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Parental expectations and aspirations: lessons from two inner-London sixth form colleges



INNOVATING & INSPIRING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP



Working paper 1

KEY FINDINGS

During the academic year 2022-23, we commissioned research with two sixth form colleges in London. We aimed to better understand how parents perceive university and career aspirations for their children. In total, we interviewed 46 parents across the two schools. Below we present the two case studies.

01

Parental involvement is likely to be linked to their own experiences of attending, or not, higher education. Parents who themselves have attended university are more likely to be involved with their child's choice of university.

02

Parents who themselves did not attend university, especially not in the UK, are more likely to rely on the school for information and advice. This can result in misinformation or lack of information if the school does not have the necessary structures in place to support students.

03

Few parents generally believe that their children have clear plans for career progression beyond university.

04

Students whose parents have not attended university are more likely to consider staying in the same city when attending university, as they do not want to lose the social support of close-by family and friends.

CASE STUDY 1

The first school is a non-selective, comprehensive, state-funded collegiate of three sixth form colleges located in southeast London. It serves a diverse and multicultural community with significant levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Most students are of black and minority ethnic heritage (88%) and a significant proportion (78%) live in disadvantaged postcode areas. 23.3% of students are eligible for Free School Meals. 85% of students go to university. Our research aimed to understand parental aspirations, and involvement in the process of choosing universities. We interviewed the parents of 19 students at the school.

The vast majority of parents had little to no influence on their child's educational decisions. In most cases, the students themselves were the primary decision-makers when it came to their secondary and tertiary education. These parents were comfortable with their children determining their own future because they either didn't wish to control their children's choices or were unfamiliar with the UK education system and lacked the motivation to form an informed opinion. On the other hand, a small number of parents played a more significant role in guiding their child's educational path. They were either actively involved in joint decision-making or directly controlled their child's educational choices. Most parents were firm believers that the school their child went to was one of the main determinants of which university they would choose, as schools are both responsible for providing information and also for raising aspirations.

Approximately one-third of students aimed exclusively for London-based universities. This decision was typically motivated by the students' discomfort with leaving their familiar area or social circle. In one case, parents were also reluctant to have their child leave London. The primary factors behind this choice were social, with no mention of cost or travel difficulties as significant considerations. Most families did not consider Oxbridge as a viable option for reasons such as feeling socially uncomfortable, concerns about a challenging workload, or a preference to stay in London. The majority of parents, however, believed that Oxbridge was beyond their child's capabilities.

FAMILY SUPPORT AND INFLUENCE

Most parents were very happy to let their children decide what path they wanted to take after school. Since many of them did not go to university themselves or were not familiar with the UK education system, they felt their children and their school would be better placed to decide what choices they wanted to make. This meant that their involvement was limited to them providing support and being proud of their children.

For example, a parent said:

She is the only person in the family to go [to university] and I feel she carries that with her. She wants to be the achiever in the family and she kind of feels that is within her grasp. I have to admit that we are not overly ambitious.

However, there were certain downsides to this approach. One of the drawbacks was that when parents were unable to offer information or were unaware of the processes, it resulted in students missing out on various opportunities. For instance, there was a case where a parent mentioned that their daughter had an interest in applying to Oxbridge, but because she missed the application deadline, she wouldn't be able to pursue this path. Students frequently depended on their schools not only for information about potential universities but also for nurturing their aspirations. In situations where schools lacked sufficient resources or failed to instil a sense of accomplishment, students could ultimately be disadvantaged.

FAMILY SUPPORT AND INFLUENCE

As one parent put it:

Far too many people go to university and they get ripped off and come out with a Mickey Mouse degree that is of very little value... [whereas] you go to the [School] and, whether it is by getting people into university, it is potentially changing lives by getting kids on the trajectory that they can get into aspirational universities.

The students in our case study had this level of support from their current school, but parents expressed a displeasure with previous secondary schools they had attended, when such opportunities were not explored.

Just like their involvement in their child's choices regarding university education, parents at the College were not highly engaged in shaping their child's career decisions beyond the university level. Most parents did not think their children had a clear plan for their future career. Some parents felt that they lacked the necessary connections or contacts to help their children secure job placements. Consequently, they depended on the school to offer guidance and opportunities for work experience. Only a small number of parents had specific opinions about what direction they thought their child should pursue in their career.

FAMILY SUPPORT AND INFLUENCE

For most families, applying to London universities seemed like the best option. This was for a variety of reasons. Some parents wanted their children to stay at home and were not happy with the prospect of them moving to another city; others had anxiety, or mobility issues, or had lost a parent. In other cases, it just felt easier to stay at home and be close to their family. As a parent put it:

He doesn't want to go outside London. He wants to stay local... he just wants to be close to home and have Sunday dinners and have none of that washing.

Financial constraints were not a prominent factor cited as a deterrent for applying to universities beyond London. The primary reasons were predominantly social in nature, revolving around the desire to remain close to their families and established social circles with which they were already familiar.

Apart from their desire to stay close to home, some students were prevented from exploring Oxbridge as an option. This was mainly because of three reasons:

1. Students preferred universities which were ethnically diverse, in which they felt they would fit in.
2. The workload associated with Oxbridge was preventative as they felt they did not have the capabilities to cope with it.
3. They found the settings themselves daunting. Since they were accustomed to a more contemporary school environment, the contrast in settings wasn't something they believed they could adapt to comfortably.

CASE STUDY 2

The second school is an academically selective, socially inclusive sixth form based in east London. 39% of students are eligible for Free School Meals. The vast majority of students goes to university, with c.10% of the student population going to Oxbridge (according to 2023 destination figures). We interviewed parents of 27 students at the school.

The parents were divided into three roughly equal groups. One third indicated that their child was the key decision maker, both as regards the choice of the school and as regards tertiary education. These parents were content for their child to determine his/her own future, either because they had no desire for control over their child, or because they were unfamiliar with the UK education system and not sufficiently motivated to acquire an informed opinion. This group were amongst the most satisfied with the school, as they felt it suited their child's specific academic ambitions.

Another third of parents were strongly controlling of their child's direction, having been attracted to the school primarily because of its university admissions record. These parents tended to have been university educated themselves, to be primarily attracted to Oxford or Cambridge, and to allow their child little agency.

The final third was less distinctive, typically with the least certainty in tertiary choices, but without either the child or the parents having apparent leadership in decision-making, and an overall sense of joint involvement. Whilst there is no direct evidence, it was suspected that some controlling parents played down their level of involvement, and it is possible that some parents in this 'joint involvement' group actually belong in the previous group. Drawing from the effects of research on participants, there can be a degree of dissembling in such parents, who would prefer to have the world believe that their child's motivations and success are due to his/her own efforts and not to their parents.

The majority of students in this school were applying to Oxbridge and only a few opted for London universities. There was growing interest in degree apprenticeships and other specialised courses, as well as medical degrees.

In the second school, parents' views on the provision of information and advice were heavily determined by their own degree of involvement in their child's academic progress. The third of parents with the least involvement tended to be those who reported that their child was happy with the assistance they had received; and that they had not wanted any further information directed at the parents. However, the third who were the most engaged (and most controlling) tended to be the most critical of various aspects of the support provided. They wanted to know the details of all activities that the child is participating in throughout the university application process. This division was evident in all of the areas that we pursued in the discussions, ranging from university preparation, to communication with parents, to advice about careers.

As one parent put it:

I would like a schedule to know where we are at and what she needs to do when.

This group of parents were well-informed about the school's current offerings and had suggestions for additional opportunities. Evidently, some of them preferred a more closely involved approach from the school in terms of communication and engagement. For example:

She would like more mentoring. Sometimes she needs more insight and help with an issue. I understand that it's a place where they encourage self-motivation but sometimes she needs more help.

Parents had three separate motivations for wanting more information about tertiary education and career paths: first, that their child was too busy or too immature to arrive at fully-informed decisions, and that the parents were accustomed to working in the background to supplement or support their child's efforts. Second, the parents had little understanding of the UK's education or employment world, and simply wanted to understand what challenges their child was facing, and how their child could be helped to network and influence in a largely unknown society. Third, the most controlling parents manifested an anxiety that their own (often migrant) naivety left them unable to steer their child as their instinct dictated, and wanted the school to give parents a proper familiarity with the tools to steer their child's success.

The attitudes toward academic advancement were mirrored in the approach to career pathways. The third of parents who desired more active participation in academic affairs also had a strong interest in being part of the decision-making process regarding their child's career. Since the school employed a means-tested approach to assisting with job placements, some of these parents were dissatisfied if such support was not extended to them.