

## Paper proposal for SRHE Annual Research Conference 2016

**Title:** Problematizing the role of student choice in shaping the higher education sector in England: the perspective of bachelor's degree students at further education colleges (0284)

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### Introduction

In 2016, the British government's Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) published a higher education (HE) White Paper entitled *Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice* (BIS, 2016). Echoing its 2011 predecessor (BIS, 2011), a key premise of the paper is that creating a market of HE providers will lead to more choice for prospective students. The justification for this perspective is as follows:

Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception (BIS, 2016: 8).

Although this policy aim is said to 'put choice for students at the heart of [the government's] higher education reform strategy' (BIS, 2016: 11), it is based on the assumption that all HE students choose an HE course and institution based mostly on their *preferences* rather than their *circumstances*. As such, it presumes that one of the primary solutions to help students make better choices is to give them more information about the options available to them; the picture that is painted is that poor choices by students is 'costly', both for the students themselves and society at large. As stated in the 2016 White Paper (BIS, 2016: 11):

Information, particularly on price and quality, is critical if the higher education market is to perform properly. Without it, providers cannot fully and accurately advertise their offerings, and students cannot make informed decisions...poor decisions by the student as to which course and institution to attend can prove costly not just for them but for the broader economy and the taxpayer.

If more information did lead to better decisions and subsequently help the best providers (and the economy) to thrive, then allowing student choice to shape the future of the HE system might make sense. Yet some research suggests that the idea of making an active choice between courses and institutions in a consumer-like fashion is not a reality for all HE students in England. In particular, it has been argued that students pursuing HE at further education colleges (FECs)—and especially those pursuing bachelor's degrees at FECs—do not necessarily make informed choices about HE

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(Parry et al., 2012). Providing HE in the further education (FE) sector might widen participation, but it does not automatically lead to competition amongst HE providers.

### Methodology

This paper focuses on the issue of student choice from the perspective of students enrolled on bachelor's degree courses at FECs in England. Students pursuing HE qualifications at FE institutions account for approximately eight per cent (159,000 students) of all HE students in England (Association of Colleges, 2016), and around 14 per cent of these (22,060 students) are pursuing a bachelor's degree (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

The evidence which supports the claims to be made in this paper emerged from doctoral research about the decisions, experiences, post-graduation expectations and post-graduation outcomes of 78 students who were in the final year of a bachelor's degree in business at six HE providers (four FECs and two universities across two regions of England) in 2013. Data from interviews with 25 of these students (who pursued their bachelor's degree at an FEC) is used to challenge the idea that all HE students, regardless of their background or circumstances, make active choices about where to pursue HE.

### Findings

From the HE in FE perspective, one of the key problems with the idea of 'funding follow[ing] the decisions of learners' (BIS, 2011: 8) is that the students who go to HE in FECs do not tend to choose going to college *over* a university. For many of them, the bigger decision is not *where* to go for HE but *whether* to go to HE. While the policy aims promoted in the 2016 White Paper (BIS, 2016) are founded on the notion of student *choice*, many HE in FE students tend to choose an institution based on *constraints* rather than from a range of possible options. This distinction is important because 'where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to power and constraint' (Ball et al., 2002: 51). When someone *chooses*, they have more freedom and their preferences can be taken into account. However, when someone is *constrained*, their options are limited by necessity rather than by preference.

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The evidence gathered for this research suggests that the notion of institutional choice is a misnomer in the college student decision-making process. As such, it cannot be relied upon to help determine which institutions, and especially which HE in FE providers, offer the best student experience. However, it is questionable whether more choice is what these particular students really need or want. The majority of those who participated in this study did not wish they had gone to a different college or another type of institution; they simply wanted certain aspects of the HE offered by their college to be better. If these students were truly 'at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2011) and 'at the heart of [the government's] higher education reform strategy' (BIS, 2016: 8), the focus of policy reforms would be on improving what they have access to already, rather than expanding the range of options available to them.

Building on the comprehensive report about HE in FE completed by Parry et al. (2012), the findings presented in this paper contribute to our understanding of the decision-making process undertaken by HE students at FECs and how it compares and contrasts with that of other HE students.

### References

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