



Social Mobility
Commission

The road not taken: the drivers of course selection

Review of literature and survey evidence

Research report
March 2021

About the Commission

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England.

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1. Introduction

Why socio-economic gaps in vocational education and training need addressing

Between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort take low-level technical qualifications which generate little labour market value¹. These young people are disproportionately from low socio-economic backgrounds², and when the routes they take are technical, they are less likely to achieve a wide range of educational and employment outcomes compared to their non-technical track peers³. Some of the variation in the choice of technical track lies with the individual's decision, but geographic factors relating to deprivation and availability of certain types of schools also play a role⁴.

This occurs against a backdrop of significant policy intervention in recent years in the area of technical education or Vocational Education and Training (VET). For instance, apprenticeship reform has arguably shifted the focus to longer and higher-quality provision, despite concerns that rapid change may, in the short run, be related to lower-quality qualifications⁵. The introduction of T levels in 2019 has also signalled a greater focus by the government on technical skills. At the same time, participation in classroom-based as well as employer-based technical education has increased.

According to statistics from the Department for Education⁶ (Figure 1) there has been an increase in take up of Level 3 technical education qualifications in the past decade among 16-18 year olds. There has also been a decrease in the total population holding a Level 2 and

¹ Wolf, A. (2011). *Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report>

² Avis, J., & Atkins, L. (2017). Youth transitions, VET and the 'making' of class: Changing theorisations for changing times? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 22(2), 165–185.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2017.1314678>

³ Hupkau, C., McNally, S., Ruiz-Valenzuela, J., & Ventura, G. (2016). *Post-compulsory education in England: Choices and Implications*. London: Centre for Vocational Educational Research.

⁴ Allen, R., Parameshwaran, M., Thomson, D., & Education Datalab. (2016, December). *Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-inequalities-and-post-16-choices>

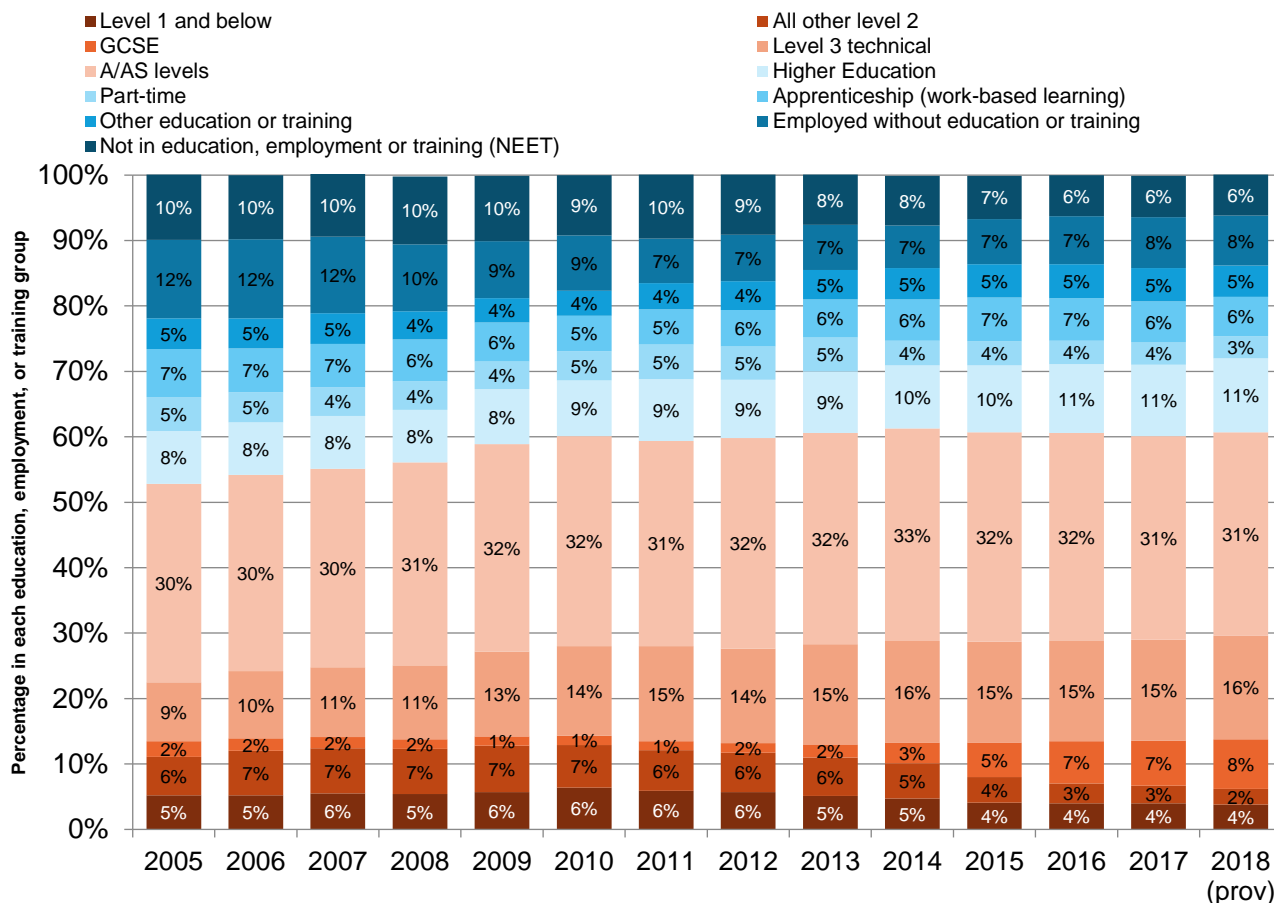
⁵ Amin-Smith, N., Cribb, J., & Sibieta, L. (2017). Reforms to apprenticeship funding in England. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁶ Department for Education. (2019). *Main text: Participation and NEET 2018*. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/810819/16-18_participation_and_NEET_statistics_main_text.pdf

below technical education qualification. Taken together, these trends indicate an overall growth in those accessing intermediate level qualifications.

Figure 1. Participation in education, training, and employment for 16 to 18-year-olds, 2005 to 2018.



Source: Authors’ calculations using data from the Department for Education. Participation in education, training and employment for young people aged 16 to 18. Data for 2018 provisional.

However, the expansion of intermediate and higher levels of technical education raises questions about equality of access, i.e. whether the beneficiaries of the higher-level, higher-quality, higher-return qualifications are more likely to come from a relatively advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with potentially better access to information, resources and support regarding VET choices.

2. International evidence on vocational education and training pathways

International perspectives from countries where VET has historically been highly valued (both in the labour market and by students) provide some evidence around the relationship between VET access and students' socio-economic backgrounds. Countries with arguably equally valued technical and academic education, such as Switzerland and Germany, display inequalities in access to higher-level VET, with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds dominating these routes. This suggests that where VET routes yield high labour market value, they are still not likely to substantially improve the chances of upward social mobility for those from less advantaged backgrounds⁷.

Reasons behind these longstanding socio-economic inequalities in outcomes are multifaceted, but research suggests that in countries with a high level of selectivity, early tracking can affect future educational and career options⁸. Therefore, inequalities within early tracking systems, which tend to direct students to higher / lower levels of general / vocational education based on socio-economic background, can highly affect long-term social mobility. In the Netherlands, research has shown that primary teachers' track recommendation significantly predicts the pupil's track assignment in secondary education, i.e. pre-university, senior general secondary

⁷Graf, L. (2016). The rise of work-based academic education in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 68(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2015.1107749>

Bathmaker, A.-M. (2017). Post-secondary education and training, new vocational and hybrid pathways and questions of equity, inequality and social mobility: Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 69(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1304680>

Edeling, S., & Pilz, M. (2017). 'Should I stay or should I go?' – the additive double qualification pathway in Germany. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 69(1), 81–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1300594>

⁸Bol, T., & van de Werfhorst, H. G. (2013). Educational Systems and the Trade-Off between Labor Market Allocation and Equality of Educational Opportunity. *Comparative Education Review*, 57(2), 285–308. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669122>

Buchmann, C., & Park, H. (2009). Stratification and the formation of expectations in highly differentiated educational systems. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 27(4), 245–267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2009.10.003>

Parker, P. D., Jerrim, J., Schoon, I., & Marsh, H. W. (2016). A Multination Study of Socioeconomic Inequality in Expectations for Progression to Higher Education: The Role of Between-School Tracking and Ability Stratification. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(1), 6–32. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215621786>

school and pre-vocational secondary⁹. This recommendation can be biased for students from different socio-economic status and ethnic backgrounds, even after controlling academic achievement¹⁰. Low socio-economic status consistently predicts a lower track recommendation even allowing for actual performance as measured by test scores, and this has been the case over the past two decades¹¹. As parental education level is a proxy for socio-economic status, the evidence suggests that primary teachers make recommendations based on parents' ability and resources to support children's study¹². Track assignment at the end of primary education in Germany is binding in some federal states, in the sense that parents cannot overrule the teacher. The intention is to reduce inequalities of educational opportunities that result from free school track choice, since parents that are of higher socio-economic status are more likely to suggest their children take the academic-intensive track¹³. Despite this binding track assignment, Roth and Siegert¹⁴ still found that parents from higher socio-economic status use their resources to help their children attain the required academic achievement needed for their desired secondary school. They can also access advice and afford to pay for other tests to prove their children are qualified for the desired school and to overturn the binding recommendation.

The vocational education and training policy landscape in England

In England, as in other Anglophone settings, transitions into VET mostly take place at the end of secondary education¹⁵, in contrast with the international examples above. In these Anglophone settings, VET is positioned at the bottom of the academic hierarchy and often targets second-chance learners who tend to earn limited economic returns in the labour market from their

⁹ Buchmann, C., & Park, H. (2009). Stratification and the formation of expectations in highly differentiated educational systems. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 27(4), 245–267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2009.10.003>

¹⁰ de Boer, H., Bosker, R. J., & van der Werf, M. P. C. (2010). Sustainability of teacher expectation bias effects on long-term student performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(1), 168–179. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017289>

Pit-ten Cate, I. M., Krolak-Schwerdt, S., & Glock, S. (2016). Accuracy of teachers' tracking decisions: Short- and long-term effects of accountability. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 31(2), 225–243. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-015-0259-4>

Timmermans, A. C., de Boer, H., Amsing, H. T. A., & van der Werf, M. P. C. (2018). Track recommendation bias: Gender, migration background and SES bias over a 20-year period in the Dutch context. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 847–874. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3470>

¹¹ Timmermans, A. C., de Boer, H., Amsing, H. T. A., & van der Werf, M. P. C. (2018). Track recommendation bias: Gender, migration background and SES bias over a 20-year period in the Dutch context. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 847–874. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3470>

¹² Böhmer, I., Gräsel, C., Krolak-Schwerdt, S., Hörstermann, T., & Glock, S. (2017). *Teachers' School Tracking Decisions*. In D. Leutner, J. Fleischer, J. Grünkorn, & E. Klieme (Eds.), *Competence Assessment in Education: Research, Models and Instruments* (pp. 131–147). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50030-0_9

¹³ Jackson, M., & Jonsson, J. O. (2013). In M. Jackson, *Why Does Inequality of Educational Opportunity Vary Across Countries?: Primary and Secondary Effects in Comparative Context* (pp. 306–338). Available at: <https://stanford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.11126/stanford/9780804783026.001.0001/upso-9780804783026-chapter-11>

¹⁴ Roth, T., & Siegert, M. (2016). Does the Selectivity of an Educational System Affect Social Inequality in Educational Attainment? Empirical Findings for the Transition from Primary to Secondary Level in Germany. *European Sociological Review*, 32(6), 779–791. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcw034>

¹⁵ Webb, S., Bathmaker, A.-M., Gale, T., Hodge, S., Parker, S., & Rawolle, S. (2017). Higher vocational education and social mobility: Educational participation in Australia and England. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 69(1), 147–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2016.1269359>

qualifications¹⁶. In the Anglophone model, VET therefore struggles to fulfil its potential of addressing educational inequality¹⁷.

In particular, there are three major issues which underpin the English VET system¹⁸. They relate to (1) the fragmented nature of the system, with limited central governance; (2) low social status historically associated with VET qualifications, and (3) neoliberal traditions that have turned the VET system into a quasi-market with a hugely diverse offering of types of qualifications, at different levels of study, and different levels of quality. These issues are entrenched in the VET system and the corresponding labour market, they also affect public attitudes and perceptions towards VET, and generally contribute towards VET participants being perceived as low-skilled, non-academic and unmotivated. The Wolf report¹⁹ highlighted these and other problems affecting the VET system and led to a set of reforms in England.

However, there is no evidence yet that fully integrates evidence on the historical, institutional and personal factors that affect the impact of VET on social mobility in England following these new reforms. Thus, there is a need to explore the extent to which social stratification has improved, in the English expanded VET system, given that one intention of VET expansion is to empower the social group that has a low rate of participation in university education²⁰.

Are current vocational education and training reforms boosting social mobility?

Against this backdrop of interacting socio-economic status, aspirations and attainment, a series of recent VET reforms have been enacted in an attempt to 1) increase the quality of VET qualifications; 2) increase the prestige of VET routes; 3) align VET routes with the labour market and address the overarching skills strategy. All of these reforms potentially impact on the role that VET might play in boosting social mobility.

One such recent prominent reform was the introduction of University Technical Colleges (UTCs) as part of the government's free school programme, which aim to achieve "parity of esteem" for VET and academic qualifications i.e. to break the stereotype that VET only takes in low-attaining students. Thus, UTCs are designed for academically-able students who wish to pursue

¹⁶ Callender, C., Scott, P., & Temple, P. (2012). *Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges*. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32425/12-905-understanding-higher-education-in-further-education-colleges.pdf

¹⁷ Hayward, G., & Hoelscher, M. (2011). The Use of Large-Scale Administrative Data Sets to Monitor Progression from Vocational Education and Training into Higher Education in the UK: Possibilities and Methodological Challenges. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 6(3), 316–329.

<https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.3.316>

¹⁸ Keep, E. (2015). Governance in English VET: On the functioning of a fractured 'system'. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 10(4), 464–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499915612185>

Lawn, M. (2013). A Systemless System: Designing the Disarticulation of English State Education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(2), 231–241. <https://doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2013.12.2.231>

¹⁹ Wolf, A. (2011). *Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report>

²⁰ Webb, S., Bathmaker, A.-M., Gale, T., Hodge, S., Parker, S., & Rawolle, S. (2017). Higher vocational education and social mobility: Educational participation in Australia and England. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 69(1), 147–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2016.1269359>

a course in technical education. At the outset (2013-14), around 13% of UTC participants were eligible for free school meals and half came from the most deprived households. Recent evidence suggests that UTCs have started to recruit increasing numbers of students from higher socio-economic status backgrounds²¹, however the picture is mixed. McInerney²² found that successfully operating UTCs were able to attract high-performing students, particularly in areas where certain specialisms were highly endorsed by local employers. Nevertheless, Cook and colleagues²³ found that UTCs primarily took in students with lower attainment who were “underprogressed” between 7 and 11 years old and predicted to have GCSE grades below the national average. McInerney goes as far as to suggest that UTCs have become institutions for underperforming young people who struggle in mainstream schools and receive limited support from teachers in UTCs. Some of these issues have been reported elsewhere, with many UTCs closing down due to low recruitment numbers and low Ofsted rankings²⁴.

Apart from setting up new types of VET providers as above, a further policy in support of VET has attempted to improve the quality, and subsequently the value attached to apprenticeships. This follows the Wolf Review which criticised the apprenticeship sector, and which over time, led to substantial reform in the sector, with apprenticeship durations increased substantially, qualifications structures re-considered (around the inclusion of English and maths qualifications, for instance), and the introduction of higher and degree apprenticeships²⁵. Indeed, Espinoza and Speckesser²⁶ found that some Level 4 and 5 VET qualifications in STEM subjects generate higher returns compared to university degree holders in the same subjects. This indicates the high demand for highly skilled technical professionals in the labour market and the potential of VET in boosting social mobility. However, the current system suffers from a low rate of progression from low-level to high-level apprenticeships and most low-level apprenticeships look as if they are designed for low-attainment students and result in low-skilled occupations. By contrast high-level VET attracts substantially more competition on entry from students who have much higher prior academic achievement.²⁸

As suggested by the Wolf Review, low-level VET programmes generate limited wage returns, so it is essential for young people to move towards higher levels of VET. Following the introduction of the Raising Participation Age legislation in 2015, the government aimed to

²¹ Thorley, C. (2017). *Tech transitions: UTCs, studio schools, and technical and vocational education in England's schools*. Institute for Public Policy Research Available at: <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/tech-transitions>

²² McInerney, L. (2016, September 10). The big problem with University Technical Colleges. *The Spectator*. Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/09/the-big-problem-with-university-technical-colleges/>

²³ Cook, W., Thorley, C., & Clifton, J. (2016). *Transitions at 14: Analysing the intake of 14–19 education institutions*. Institute for Public Policy Research. Available at: <https://www.ippr.org/publications/transitions-at-14>

²⁴ Camden (2019); Weale (2017); Whieldon (2019)

²⁵ Brockmann, M., & Laurie, I. (2016). Apprenticeship in England – the continued role of the academic–vocational divide in shaping learner identities. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 68(2), 229–244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2016.1143866>

Mulkeen, J., Abdou, H. A., Leigh, J., & Ward, P. (2019). Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeships: An empirical investigation of stakeholder perceptions of challenges and opportunities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(2), 333–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1365357>

²⁶ Espinoza, H., & Speckesser, S. (2019). *A comparison of earnings related to higher level vocational/technical and academic education*. London: Centre for Vocational Educational Research.

reduce the rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) by keeping students in post-16 education. However, the VET sector risks simply warehousing Level 1 pre-vocational course participants who were previously (at risk of being) NEET. These students face the challenges of highly regulated GCSE provision and the high academic tariff required by mainstream VET programmes, which jeopardises their chances of progression²⁷. Part of the reason for this problem can be attributed to the key structural VET issues identified above. For instance, as shown by Cornish²⁸, owing to the fragmented system and quasi-market nature, teachers in Level 1 pre-vocational course have to bear the pressure of a performance-driven culture while handling disruptive behaviours of students. Therefore, they use various methods to keep students occupied but not necessarily with academically focused or relevant activities.

Another reason behind the poor quality of many VET programmes is the competitive funding environment for VET, which prioritises programmes with high completion rates²⁹. That is, in order to secure funding, VET providers tend to offer easily achievable qualifications, which develop fewer skills demanded by the labour market. Thus many graduates with low-level VET qualifications end up churning between NEET and re-training³⁰.

²⁷ Avis, J., Orr, K., & Warmington, P. (2017). Race and vocational education and training in England. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 69(3), 292–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1289551>

Cornish, C. (2018). 'Keep them students busy': 'Warehoused' or taught skills to achieve? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23(1), 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1420733>

²⁸ Cornish, C. (2018). 'Keep them students busy': 'Warehoused' or taught skills to achieve? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23(1), 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1420733>

²⁹ Donovan, C. (2019). Distrust by design? Conceptualising the role of trust and distrust in the development of Further Education policy and practice in England. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 24(2–3), 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2019.1596414>

³⁰ Economic Affairs Committee. (2018). *Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education* (No. 2nd Report of Session 2017-19). London: the Authority of the House of Lords.

Hupkau, C., McNally, S., Ruiz-Valenzuela, J., & Ventura, G. (2016). *Post-compulsory education in England: Choices and Implications*. London: Centre for Vocational Educational Research.

3. Socio-economic factors affecting vocational education and training participation

Evidence consistently shows that socio-economic background is a significant predictor of participation gaps at all levels of both academic and technical education degrees, even after controlling for prior GCSE attainment³¹. Because of financial constraints, young people in more deprived circumstances (as captured through eligibility for free school meals or FSMs) are slightly more likely to engage with apprenticeships. However Allen and colleagues³² found that FSM-eligible young people still have lower participation in any form of technical degree compared to their non-FSM peers. This can be partly due to the higher rates of FSM recipients who drop out of school before obtaining any substantive qualifications, despite the Raising Participation Age legislation that requires young people to remain in education and training until age 18³³. Even for those who continue their study, Mann and colleagues³⁴ have found that former FSM recipients reported lower levels of engagement with employers compared to their non-FSM counterparts in either technical or academic education institutions. For example, they were less likely to engage in activities such as job shadowing, work experience and getting career advice.

Alongside socio-economic background, geographical regions remain a prominent factor in predicting the likelihood of participation in vocational education, as local characteristics including deprivation, local labour markets, and distance to education institutions, shape

³¹ Allen, R., Parameshwaran, M., Thomson, D., & Education Datalab. (2016, December). *Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-inequalities-and-post-16-choices>

³² Allen, R., Parameshwaran, M., Thomson, D., & Education Datalab. (2016, December). *Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-inequalities-and-post-16-choices>

³³ Children's Commissioner. (2019, September). *Briefing: The children leaving school with nothing*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2019/09/20/almost-one-in-five-children-left-education-at-18-last-year-without-basic-qualifications/>

³⁴ Mann, A., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Huddleston, P. (2017). *Contemporary transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college*. London: Education and Employers.

individual decisions about post-16³⁵ and also higher education destinations³⁶. That is, in areas with abundant job opportunities, there is less incentive to receive more training and thus the participation rate in VET is lower. According to Crawford and colleagues³⁷, once they have decided to stay on in full-time education, students in poorer areas are 14.4 percentage points more likely to choose a further education college over a sixth-form college, even after allowing for academic achievement at GCSE and also school characteristics. Some of this is explained by a combination of regional variation in the number of sixth form places available, and the fact that regions with few sixth forms tend to have rather limited choices of A level subjects. This results in a larger number of mid-level attainers staying in general further education colleges. In these areas, there are also fewer pupils taking Level 3 qualifications and above, compared to the national average³⁸.

What is the role of aspirations?

Young people in VET have high aspirations but are not achieving their best due to many external factors

Regardless of the constraints discussed above, both quantitative and qualitative evidence shows that participants from less privileged backgrounds hold high aspirations³⁹. They actively search for alternative education and employment pathways after Key Stage 4, suggesting the structural constraints are not overpowering⁴⁰.

VET participants tend to have great resilience, "swimming against the tide", and the process of going down the VET route often involves a certain degree of serendipity⁴¹. In recent years, empirical evidence has also dispelled the stereotypical idea that participants in low-level VET programmes have low academic aspirations. Instead, they have a strong interest in learning

³⁵ Wright, S. (2005). *Young people's decision-making in 14-19 education and training: A review of the literature*. The Nuffield Review of 14-19 education & Training

³⁶ White, P. M., & Lee, D. M. (2020). Geographic inequalities and access to higher education: Is the proximity to higher education institution associated with the probability of attendance in England?. *Research in Higher Education*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-019-09563-x>

³⁷ Crawford, C., Meschi, E., & Vignoles, A. (2011). *Post-16 Educational Choices and Institutional Value Added at Key Stage 5*. CEE DP 124. Centre for the Economics of Education (NJ1).

³⁸ Allen, R., Parameshwaran, M., Thomson, D., & Education Datalab. (2016, December). *Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-inequalities-and-post-16-choices>

³⁹ Davey, G., & Fuller, A. (2013). Hybrid Qualifications, Institutional Expectations and Youth Transitions: A Case of Swimming with or against the Tide. *Sociological Research Online*, 18(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2876>

Schoon, I., & Lyons-Amos, M. (2017). A socio-ecological model of agency: The role of psycho-social and socioeconomic resources in shaping education and employment transitions in England. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 8(1), 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v8i1.404>

⁴⁰ Schoon, I., & Lyons-Amos, M. (2017). A socio-ecological model of agency: The role of psycho-social and socioeconomic resources in shaping education and employment transitions in England. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 8(1), 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v8i1.404>

⁴¹ Davey, G., & Fuller, A. (2013). Hybrid Qualifications, Institutional Expectations and Youth Transitions: A Case of Swimming with or against the Tide. *Sociological Research Online*, 18(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2876> p.9

more advanced skills but the lack of support, deep-rooted negative perceptions and low expectations of teachers prevent them from having higher achievement⁴².

Atkins⁴³ argued that young people in lower level VET programmes had diverse and high expectations about their career outcomes when they chose their post-16 education routes, in spite of the fact that none of their parents had received education beyond VET Level 2, nor had personal experience of students' aspired occupations. In her study, many young people on Level 1 VET programmes were confident about the positive returns to their current qualification. But she highlighted the need for advice and guidance to help young people develop cultural capital as she found many young people in these programmes had vague and limited knowledge regarding how their qualifications could help them achieve their goals. She argued that the current policy discourse with a strong focus on "raising aspirations of unmotivated teenagers" risks young people forming unrealistic aspirations. Cornish⁴⁴ also found that participants in Level 1 pre-technical programmes had high expectations for their courses to be academically focused, so as to facilitate their future education progression. However, teachers had rather low expectations of students' competence which inevitably affected the choice of course content and quality of the learning experience.

Thus, much research has shown that participants in VET have high aspirations for their post-16 choices, but they can still be constrained by institutional factors and crucially by low prior achievement. This is not the only challenge as the effect of agency and aspirations is very strongly constrained by cultural capital and familial influence, i.e. information from friends and experiences of parents.

Socio-economic background and aspirations interact

It is a common problem that external support and personal perceptions can constrain and contribute to students' decisions about taking VET courses⁴⁵. As a result, choices are generally made by VET participants following serendipity rather than systematic vocational guidance, which raises questions about the effectiveness of the current career guidance provision in schools. For instance, Atkins and Flint⁴⁶ found that students studying VET courses in a further education setting were substantially more likely to seek support from family and friends, rather than from mainstream careers guidance services.

⁴² Atkins, L. (2010). Opportunity and Aspiration, or the Great Deception? The Case of 14–19 Vocational Education. *Power and Education*, 2(3), 253–265. <https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2010.2.3.253>

Cornish, C. (2018). 'Keep them students busy': 'Warehoused' or taught skills to achieve? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23(1), 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1420733>

⁴³ Atkins, L. (2017). The odyssey: School to work transitions, serendipity and position in the field. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(5), 641–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1131146>

⁴⁴ Cornish, C. (2018). 'Keep them students busy': 'Warehoused' or taught skills to achieve? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23(1), 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1420733>

⁴⁵ Atkins, L. (2017). The odyssey: School to work transitions, serendipity and position in the field. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(5), 641–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1131146>

Billett, S., Thomas, S., Sim, C., Johnson, G., Hay, S., & Ryan, J. (2010). Constructing productive post-school transitions: An analysis of Australian schooling policies. *Journal of Education and Work*, 23(5), 471–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2010.526596>

⁴⁶ Atkins, L., & Flint, K. J. (2015). Nothing changes: Perceptions of vocational education in England. *International Journal of Training Research*, 13(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2015.1051344>

Family background therefore influences VET decisions, both through a mechanism related to the socio-economic background of potential VET participants, as well as the sources of information and guidance about it. Parents with more professional backgrounds can better inform the choices of young people (e.g. advise on which subjects and qualifications to take)⁴⁷. For instance, following their parents' suggestions, these young people are more likely to pick professional subjects like BTEC business as they hope to attain skills that could help them to progress up the ladder. In contrast, for young people in VET who are from low socio-economic backgrounds, they are more likely to do what their parents are doing⁴⁸.

Even though further education colleges do not solely offer technical training, they provide a potential pathway to acquire VET qualifications. Thus, compared to academic post-16 institutions, participants in FE are more likely to engage with the technical courses on offer and the subsequent career options. Due to insufficient understanding of the link between education and career, many students in FE tend to have vaguer goals in life, such as "do well in a career" and "get a good job" but they do not necessarily know how to achieve what they set out for and what subjects they need to do. They stay in education simply because "education is important" but they do not know how to best achieve their career goals⁴⁹. The risk of making naive subject and qualification choices⁵⁰ are particularly high for working-class boys.

Recent VET policy reforms in England have brought opportunities but also challenges for social mobility. A very recent study by McIntosh⁵¹ has explored students' post-16 aspirations and outcomes, focusing on differences between two cohorts of a longitudinal study, during which time the above policy changes were implemented. Findings from this study consistently suggest that students with lower attainment struggled with fulfilling their aspirations to reach their desired post-16 education destinations, across both cohorts. Also in both cohorts, young people from more deprived socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds were more likely to have low attainment and therefore to find themselves in the above situation, indicating that there is a strong link between SES, attainment and *realised* pathway, even if aspirations are high for all groups.

Therefore, socio-economic background interacts with personal aspirations to affect VET participation. However, this has yet to be explored by using more recent datasets. Even though socio-economic differences in post-16 aspirations have been explored by McIntosh⁵², there the

⁴⁷ Wright, S. (2005). *Young people's decision-making in 14-19 education and training: A review of the literature*. The Nuffield Review of 14-19 education & Training

⁴⁸ Wright, S. (2005). *Young people's decision-making in 14-19 education and training: A review of the literature*. The Nuffield Review of 14-19 education & Training

Mann, A., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Huddleston, P. (2017). *Contemporary transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college*. London: Education and Employers.

⁴⁹ Baird, J.-A., Rose, J., & McWhirter, A. (2012). So tell me what you want: A comparison of FE college and other post-16 students' aspirations. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 17(3), 293–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2012.700095>

⁵⁰ Adey, K., & Biddulph, M. (2001). The Influence of Pupil Perceptions on Subject Choice at 14+ in Geography and History. *Educational Studies*, 27(4), 439–450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690120071894>

⁵¹ McIntosh, S. (2019, May). Post-16 aspirations and outcomes: Comparison of the LSYPE cohorts. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-aspirations-and-outcomes-comparison-of-the-lsype-cohorts--2>

⁵² McIntosh, S. (2019, May). Post-16 aspirations and outcomes: Comparison of the LSYPE cohorts. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-aspirations-and-outcomes-comparison-of-the-lsype-cohorts--2>

focus of the analysis was not specifically on the interaction between SES (as captured through FSM eligibility as a measure of deprivation) and VET choice. More evidence is therefore needed on the nature of and timing of any differences in aspirations by socio-economic status, as well as how geography may play into this. These are very important questions, the answers to which can inform the design and timing of interventions.

4. Changing patterns of vocational education and training access and aspirations

Approach

To supplement the analysis reported by McIntosh, we have undertaken further analytical work using Our Future, the second cohort of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (now Next Steps). This analysis addresses several of the points raised by the review above, as well as conclusions from the McIntosh study and focuses on overall VET aspirations, as expressed by young people at age 14/15, including the routes that they wish to take. We then report actual realised pathways (as reported by the McIntosh study). Finally, we explore how the level of advice received by young people in schools and other educational establishments is related to their respective aspirations, and how this may differ by socio-economic background.

First, we can ascertain if young people from different socio-economic backgrounds have different aspirations and expectations in terms of their intentions towards educational progression to technical and non-technical routes in general, and specific routes (like apprenticeships) in particular. The data also allows for consideration of the impact of geography on young people's intentions. This builds on evidence discussed above that suggests an interplay between socio-economic background and aspirations, potentially mediated by regional variation in the supply of high-quality routes and pathways.

Prior evidence⁵³ has suggested that parental qualifications and occupations are one of the best proxy indicators for socio-economic disadvantage in the absence of full and verified household income data. As Our Future data includes a measure of parental occupation, categorised using the National Statistics socio-economic classification, we use that measure instead of household income. All results are based on weighted survey data, using Wave 1 survey weights (as the source of all background variables).

⁵³ Ilie, S., Sutherland, A. and Vignoles, A., 2017. Revisiting free school meal eligibility as a proxy for pupil socio-economic deprivation. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), pp.253-274. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3260>

Overall aspirations of post-16 education progression

We first explore overall aspirations of progression post-16, to any educational pathway by socio-economic background, as expressed at age 14/15 (at wave 2).

Table 1. Young people's age 14-15 general aspirations for post-16 education progression

Parental occupation	Stay in full-time education	Leave full-time education	Undecided	Unknown (missing)	Total
Higher managerial and professional	94.1%	2.7%	2.2%	1.0%	100%
Lower professional and higher technical	88.7%	5.7%	3.9%	1.7%	100%
Intermediate occupations	86.7%	8.3%	4.0%	1.0%	100%
Small employers	84.5%	9.1%	4.9%	1.5%	100%
Lower supervisory and technical	81.5%	13.0%	4.1%	1.4%	100%
Semi-routine occupations	82.8%	9.0%	5.2%	3.0%	100%
Routine occupations	82.0%	9.5%	5.8%	2.7%	100%
Long-term unemployed or never worked	84.7%	6.9%	5.0%	3.4%	100%

Notes: Unweighted N=11,166

This suggests that a higher proportion of young people from the most advantaged socio-economic backgrounds express an aspiration that they will continue in full-time education; although the difference stands at around 10 percentage points, on average over 80% of young people wish to continue in education, regardless of their socio-economic background.

Of those reporting that they would like to leave *full-time* education, 71% report wanting to pursue an apprenticeship and a further 20% report wanting to engage in some education/training and work combination. The proportion of young people choosing to completely opt out of the educational system is very small, regardless of educational background. Overall across the cohort, less than 7% of young people expressed an aspiration to leave education completely at the age of 16. This could be seen as a direct consequence of raising the participation age to 18, a policy change which affects the Our Future cohort, though even before the legislative change, the proportion of young people leaving education at age 16 had fallen to around one in ten.

In terms of the specific routes that young people would like to progress to at age 16, respondents were provided with a number of options. Confusingly, apprenticeships are also included as a “full-time” route in the options given to young people when enquiring about their route-specific aspirations post-16.

Disaggregated by SES background, young people express a range of specific pathways aspirations. Just under 77% of young people whose parents have higher managerial or professional occupations express a desire to progress to a sixth form (whether at the same or a different institution). This is higher than young people from all other socio-economic backgrounds. Young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (with parents having never worked or in long-term unemployment) express a higher rate of preference for sixth-form progression than the next three relatively more advantaged groups; and a similar (statistically not significantly different) rate of preference to both lower supervisory and intermediate occupations.

The highest proportion of young people wishing to take a course at a further education college are to be found amongst those whose parents have lower-supervisory and technical occupations. This suggests that the socio-economic gradient in relation to overall progression aspirations may be flattening, but socio-economic background is still associated with specific pathway choices. On the other hand, the fairly high rate of indecision amongst all young people (ranging from 8% to 12%), which is higher on average amongst those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, suggests that up to one in every eight young people make pathway decisions fairly close to the transition point.

Table 2. Young people’s aspirations at age 14/15 for specific post-16 progression routes

Parental Occupation	Go to a sixth form college (same/other school/college)	Take a course at an FE college	Do an apprenticeship	Other, undecided, unknown specific decision	Leave full-time education or undecided on continuation	Total
Higher managerial and professional	76.7%	9.7%	1.0%	7.6%	5.0%	100.0%
Lower professional and higher technical	62.8%	16.3%	2.4%	9.0%	9.6%	100.0%
Intermediate occupations	55.5%	20.0%	3.3%	8.8%	12.3%	100.0%
Small employers	54.1%	19.3%	3.3%	9.3%	14.0%	100.0%
Lower supervisory and technical	46.0%	25.6%	3.4%	7.9%	17.1%	100.0%
Semi-routine occupations	48.0%	23.3%	3.3%	11.3%	14.2%	100.0%
Routine occupations	48.1%	24.0%	3.0%	9.7%	15.3%	100.0%
Long-term unemployed or never worked	54.1%	18.8%	3.1%	12.1%	11.9%	100.0%

Notes: Unweighted N=11,166

In his study of post-16 aspirations and outcomes, McIntosh is able to link to the National Pupil Database and observe actual choices post-16, as they relate to earlier aspirations. That analysis finds that the proportion of young people reporting an academic route aspiration (as opposed to a VET aspiration) and who realise that aspiration, is higher for those from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and for those with higher levels of GCSE / age 16 attainment.

Disaggregating by academic and VET aspirations reported at age 14/15, McIntosh is able to trace the Year 12 (age 16/17) route followed. Interestingly, 75% of young people previously expressing a desire to follow a VET pathway are observed to have done so, and a further 10% of this group are in routes that are a combination of academic and technical provision. By contrast, only 55% of young people expressing an academic preference are observed in academic routes in Year 12, with 15% of them in VET routes, and a further 19% in combined routes. The level of no participation observed (i.e. young people who do not realise any aspiration) is higher (12%) for young people initially expressing an academic aspiration, compared to those expressing a technical aspiration (8%), perhaps indicating a more realistic perspective amongst the initially VET-aspiring young people⁵⁴.

When looking at prior attainment, over 90% of young people from the most advantaged backgrounds, who achieve above 7 GCSEs at grades A* to C, progress to an academic qualification post-16. Less than 15% of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and with the lowest attainment (between 1 and 4 GCSEs at A* to C) are later observed in academic routes⁵⁵.

This suggests that although aspirations are high, young people from more deprived backgrounds, as well as those who attain at lower levels at age 16, are likely to find themselves on non-academic routes, including VET, beyond age 16. This is regardless of their earlier (high) aspirations. In effect, this illustrates the validity of the above-mentioned criticism of the current state of the VET sector whereby it is not seen as a desirable destination for high attaining students.

With evidence above pointing to regional variation in the availability of different types of post-16 institutions and pathways, it is important to determine whether it is also associated with the choices young people make. For example, aspirations for post-16 pathways may be influenced by the availability of different types of provision. Our Future allows for the exploration of these aspirations, disaggregated by the government office region in which young people were living at the first survey wave (at age 13) and by socio-economic background (parental occupations).

Figure 2 below illustrates how the levels of aspiration to stay in full-time education post-16 are similar across regions. For the least deprived occupation category (higher managerial), between 86% and 97% of young people express an aspiration to continue, regardless of region. Similarly, for the most deprived occupation group (parents in long-term unemployment or never

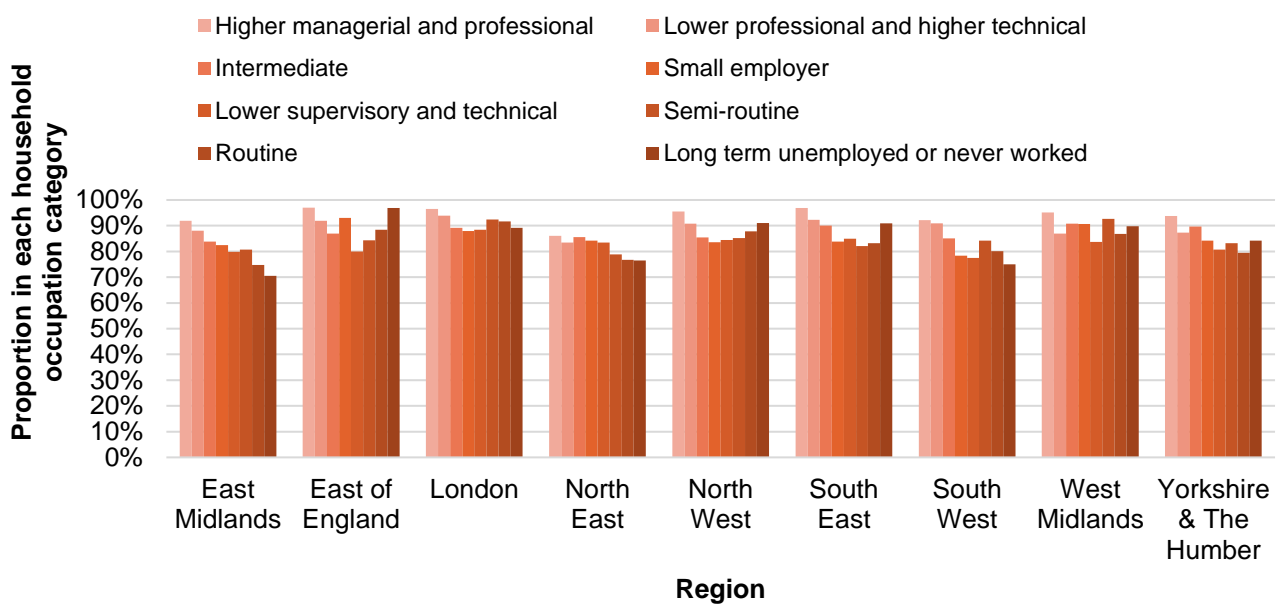
⁵⁴ McIntosh, S. (2019, May). Post-16 aspirations and outcomes: Comparison of the LSYPE cohorts. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-aspirations-and-outcomes-comparison-of-the-lsype-cohorts--2>, p. 24

⁵⁵ McIntosh, S. (2019, May). Post-16 aspirations and outcomes: Comparison of the LSYPE cohorts. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-aspirations-and-outcomes-comparison-of-the-lsype-cohorts--2>, p. 25

having worked), between 71% and 96% of young people express the same aspiration to continue in full time education. Whilst regional variation is low, four of the nine main regions in England show a pattern whereby young people from more deprived backgrounds have lower overall aspirations for post-16 progression to full-time education than their more advantaged peers. In Yorkshire and the Humber, for instance, 94% of young people from the highest occupational class express an aspiration to continue, compared to 84% of the never worked / long term unemployment group, but this is still higher than both lower supervisory / technical and routine occupations group, at 81% and 79% respectively. Comparatively, only 86% of young people from the highest occupation category in the north-east report an aspiration to progress, with a similar, ten percentage point difference between these young people and those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (at 76%). Generally however, the relationship between parental background and aspiration is not linear.

Overall, this suggests that there are modest regional variations in aspiration observed in the data and that while, in general, higher SES young people have higher aspirations, there is not a strong linear relationship between SES and aspiration.

Figure 2. Regional trends in aspirations: the proportions of young people aged 14/15 expressing a desire to continue in full-time education after age 16, broken down by background



Notes and sources: Authors' calculations using linked data from Next Steps

When exploring the specific pathways that young people wish to pursue if they choose to stay on in full-time education, the combination of region and socio-economic background is associated with a varied choice of routes (Figure 3).

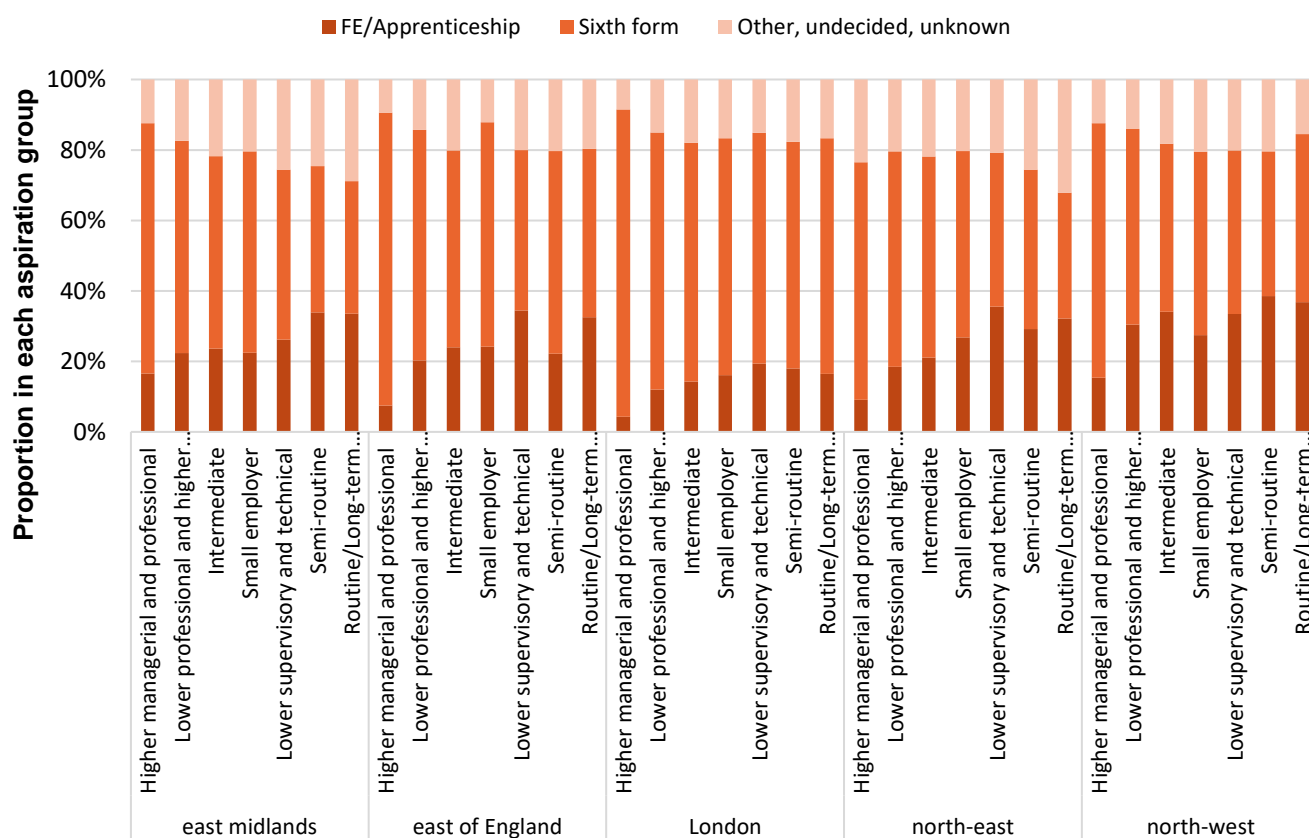
Across regions, the main pathway to which young people aspire at age 14/15 is to pursue education in the sixth-form of a school (whether the same or different to the one they were attending), or a separate sixth-form college. This holds regardless of their socio-economic background. While VET is provided by sixth-forms, this is a predominantly 'academic-only' track, which is clearly favoured by a majority of applicants. As outlined above, there remain some

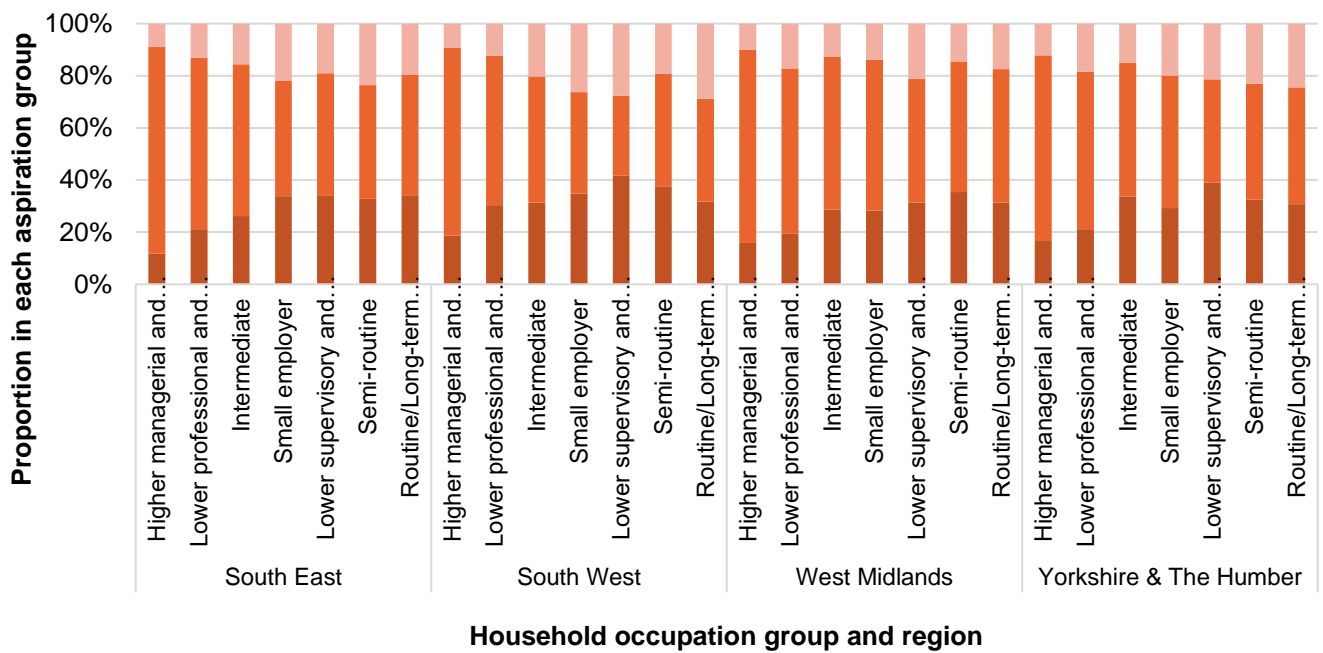
small differences by socio-economic background in the level of preference for sixth-form-based education post-16, with regional variation compounding this. For instance, for the higher managerial and professional group, sixth-form-based education is preferred by 77% of students, varying between 67% in the north-east and 87% in London.

Reported aspirations to continue into further education colleges or apprenticeships (two of the main VET routes opening up to young people post-16, though further educational colleges offer a variety of non-VET routes) vary between regions and by socio-economic background. For instance, amongst those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, aspirations to attend a FE college vary between under 6% in London and the south-west, and up to 37% in the north-east.

In terms of progression to apprenticeships, the differences are very small between any of the regional-SES groupings, so that against the backdrop of the average rate of 3% of young people wanting to progress to this type of qualification, the variability is minimal. Specifically, between 1% and 5% of young people from routine occupations backgrounds aspire to an apprenticeship; between 1% and 6% of those from intermediate occupations do so, and between 0% and 3% of those from higher managerial and professional qualifications.

Figure 3. Young people's aspirations for different post-16 pathways





Notes and sources: Authors' calculations using linked data from Next Steps

One of the explanations regarding differential realised progression post-16 is related to the routes open to young people, as determined by their previous qualification and subject choices, as well as by their attainment, and the level of support that they may be receiving in relation to these choices. In Our Future, we are able to observe the level of careers advice, guidance and support that young people have received in their educational institutions before age 16.

At age 13/14, 61% of young people reported having received some careers advice. This is fairly consistent across different socio-economic backgrounds (by parental occupation class) with between 57% and 63% of young people in each category reporting having received careers advice from a person coming into their school (Table 3). At age 14/15, a similar proportion (59%) of young people had received support from a careers adviser coming into their school since the previous survey round. Again, the proportions of young people reporting support was similar across socio-economic groups. This consistency suggests that all young people in schools that offer career guidance (by an external person) are receiving it, irrespective of their socio-economic background. It is of course striking however, that more than one in three young people appear not to receive guidance of this kind at all.

Table 3. Proportion of young people reporting receiving careers advice from a careers advisor coming into the school to talk to them

Occupational grouping	Received by age 13/14	Received by age 14/15 since 13/14	Go to a sixth form college (same/other school) & got advice	Take a course at an FE college & got advice	Do an apprenticeship & got advice	Undecided about specific pathway & got advice
Higher managerial and professional	62.8%	58.5%	62.8%	69.2%	37.7%	62.5%
Lower professional and higher technical	62.2%	59.9%	61.8%	61.0%	63.2%	67.7%
Intermediate occupations	62.1%	58.7%	63.9%	65.4%	65.2%	58.1%

Small employers	59.9%	62.0%	55.6%	67.7%	70.8%	63.0%
Lower supervisory and technical	56.9%	56.8%	55.7%	67.1%	58.2%	33.4%
Semi-routine occupations	58.7%	57.6%	59.8%	64.6%	52.0%	61.7%
Routine occupations	57.7%	57.0%	61.3%	54.8%	70.5%	47.4%
Long-term unemployed or never worked	57.0%	55.2%	61.6%	60.6%	64.2%	57.1%
Unweighted N	N=13,100	N=10,308	N=6,597	N=6,597	N=6,597	N=6,597

When combining this with the age 14/15 aspirations, as reported above, we find some indication of an association between aspiration to either an academic or VET route and careers advice, with students expressing an aspiration to pursue an apprenticeship by and large reporting the highest rate of advice at age 14/15 (71% in the small-employers occupation group). Just under 68% of young people from a lower professional occupation group who report being undecided about their pathway post-16 had received this type of careers advice.

Interestingly, the group that receives the least amount of support are young people from the most advantaged background wanting to do an apprenticeship. This would require further exploration as to whether there is something specific about the particular apprenticeships that these young people wish to pursue, or whether a different mechanism is at play.

The above results also suggest that earlier careers guidance is not associated with later aspirations for either academic or VET routes. There is a higher rate of support for young people changing institutions (into either a sixth form college, FE college, or an apprenticeship). The data is perhaps encouraging, indicating that those who need advice are receiving it, suggesting a fairly responsive system.

The timing of Our Future does not allow us to investigate the impact of the most recent changes to school policy and funding in relation to the provision of careers advice. More research is needed to ascertain if, and how, such changes may have affected the likelihood of young people being able to access such services.

5. Conclusion

Current policy initiatives are aiming to increase the status of technical education and training, trying to ensure that they are seen by young people from all socio-economic backgrounds as viable and quality alternatives to traditionally-academic routes. However, in terms of aspirations it appears that academic routes are still more highly valued by students, and there is some evidence from the wider literature pointing to socio-economic differences in the guiding of those aspirations by parents, teachers, and the overall structure of the VET system. The empirical evidence also suggests that aspirations to different educational routes are not the main determinant of later choices, with socio-economic background and prior attainment more strongly associated with actual routes taken beyond age 16.

