experience – the work they have been doing parttime was outdoors and forestry related and this is what they have ended up going with. I’m not sure what the interpretation theory wise would be for this as not really “happenstance” but neither fully planned but in some ways taking the easiest route and some discussion of risk and security.

Appendix VIII: Developing Themes and Fieldwork Extracts





There is a strong class connection with university participation. One theme around reasons for non participation is due to individual from low SES not participating is due to 'risk'. [Individuals from a more privileged background are use to having what they need so the desire to earn money / have the things they want is perhaps not such a pressing need where for an individual from a low SES this is potentially more important leading them to choose an alternative route such as an apprenticeship or a job or a college course which typically would have a shorter course time frame] This also potentially links into goal planning & short-term frustrations for long term gain. A privileged individual would understand the benefits of university from encouragement from family and friends and therefore view it as the logical next step, where an individual from a low SES may not see the relevance and therefore 'choose' / make an active choice to participate, having carefully considered their options.

this is an interesting thought but not much evidence to back up. (something to explore in interviews)

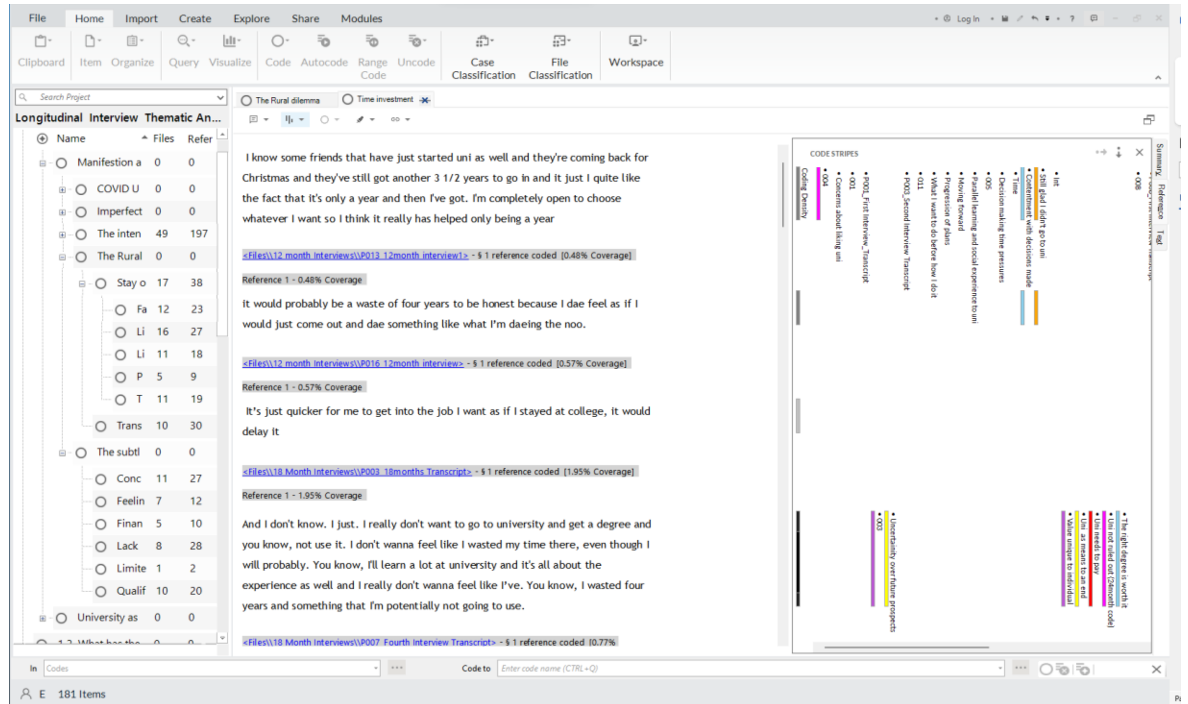
am I reading / seeing evidence of this in the literature?

- Positional good
- Ethnocentric.
- Active v passive choice
- Why do we want to widen access
- Are young people rational?
- Can they make own choices?
- Do we have a responsibility.

participants
future - building blocks
no interest
undecided
University as a risky investment
time
finance
alternative
incentives of other choices
degree not needed
salary not top priority
University as an informed choice
Interaction with info sources - vicarious experiences
impact of rural location

Future decision
covid impact
info gather
quals

Appendix IX: NVivo Coding Extract



Appendix X: Interview Durations by Participant

Participant Name	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5
Sarah	00:54:28	00:38:33	00:21:01	00:41:17	00:52:55
Tracey	00:43:41	00:19:09	00:21:29	00:34:52	00:51:23
Steve	00:41:41	00:19:47	00:29:03	00:33:22	00:35:23
Robert	00:50:24	00:20:19	00:17:33	00:28:17	00:30:42
Curtis	00:28:56	00:15:35	00:10:03	00:15:56	00:25:57
Felicity	00:51:12	00:18:26	00:26:52	00:28:01	00:31:00
Zach	00:35:08	00:21:47			
Jack	00:43:09	00:26:05	00:29:41	00:40:48	00:46:58
Harry	00:34:13	00:23:18	00:39:39		
Milly	00:32:01	00:16:55	00:33:22		
Jordan	00:21:20				
Trevor	00:54:04	00:22:55	00:31:19	00:22:48	00:40:43
Colin	01:04:25	00:25:24	00:20:58	00:28:17	00:33:34
Lizzy	00:54:26	00:14:35	00:17:22		
Pamela	00:28:15	00:21:07	00:24:47		
Bryonny	00:41:29				
Total Duration	11:18:52	05:03:55	05:23:09	04:33:38	05:48:35
Mean of Interview	00:42:26	00:21:43	00:24:51	00:30:24	00:38:44

References

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