'Possible Selves' in practice: how students at Further Education Colleges in England conceptualise university

Steven Jones , Rita Hordósy , Jenna Mittelmeier , Aunam Quyoum & Tamsin McCaldin

Published online: 18 Jan 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

'Possible Selves' in practice: how students at Further Education Colleges in England conceptualise university

Steven Jones [a], Rita Hordósy [b], Jenna Mittelmeier [c], Aunam Quyoum [d] and Tamsin McCaldin[e]

aManchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK; bSchool of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nottingham, Wollaton Road, Nottingham, UK; cManchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK; dSchool of Education, The University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, UK; eManchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project in the North of England that looks at the college-to-university decision-making processes of non-traditional students through the conceptual lens of 'Possible Selves', as initially developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) and applied to higher education by Harrison (2018), Henderson (2019) and others. Our data involves in-depth interviews with young people, and with the college staff responsible for advising and guiding them, at Further Education Colleges from which the rate of transition to university is lower than the national average. Our findings show that young people talk about their 'like-to-be' and 'like-to-avoid' futures in complex and self-regulated ways, often moderating how they articulate aspiration to align with external discourses, such as those projected by college staff. Students also demonstrate a keen awareness of structural limits, effectively constructing future selves which, though 'elaborated', reflect counter-reading of dominant narratives around financial self-improvement as achieved via the 'full' university experience. The 'Possible Selves' approach is therefore found to be enabling as a mediating artefact for researchers, and valuable for identifying policy-relevant points of tension between students and their college staff.

Introduction

The 'Possible Selves' model has its roots in psychology (Markus and Nurius 1986) and offers a way to explore how individual futures are imagined through reported 'like-to-be' and 'like-to-avoid' versions of the self. Markus and Nurius (1986) characterise the former as ideal (imagined) selves and the latter as the selves that we most fear becoming. Though the model has been applied in diverse contexts (see Henderson, Stevenson, and Bathmaker 2019, 1), including the possible selves of adult women with eating disorders (Erikson, Hansson, and Lundblad 2012), its potential to offer a theoretical underpinning for university access (Harrison 2018) has attracted most recent attention. This is partly because the model allows

---

researchers and practitioners to move on from discredited discourses of raised aspirations (Harrison and Waller 2018; Henderson 2019), and allows the voice of young people to emerge more clearly.

The conceptual potential of the 'Possible Selves' is discussed extensively in the literature (see Henderson, Stevenson, and Bathmaker 2019), with the model presented as a window into the thinking of students as they negotiate complex educational choices. By more fully understanding the psychological and emotional ways in which young people process the information presented to them and the options available, structural critiques of wider society can be developed. The model also has potential to influence policy, given its insights into how young people conceptualise and navigate post-18 educational and vocational routes. However, attempts to put the model into practice have so far been less common, and the model has remained largely at the theoretical level. We address this gap in the literature through questions about the extent to which 'Possible Selves' can act as both a data collection artefact and as an analytic lens through which local education contexts can be assessed and interpreted. We also consider how 'Possible Selves' can illuminate the policy issue in new and important ways. In particular, we evaluate students' engagement with – and sometimes disruption of – dominant discourses around 'choice'. We focus closely on the tensions that arise when 'like-to-be' selves are projected on to young people that do not correspond with their own imagined futures.

Our data involve the views and dispositions of young people attending Further Education Colleges (FECs) in one city in the North of England. Progress to university from our chosen FECs is persistently beneath target, and anecdotal evidence suggests that transitional difficulties arise because the predominantly working-class students perceive themselves to 'stand out' rather than 'fit in' – to borrow Reay, Crozier, and Clayton's (2010) terms – within more elite education contexts. The originality of our research lies both in the questions being addressed (why young people on some routes remain more likely to self-exclude from higher education) and the heuristic through which those questions are critically answered (which 'selves' emerge during key decision-making moments). The study is contextually novel because it is the first that specifically uses the 'Possible Selves' to examine the college-to-university transitions of FEC students.

Research Context

In England, progression from different types of secondary educational institutions to university has been the focus of research for several decades. Ball, MacRae, and Maguire (1999) outlined the daunting market of post-16 educational provision and explored how young people attempt to navigate it, while Archer and Hutchings (2000) focused at the underlying reasons for self-exclusion in such an environment. At the local level, Beaumont, Moscrop, and Canning (2016) reported misalignment between the guidance given to students by colleges and the expectations of their universities, a 'gap' subsequently explored by Jones 2018). Though researchers such as Lehmann (2009) moved beyond deficit models to celebrate the learning strategies that working-class students mobilise, cultural fears about assimilation within more elite educational environments remain live for many students (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Working-class students in particular are said to face 'considerable identity work' (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010, 120) as they attempt to fit in at English universities.

In a rapidly changing context of post-16 educational provision in England (McCaig 2016), information, advice and guidance (IAG) become crucial to support learners. In 2010, independent career guidance became a statutory requirement for all young people in England. However, research suggests that the move to provide this within schools, rather than at the wider (Local Authority) level, has impacted negatively on the provision of expert careers education (Acquah et al. 2017). Moote and Archer (2018) raise specific equity issues based on differing school resources, and warn of a potential bias deriving from guidance with a narrow focus on subject and institutional choice. Questions continue to be raised about whether tertiary qualifications are necessary for all (Atkins 2017). Further, subject and qualification choices have been shown to facilitate, or limit, access to universities in general (Baker 2019), and to more elite institutions in particular (Boliver 2013), with Abrahams (2018) pointing to the inequalities in subject options available at different types of universities. Institutional and discipline choice, as well as attainment at secondary level, remain highly stratified based on socio-economic characteristics (Crawford et al. 2017). National trends in participation (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service 2020) confirm that FEC learners in England are less likely than other learners to envision university as part of their future.

Theoretical Framework

'Possible Selves' are characterised by Markus and Nurius (1986) as a bridge between the present and the future. In this regard, students' imaginable futures are influenced by both attractiveness (i.e. what they want for their lives) and realism (i.e. perceived limitations within their immediate sociocultural surroundings). Across the realm of prospective futures, students envisage desirable possibilities ('like-to-be' selves) and undesirable possibilities ('like-to-avoid' selves), as Harrison (2018) describes. Oyserman et al. (2004) show that improved academic outcomes follow when 'self-regulation' takes place. In other words, where young people are able to articulate their like-to-be selves, they become more likely to mobilise appropriate strategies for realising their vision. Within this framework, it becomes necessary to recognise students' multiple perspectives, the means by which they are acquired, and the role that university plays in leveraging access to these futures (Henderson 2019).

Particularly relevant here is the notion of 'elaboration', as mentioned by Markus and Nurius (1986) and developed by Oyserman et al. (2004). The meaning of 'elaboration' goes beyond its use in everyday discourse, capturing not only the way in which individuals talk about their future, but the clarity of that vision and, importantly, the clarity of the steps needed to realise it. Elaboration incorporates the processes by which an individual strategises their future to become or avoid a possible self. According to Harrison and Waller (2018), it reflects the extent to which possible selves are fully formed. The more sophisticated and detailed the 'roadmap' (Oyserman et al. 2004), the more vivid the possible self becomes, and the more confident the young person is about broader strategy as well as the intermediate steps that need to be taken. Clear elaboration increases the likelihood of realisation (Cross and Markus 1991).

However, the 'Possible Selves' model is not without complications and drawbacks. Erikson (2007) pressed for a clearer definition, drawing attention to a number of common misinterpretations, and Henderson (2019) warns that the model's emphasis

on the individual, rather than on her environment, risks undermining more structural analysis of systematic inequalities. We are therefore careful to guard against the theoretical framework returning us to approaches that bring ambiguity to an already imprecise field, or unwittingly reproduce stereotypes that impose further deficits on to the student.

Methodology

The project teams were commissioned to investigate the progression of FEC students to university by a network which works with schools, colleges and universities to help young people access university as part of the UK's National Collaborative Outreach Programme. We were asked to probe learner attitudes and intentions towards higher education, to understand more about the provision of IAG, and to review structural and logistical barriers.

Once ethical approval for all data collection was successfully sought from the host institution, we conducted 14 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with FEC students from three institutions who were aged 16–18 and undertaking (Level Three) qualifications that allow for university entry. We used individual approaches rather than group interviews or surveys in recognition of the personal and potentially emotional nature of research that seeks to map students' futures and career intentions. Our original aim of interviewing two or three students from each of the FECs in the outreach partnership, reaching a total of 20 to 30 participants, was constrained by administrative issues resulting from both a pressed timeframe and a lack of institutional buy-in from some FECs. However, in three FECs, students were selected and approached by a gatekeeper to take part in the research. These students were studying a wide range of courses and were in different years of study within their Level Three qualifications. Our analysis centres on social class because other factors, such as ethnicity, were difficult to assess and control for given our limited sample size. We note that caring responsibilities may also be salient to decision-making for some young people. Interviews took place in a private location on students' college campus and lasted approximately an hour. Students received the participant information and consent sheet in advance from the gatekeepers. These documents were also provided on the day by the interviewer. All data were managed in accordance with the host university's policies and protocols.

In student interviews, the 'Possible Selves' model was used overtly as a mediating artefact (Figure 1), a visualisation to support and encourage conversation about the object in question (see, for example, Bahn and Barratt-Pugh 2013). Student interviewees were asked to list and talk through their preferred future selves, their unwanted (and already jettisoned) future selves, and the mechanisms through which all imagined outcomes might be facilitated or denied. Figure 1 acted as a prompt and a visual aid. Post-it notes were used to categorise 'like-to-be' and 'like-to-avoid' futures, with the model serving as a hands-on discussion tool throughout the interview and helping participants to talk more explicitly about their decision-making processes. Our research aim was to learn more about how and when choices are reached about university participation and what kind of personal dispositions are drawn upon during that process. The discussions were voice recorded, if the student agreed to this, and the final presentation of post-it notes was photographed.
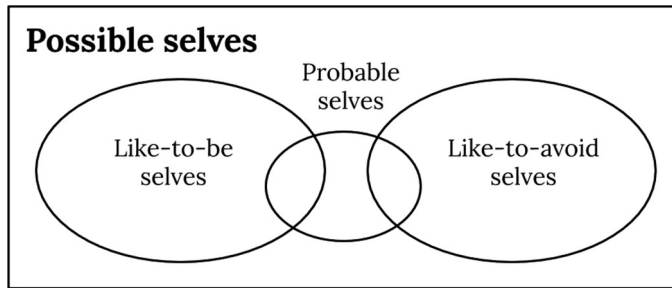
Figure 1. Graphical representation of possible selves (based on Harrison 2018, 5)

We also conducted seven semi-structured interviews with staff involved in providing advice and guidance to students in some capacity within the FECs and the broader outreach partnership. These interviews aimed to gain a broader and more context-sensitive under-standing of the potential institutional and structural challenges around providing advice to diverse cohorts of young people. Questions were asked about the perceived challenges students faced in career planning and the wider role of higher education in their futures. These interviews took place individually via telephone and most lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Throughout the interviews, questions were again framed and organised using the 'Possible Selves' model, thus allowing comparison between the views of staff members and students towards higher education. However, Figure 1 was not used directly as a mediating artefact.

The key themes presented in this paper were determined through sustained, structured discussion between the five members of the research team. We used the six-step model for thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87) as a guide: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and reporting. We did not use software tools for analysis of the student interviews, but we did use NViVo for the staff interviews. Transcripts were first read by individual members of the research team, followed by collaborative discussions about initial concepts. These discussions formed the basis for developing a coding strategy. Each transcript was coded by the original interviewer, and subsequently reviewed and revised by a second member of the team. Coded transcripts were then read by the full research team and follow-up collective deliberations helped to organise the findings and develop overarching themes. Our final themes are not intended to be exhaustive but rather to capture the essence of the interview data. We pay particular attention to issues over which incongruity was identified, whether between students and staff, students and their family, staff and their interpretation of national education policy, or students and their socio-cultural environment.

Findings

We discuss our findings in relation to two overarching themes. First, we examine recurring stay-at-home narratives among FEC students, tracing their roots and

considering the responses to them by college staff. Second, we examine students' projected financial selves, paying particular attention to their conceptualisation of ambition and, again, considering tensions between the students' imagined economic futures and those projected by staff. In both cases, we draw upon the 'Possible Selves' model as our primary interpretative lens. Emerging patterns are then examined more closely in the Discussion section.

Theme 1: the 'like-to-be' self as the 'stay-at-home' self

Within our data was a recurring mismatch between what students regarded as their optimal engagement mode in higher education and the pressure they perceived to engage in alternative ways. In pre-Covid times, this pressure stemmed in part from dominant public narratives of the 'full' university experience, often demanding that students live away from their family home to benefit maximally. However, the message was mediated and reinforced locally through the IAG received at the FEC. This geographical tension was recurring, with many students expressing a strong preference to remain living at the home during their degree but being made to feel as though such a decision would represent a compromise or 'sell-out'. This created a barrier to access: many students indicated that they would rather self-exclude from higher education than leave their home setting.

Within the literature, stay-at-home students have sometimes been positioned problematically (e.g. Crozier et al. 2008; Clayton, Crozier, and Reay. 2009) because their engagement levels are perceived to be lower than their peers. However, 20% of full-time students at UK universities live with their parents or guardians during term-time. In 2018/19, this corresponded to 365,475 students, a rise from 327,300 five years earlier (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2020). For many of our interviewees, 'like-to-be' selves were firmly located in their immediate environment, often because family connections and friendship networks were highly valued. The 'like-to-avoid' self was often imagined as estranged from the home environment. Interviewees made statements such as 'it would be nice to stay close to my mum', 'based [here], you're still close to like your family and everything' and 'I'm more comfortable living at home.'

Local knowledge was therefore 'collateral' (Holton 2015) in that students felt empowered by their geographical familiarity and could avoid stepping into spaces that were culturally, as well as spatially, alien. Many emphasised that they were actively choosing to stay at home, and that their decision was not a reflection of under-confidence, poor guidance or a misunderstanding of what higher education involves. Only one of our interviewees acknowledged that they were frightened of leaving home: 'I don't know anything outside of this bubble, like this is just my world'.

However, FEC staff tended to interpret students' decisions through a less positive lens ('not very adventurous'), readily invoking a deficit model ('living away somewhere different is just not, it's just not on their radar really'). In interviews, staff positioned the traditional, middle-class model of going away to university as the common-sense norm. For some, this implicitly drew on their own experiences of higher education. Our staff interviewees found it genuinely difficult to understand why younger generations of students would remain at home, and thereby 'miss out' on the life-changing opportunities that they enjoyed during their own time at university. This stance was well-

intentioned, but perhaps insensitive to inter-generational and other differences: the cultural ties that bind many working-class families; the increasing role of technology in accessing 'experiences' vicariously; the keenly-felt need to avoid additional financial burdens.

Some staff members went further in expressing disapproval towards students, characterising them as under-committed and unwilling to invest time and energy into the decision-making process:

> "I think they pick a subject area and then just pick where's local that they can do that. So, yeah, it's not kind of thinking 'oh what career do I want to go into?' For many students it isn't that long-term planning or vision. It's just kind of, again, it's kind of, 'what's easy and straightforward?' And I would say that, yeah, there's very, there isn't a lot of research that goes into making their choices, unfortunately." (FEC staff member)

We found little evidence in our student interviews of 'easy and straightforward' options being taken. Indeed, for many, the decision to continue studying required complex additional strategising, logistically and financially. Many students were juggling academic study with other commitments, including part-time work. Despite this, most were able to elaborate a long-term plan or vision for themselves, albeit not one that fitted neatly with the assumptions and expectations of the staff at their college.

As Holton (2015) points out, home environments can be highly emotive and memory-laden places for young people. This helps to explains why the stay-at-home participation option is growing in popularity among young people (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2020). When considering their participation options, many felt drawn to the perceived stability and security of a familiar place. Stay-at-home participation was socially, as well as economically rational, for most of our interviewees.

Theme 2: the 'like-to-be' self as the financially comfortable self

Given the level of indebtedness associated with university participation in the English funding system (Belfield et al. 2017), it is not surprising that monetary considerations were to the fore of interviewees' minds. However, once again, the 'Possible Selves' models exposed a gap between the financial futures projected on to young people and those articulated directly. Students were aware of dominant narratives of higher education as a stepping stone to higher earnings, but tended to frame their potential graduate premium differently, and often in non-financial language.

Stability was the over-riding objective, with ambitions mostly articulated in terms of having an 'okay' career, a 'decent' salary and a 'comfortable' life. Again, the framing was positive. Students had rationally matched their goals to perceived local employment conditions, and modified their expectations accordingly. 'Just to have my own house and car and stuff like that' was the reported goal of one student, who then added:

> "I'm not really fussed how big or, like, how small a house or car, and I'm not really too fussed about getting paid loads." (FEC student)

For some, the route to financial stability involved university, but many interviewees expressed misgivings about the narratives that surrounded them. Some felt that university was too forcefully imposed as the next step, making the point that work

experience was more important than further qualifications, while others questioned the reliability of the progression from degree-level study to secure employment:

> "A good paying job and university aren't linked. Well, they can be linked but they're not like you have to go to university to have a good paying job". (FEC student)

Comments from staff tended to strike a different tone. Some feared that students were opting for short-term gains in vocational careers while foregoing potentially higher longer-term earnings through university attendance:

> "They're probably just thinking about getting out of college, going to work and getting, you know. They're twenty, they're nineteen, twenty. They're going to get a job on a building site earning three or four hundred [pounds] a week and you know, that's what they're thinking about. And so it's really difficult to break that. We're pushing people into higher education. And so, you know, the guys that I have here at this college, say to me 'I can earn £500 [a week] by not going to university so why would I go?' And it's a hard argument to really have with them because in one way you have to kind of agree with them." (FEC staff member)

The view expressed above may seem empathetic because it ultimately acknowledges students' economic rationality. However, it also involves deep-rooted class-based stereotypes that were not consistent with the way in which students talked about themselves. Students' imagined 'like-to-be' selves rarely involved manual work. Their arguments demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of labour markets than staff implied. They did not focus solely on anticipated short-term pay-offs. Whether it is the duty of advisers to 'break' students' way of thinking is therefore questionable.

Other staff took a different position, noting that the higher education sector focused disproportionately on the social aspects of being a university student, and pointing to university marketing that they found problematic and potentially demotivating for their FEC students. For instance, fears were expressed that universities overstated the added value of attending, which could be misleading to students:

> "I think they're probably on the right side of marketing guidelines as to what they're allowed to say but I think sometimes they misrepresent university. University isn't necessarily guaranteed to get you a job on £50,000 a year as soon as you finish university but statistically on some courses you might earn more in your lifetime." (FEC staff member)

However, the way in which staff conceptualised their own FECs was sometimes at odds with this critique, and with what students said they wanted from their college. For example, one staff member emphasised that 'we very much promote ourselves as an aspirational college,' adding that 'we expect our students to be ambitious.' Further probing revealed that staff were acutely aware of how their colleges were perceived from the outside. Like universities, they were operating within a competitive educational environment built on prestige indicators and proxies of success.

Staff also imagined pressures on students from parents to enter the workforce immediately after they graduated from college:

> "You know, if mum and dad want you to go out and get a job and start putting food on the table at home, you know, that [is] ultimately going to have impact". (FEC staff member)

> "We do still have kind of some parents - I wouldn't say all, it'd be a minority - but some parents who are more keen for their sons and daughters to enter the job market, start

earning money, start picking up those life skills straight away, and may not fully see the value of higher education." (FEC staff member)

But the assumptions that parents expected financial support from their children was not consistent with the students' testimonies, which occasionally acknowledged wanting to contribute to the family budget, but never mentioned feeling morally obliged to do so. The deficit model that college staff imposed on their parents was something that students were aware of and sometimes resentful towards.

Most interviewees discussed their future financial aspirations in relation to their personal interests, such as subjects they were interested in or jobs that they would find fulfilling. Here, 'like-to-avoid' dispositions emerged strongly, confirming Harrison's view (2018) that they can be just as motivating as 'like-to-be' selves. One student said:

"I don't want to do an office job. I just find it too like boring … the same thing like every day." (FEC student)

Other interviewees expressed fear about becoming 'trapped' in the workplace. Most were willing to sacrifice a higher graduate salary for a more stimulating working environment.

One staff member reflected on FECs' own role in disaffecting students, ascribing blame in part to the way that courses were framed in instrumental terms, as a means to enter a vocational sector as quickly as possible. The perceived danger here was that the courses were seen by students as obligatory and short-term rather than emancipatory.

"I mean if you look at the way vocational courses are described to young people, it's all about [being able to] support you into your chosen sector. And that's not just at college, I think that's across the board in FECs and vocational courses. And there's the chance that they sort of see this as a mandatory piece of education, where [if] they pick something they get something to the career they want, or into the sector they want, then that's sort of two years done and then they can go and do what they want to do but it's without the long term thinking that HE would progress them further and that sector will help them earn more money in the future." (FEC Staff member)

The view that 'HE would progress [students] further' perhaps lies at the heart of many tensions. It could be argued that staff are right to encourage their students to take a more long-term approach and aspire to higher levels of education. They are aware of the graduate premium associated with degree-level work and, in many cases, experienced the transformatory power of higher education personally. Indeed, even though we did not use the 'Possible Selves' model as a direct prompt in staff interviews, it often emerged organically in their thinking. Staff readily imagined future selves for their students based their own pasts. However, students were reluctant to accept externally imposed projections of themselves, often critiquing the motivations behind them. These external imagined futures often conflicted with students' instinct to remain grounded within a familiar environment, and to avoid the financial indebtedness associated with the 'full' university experience.

Discussion: how are possible selves forged?

Using the 'Possible Selves' model allowed crucial and policy-relevant tensions to be captured as students' futures were imagined. In putting the model into practice, we have shown how it can act as a 'mediating artefact' within a research methodology by

helping to exemplify some of the intricate and knowledgeable ways in which young people set about elaborating their future selves. However, following Murphy's (2018) work on the role of family in shaping 'like-to-be selves' we argue that the 'Possible Selves' model is receptive to further refinement to accommodate how emerging versions of the 'self' are constructed and influenced by external factors. College students from less advantaged backgrounds remain highly aspirational. However, we note a tendency for their aspiration to be expressed in ways that are inconsistent with the language used by FEC staff, and which sometimes betray naivety about the practical steps needed to progress.

In particular, our data point to rivalry between multiple 'Possible Selves'. Several students expressed concern that their academic journey could be derailed by events beyond their control, and their aspirational self therefore never realised. For example, one student said: 'What if I randomly have a baby [in] three years and then I'm like, "oh no I can't do that university now?"' Other students indicated that they held on to multiple 'selves' because their personal lives were disordered and they feared that no single, clearly bounded path would become available for them to follow. In such ways, young people were demonstrating high levels of self-awareness.

However, this self-awareness did not mitigate the uncertainty that students felt about the routes through which the optimal possible self might be accessed. Many of our interviewees felt that they lacked the wherewithal to 'play the game' when it came to educational advancement and workplace transition, unable to imagine themselves beyond their immediate, short-term future. For example, one student said 'I literally don't know what you do after you've got a degree? Do you look for jobs? Or is that it?' This was partly an IAG issue: schools-based careers advice was an inadequate surrogate for the kind of social and cultural capitals upon which more advantaged peers are able to draw. Like the BTEC students interviewed by Baker (2019), the young people that we spoke to felt excluded from national and local outreach initiatives, constrained by financial limitations, and denied opportunities to develop their own sense of 'place' in the education pipeline. We found repeated evidence of long-term vagueness muddying short-term motivation. Without a clear path to the optimal self, some students struggled to remain academically focused. Well-elaborated possible selves can be motivational possible selves, but the participants in the study were and un(der)motivated because their possible selves were un(der)elaborated.

On an individual level, observations were made that suggested an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of the experiences that might associate most closely with the 'Possible Selves' to which young people aspired. For example, one reported: 'I used to have a job but I lost it because they scammed me,' referring to how she was unfairly dismissed from an art gallery after two shifts for bureaucratic reasons. But while recounting the story, it became apparent that the gallery was in fact exhibiting and selling the student's art. The cultural capital and exchange value of having her artwork publicly displayed had passed undetected by the student.

We also find myriad assumptions being made by staff about the young people in our interviews, often unconsciously modelled on the 'normal' transition route of previous generations and therefore insensitive to differences in culture and motivation. Students sketched out their future selves tentatively, often with a high degree of passivity. This was partly because of incongruities between the guidance available and students' perception

of their own position. For some, being a student or being a graduate was firmly a 'like-to-avoid' self (unlike, say, being a home-owner, which was a 'like-to-be' self). But staff repeatedly framed familial influence from a deficit perspective, regarding stay-at-home participation as failure and parental influence as counter-productive. University was uncritically presented as the 'right' way to elaborate the self, resulting in uncertainty and marginalisation for many students. This is perhaps a hangover from the aspirational discourses of Widening Participation policy that located self-exclusion as the individual's problems and projected low ambitions on to working-class families (Harrison and Waller 2018).

Possible selves were thus forged through a series of uneasy and problematic compromises. Students were being pressured to accommodate advice based on stereotypes around what a traditional university education looks like, while also pressurising themselves to keep open as many options as possible to accommodate unexpected individual setbacks. Added to this mix was often a deficit in trusted information, structural barriers of which many interviewees were acutely aware, and a lingering sense that they were to blame – as students – for lacking ambition. Unsurprisingly, where possible selves did emerge through this fog, they were often elaborated under-confidently.

However, it could be argued that students' cost-benefit calculations were actually better informed that those of their advisers, and shrewdly resistant to dominant narratives of average gain (e.g. McGuigan, McNally, and Wyness 2016). Our interviewees had an instinctive awareness that their 'future self' would be shaped by different input variables from those of previous generations and of their more advantaged peers. In taking into account the structural constraints of class, ethnicity and gender, students arguably measured risk – and therefore crafted 'Possible Selves' – in more sophisticated ways than that assumed by public discourses. Choices remained rational, but were based on different cost-benefit formulae than those applied elsewhere.

Conclusion

Like other researchers (Harrison 2018; Harrison and Waller 2018; Erikson 2019; Henderson 2019; Henderson, Stevenson, and Bathmaker 2019), we find the 'Possible Selves' model to be an instructive and appropriate thinking tool for approaching questions around access to university for young people from lower participation backgrounds. The model offers a rich and potentially exciting lens for critiquing policy, especially as successful elaboration can allow accelerated propulsion towards the 'like-to-be' self (Oyserman et al. 2004). By specifically asking FEC students about their imagined future selves, we were able to see how bridges were being constructed between the present and the future.

However, we identify a need for further research to explore how future selves are shaped and normalised by external factors. The young people that we profiled had absorbed messages from multiple directions, internalising numerous outsiders' perceptions of their future, sometimes regardless of their acuity. Emerging expressions of 'like-to-be' and 'like-to-avoid' thus need to be treated with caution and contextualised appropriately. Indeed, asking young people aged 16 to 18 about their possible selves reveals a complex web of accumulated pressures (see also Erikson 2019). Many of the ways in which students have been conditioned to think emerge during interviews, but by then it is

arguably too late to gain a sense of what is truly wanted and not wanted. Students self-regulate their 'like-to-be' self, resigned to socio-economic constraints and their relative lack of agency. Following Oyserman et al. (2004), we therefore suggest a distinction between 'true possible selves' and 'conditioned possible selves', arguing that the former become difficult to identify for those denied structural facilitation. This echoes the attention that Clegg pays to 'the gap between how individuals think and talk about their futures in relation to their actions in the present, and the ways this cannot be discursively neutral' (2019, 53).

The 'Possible Selves' model has always positioned students' imagined futures in context, both present and future, and acknowledged structural constraints and the limits of agency (Harrison 2018). In such ways it differs from decontextualised accounts of aspiration or ambition, despite questions of whether the 'Possible Selves' model confers too much agency to the individual students (Henderson 2019). Oyserman et al. (2004) imply that even the most eloquently expressed visions of the 'like-to-be' self are not enough unless linked with credible realisation strategies. A focus on 'elaboration' can therefore risk placing further blame on young people for lacking the strategies to fulfil their 'like-to-be' selves. The ability to articulate one's possible selves is important, but it cannot compensate for a lack of well-understood progression routes. As Harrison (2018) points out, thinking about future selves is only likely to be transformational for disadvantaged young people within a facilitative organisational context. We identified high levels of personal aspiration but also high levels of indecision among students lacking relevant capitals and unable to access reliable IAG. One danger of the 'Possible Selves' model is that it does not fully accommodate the 'social realist' students who have understood and accepted that their aspirations need to be moderated by the lack of openings for young people like them to succeed. The 'like-to-be' selves elaborated by such students can easily be mistaken for unambitious selves, especially where they deviate from those encoded in dominant discourses of university participation. As Erikson notes when critiquing the model, 'motivation is not formed in a cultural vacuum' (2019, 23). We see the 'possible self' as a dynamic construct, embracing multiple, life-long learner identities.

Our analysis of interviews with staff may offer an insight into why students' possible selves were often confused or unstable. In many cases, advisers' own transition narratives were unwittingly replicated, with their own recalled possible selves being projected on to a generation of students negotiating a very different social and cultural landscape. Contrary to assumptions made by some staff, not all of the students that we interviewed were motivated by the prospect of a generous financial graduate premium. Aspirations were not limited by parental expectations and boundaries (Harrison and Waller 2018). As in previous studies (Jones et al. 2020), we found young people visualising university participation through a non-financial lens and using non-financial language.

Indeed, 'high-flying' metaphors tended be avoided, with FEC students preferring stability and security to the distant possibility of astronomical success. As such, their thinking was out of line with the more entrepreneurial lens through which ambition was conceptualised by their advisers. Voigt (2007) warned against interpreting aspiration in consumer terms, noting that people from different backgrounds weigh up costs and potential gains in different ways. This was one of the reasons that students were loyal to educational spaces that they found familiar and considered safe. Even the lure of

institutional prestige, so embedded within discourses of higher education, was shunned. This created tensions between the students and their advisers, many of whom had internalised elitist sector hierarchies in which the stay-at-home student occupied a lowly position. Staff focused on average graduate outcomes, in contrast to students' more context-sensitive calculations of (perceived) individual risk. Social and geographic mobility was fetishised by students' advisers, adding to decision-making ambiguity.

For students' 'like-to-be' selves to be realised, transition discourses need to move beyond narrow conceptualisations of the 'university-educated possible self'. This projection, often favoured by FEC staff, rests on assumptions that students' financial and (assumed) lifestyle motivations take priority over familial and geographic motivations. It does not empower young people to elaborate their futures. Indeed, it sometimes leaves the FEC student feeling misunderstood and shamed. This has implications for FEC staff – who are arguably selling higher education 'wrong' – and also for policymakers in the post-Covid landscape where 'possible selves' are now being formed.

The 'university-educated possible self' would benefit from being reimagined, and we have identified specific ways in which its facilitation could become more sensitive to the needs and dreams of all young people, such that 'true possible selves' can be converted to future selves through sustained and appropriate structural support. Without this, the danger is that imagined selves remain imagined, closed down by antagonistic environments before the process of realisation begins. A first step would be for those involved with advising young people to recognise and respect their ambition, as they elaborate it, without seeing it through deficit lenses.

Notes on contributors

Steven Jones is a Professor of Higher Education and Head of the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. He conducts research into policy and practice in post-compulsory education that explores how economically disadvantaged young people conceptualise, engage with and perform at university. He is particularly interested in how students' cultural and social capital affects their higher education experiences.

Rita Hordósy is a Nottingham Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham. Her research interests revolve around social justice issues in education and post-compulsory education trajectories, with her current work focusing on the research/teaching nexus compared across European universities.

Jenna Mittelmeier is a Lecturer in International Education in the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. Her research focuses on students' transition in higher education, with particular expertise in international students' experiences and curriculum internationalisation.

Aunam Quyoum is a PhD researcher in Education at the University of Sheffield. She uses participatory methods and curriculum-based research as a prism to explore students' understanding of history, identity and citizenship in contemporary Britain.

Tamsin McCaldin is a Lecturer in Educational Leadership in the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester, as well as a former secondary school teacher. Her research focuses on students' experiences, particularly in the area of preparing for examinations, in the context of education policy.

ORCID

Steven Jones 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4529-9996
Rita Hordósy 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1888-8269
Jenna Mittelmeier 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6037-822X
Aunam Quyoum 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3637-543X

References

Abrahams, J. 2018. "Option blocks that block options: exploring inequalities in GCSE and A Level options in England." *British journal of sociology of education* 39 (8): 1143–1159. doi:10.1080/01425692.2018.1483821.

Acquah, D. K., H. Limmer, and D. Malpass. 2017. "'I don't know where to find the careers adviser ... he has disappeared': the impact of changes to careers advice on 14–16 year olds in University Technical Colleges and schools." *Research Papers in Education* 32 (2): 197–216. doi:10.1080/02671522.2016.1167234.

Archer, L., and M. Hutchings. 2000. "'Bettering Yourself'? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education." *British journal of sociology of education* 21 (4): 555–574. doi:10.1080/713655373.

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. doi:10.1080/01425692.2015.1131146.

Bahn, S., and L. Barratt-Pugh. 2013. "Getting reticent young male participants to talk: Using artefact-mediated interviews to promote discursive interaction." *Qualitative Social Work* 12 (2): 186–199. doi:10.1177/1473325011420501.

Baker, Z. 2019. "The vocational/academic divide in widening participation: the higher education decision making of further education students." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 1–15. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2019.1599328.

Ball, S. J., S. MacRae, and M. E. G. Maguire. 1999. "Young lives, diverse choices and imagined futures in an education and training market." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 3 (3): 195–224. doi:10.1080/136031199285002.

Bathmaker, A.-M., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2013. "Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game." *British journal of sociology of education* 34 (5–6): 723–743. doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.816041.

Beaumont, C., C. Moscrop, and S. Canning. 2016. "Easing the transition from school to HE: scaffolding the development of self-regulated learning through a dialogic approach to feedback." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 40 (3): 331–350. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2014.953460.

Belfield, C., J. Britton, L. Dearden, and V. D. E. Laura. 2017. "Higher Education funding in England: past, present and options for the future" IFS Briefing Note BN211. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/33177/1/BN211.pdf

Boliver, V. 2013. "How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?" *British Journal of Sociology* 64 (2): 344–364. doi:10.1111/1468-4446.12021.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative research in psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706QP063OA.

Clegg, S. 2019. "Extending the analytical scope of theories of 'possible selves'." In *Possible Selves and Higher Education: New Interdisciplinary Insights*, edited by H. Henderson, J. Stevenson, and A.-M. Bathmaker, 41–56. Abingdon: Routledge.

Crawford, C., L. Dearden, J. Micklewright, and A. Vignoles. 2017. *Family Background and University Success Differences in Higher Education Access and Outcomes in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cross, S., and H. Markus. 1991. "Possible selves across the life span." *Human development* 34 (4): 230–255. doi:10.1159/000277058.

Crozier, G., D. Reay, J. Clayton, L. Colliander, and J. Grinstead. 2008. "Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education." *Research Papers in Education* 23 (2): 167–177. doi:10.1080/02671520802048703.

Erikson, M. G. 2007. "The meaning of the future: Toward a more specific definition of possible selves." *Review of General Psychology* 11 (4): 348–358. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.11.4.348.

Erikson, M. G. 2019. "Potentials and challenges when using possible selves in studies of student motivation." In *Possible Selves and Higher Education: New Interdisciplinary Insights*, edited by H. Henderson, J. Stevenson, and A.-M. Bathmaker, 13–26. Abingdon: Routledge.

Erikson, M. G., B. Hansson, and S. Lundblad. 2012. "The possible selves of adult women with anorexia nervosa." *Eating disorders* 20 (4): 288–299. doi:10.1080/10640266.2012.689212.

Harrison, N. 2018. "Using the Lens of "Possible Selves" to Explore Access to Higher Education: A New Conceptual Model for Practice, Policy, and Research." *Social sciences* 7 (10): 209. doi:10.3390/socsci7100209.

Harrison, N., and R. Waller. 2018. "Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education." *British educational research journal* 44 (5): 914–938. doi:10.1002/berj.3475.

Henderson, H. 2019. "Borrowed time: a sociological theorisation of possible selves and educational subjectivities." In *Possible Selves and Higher Education: New Interdisciplinary Insights*, edited by H. Henderson, J. Stevenson, and A.-M. Bathmaker, 27–40. Abingdon: Routledge.

Henderson, H., J. Stevenson, and A.-M. Bathmaker. 2019. "Introduction: Why possible selves and higher education?" In *Possible Selves and Higher Education: New Interdisciplinary Insights*, edited by H. Henderson, J. Stevenson, and A.-M. Bathmaker, 1–11. Abingdon: Routledge.

Higher Education Statistics Agency. 2020. *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2018/19*. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/16-01-2020/sb255-higher-education-student-statistics

Holton, M. 2015. "'I already know the city, I don't have to explore it': Adjustments to 'sense of place' for 'local' UK university students." *Population, space and place* 21 (8): 820–831. doi:10.1002/psp.1866.

John, C., G. Crozier, and D. Diane Reay. 2009. "Home and away: risk, familiarity and the multiple geographies of the higher education experience." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 19 (3–4): 157–174. doi:10.1080/09620210903424469.

Jones, S. 2018. "Expectation vs experience: might transition gaps predict undergraduate students' outcome gaps?" *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42 (7): 908–921. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323195.

Jones, S., K. Vigurs, and D. Harris. 2020. "Discursive framings of market-based education policy and their negotiation by students: the case of 'value for money' in English universities." *Oxford Review of Education* 1–18. doi:10.1080/03054985.2019.1708711.

Lehmann, W. 2009. "Becoming Middle Class: How working-class university students draw and transgress moral class boundaries." *Sociology* 43 (4): 631–647. doi:10.1177/0038038509105412.

Markus, H., and P. Nurius. 1986. "Possible Selves." *American Psychologist* 41 (9): 954–969. Unique Identifier: 1987-01154-001. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954.

McCaig, C. 2016. "The retreat from widening participation? The National Scholarship Programme and new access agreements in English higher education." *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (2): 215–230. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.916672.

McGuigan, M., S. McNally, and G. Wyness. 2016. "Student awareness of costs and benefits of educational decisions: Effects of an information campaign." *Journal of human capital* 10 (4): 482–519. doi:10.1086/689551.

Moote, J., and L. Archer. 2018. "Failing to deliver? Exploring the current status of career education provision in England." *Research Papers in Education* 33 (2): 187–215. doi:10.1080/02671522.2016.1271005.

Murphy, A. 2018. "Shaping possible selves: The role of family in constructing higher education futures for students with dyslexia." In *Possible Selves and Higher Education: New Interdisciplinary Insights*, edited by H. Henderson, J. Stevenson, and A.-M. Bathmaker, 78–92. Abingdon: Routledge.

Oyserman, D., D. Bybee, K. Terry, and T. Hart-Johnson. 2004. "Possible selves as roadmaps." *Journal of research in personality* 38 (2): 130–149. doi:10.1016/S0092-6566(03)00057-6.

Reay, D., G. Crozier, and J. Clayton. 2010. "'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education." *British educational research journal* 36 (1): 107–124. doi:10.1080/01411920902878925.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.2020 "2020 Cycle Applicant Figures." https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2020/2020-cycle-applicant-figures-15-january-deadline

Voigt, K. 2007. "Individual choice and unequal participation in higher education." *Theory and Research in Education* 5 (1): 87–112. doi:10.1177/1477878507073617.