

HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE CHOOSE THEIR POST-16 EDUCATION?

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the multifaceted factors influencing the decision-making process of students currently in Years 12 and 13 on how they selected their sixth form school for post-16 education while in Year 11. Conducted in December 2023, the research involved interviews with 22 students enrolled in a selective inner-city London sixth form school, referred to as School A. School A has an excellent record of sending students to prestigious universities, including Oxbridge, medicine, veterinary degrees, and an increasing number securing degree apprenticeships.

The findings reveal that students actively participated in the decision-making process, considering various criteria to make informed choices. Academic reputation and the influence of parental preferences are factors weighed in the decision-making process. Despite parental influence, students perceived themselves as the ultimate decision-makers.

Key factors influencing their choice of School A included a focus on academic achievement, a commitment to student wellbeing, and a

distinctive lack of an overly competitive culture. The school's strategic prioritisation of wellbeing, diversity, and core values such as kindness and respect resonated positively with the students. Furthermore, location considerations, safety concerns, and transport accessibility contributed to the decision-making process. Crucially, the students highly valued School A's clear pathway of preparation for Oxbridge, medicine, and veterinary schools. They expressed trust in the school's staff, believing in their competence and ability to adequately prepare students for the next steps in their academic journey.

In conclusion, this case study provides valuable insights into the decision-making dynamics of students when choosing a sixth form college. The findings illustrate the importance of a holistic approach, encompassing academic excellence, student wellbeing, diversity, and high academic aspirations, in shaping students' choices. The study serves as a resource for educational institutions aiming to enhance their appeal and cater to the diverse needs and aspirations of prospective students.

THE TWO RESEARCH QUESTIONS WE HAD FOR THIS CASE STUDY WERE:

1. To what extent do students actively participate in the decision making process?
2. What factors influence students in choosing their post-16 education?

TO WHAT EXTENT DO STUDENTS ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS?

“OF COURSE, PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS PLAYED A ROLE IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS”

The interviews underscored the proactive engagement of all students in the careful process of selecting their sixth form schools. While the secondary schools they were affiliated with offered guidance on suitable applications, and parents often expressed their preferences, a repeated pattern emerged whereby the students perceived themselves as the ultimate arbiters in making the decisive choice. Actively participating in the decision-making journey, they conscientiously visited prospective sixth forms and colleges, being very involved in the task of identifying colleges that resonated with their educational aspirations.

Many mentioned googling prospective schools and trying to find as much information online, either through the school's **website or through social media**.

Of course, parental expectations played a role in the decision-making process, with parents expressing a strong preference for their children to attend schools with very **strong academic records**. The prevailing criterion for many parents was a **commitment to academic excellence**. Despite this parental influence, the students maintained a significant level of autonomy, retaining the final say in their choices.

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE STUDENTS IN CHOOSING THEIR POST-16 EDUCATION?

One of the primary considerations that influenced their decision-making process was the emphasis on **good academic results**, a key motivator for all students we interviewed. Given the high academic attainment level of students at the secondary school, they were advised to explore three potential sixth forms within their borough, all renowned for consistently producing excellent academic outcomes and sending students to Oxbridge.

However, the students showed a significant focus on **wellbeing and pastoral support**, a factor that stood out during their visits to open days at School A. The school's commitment to wellbeing sessions and its strategic prioritisation of student wellbeing resonated positively with them. In contrast, they perceived the other schools as overly fixated on academic achievement, often leading to a detrimental "Oxbridge agenda" and a competitive atmosphere among students. The reputation of pressure and stress associated with the other two schools was unappealing to the students.

Students also expressed a desire for **high expectations**. Many local sixth forms predominantly offered BTECs and vocational courses, limiting options for those aspiring to pursue higher education in a Russell Group university. This was reflective of the wider demographic in an area of high economic deprivation.

Location also factored into their decision-making process. Some female students cited discomfort with one of the options due to safety concerns, while another student found one option too close to home, which could restrict social interactions. The excellent transport links near School A were deemed crucial for facilitating easy travel across London.

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE STUDENTS IN CHOOSING THEIR POST-16 EDUCATION?

A welcome aspect was the absence of a secondary school at School A, creating an **equal starting point** for all students. This shared experience of starting fresh and overcoming the challenges of adjustment fostered a sense of unity among students, as those joining in sixth form felt like outsiders together, with no pre-existing insiders.

The students highly valued School A's commitment to **diversity and core values** such as kindness and respect. During open day visits, they observed a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, appreciating the school's genuine embrace of all cultures and identities. Cultural events and opportunities for self-expression further reinforced the school's commitment to diversity, which appealed to students.

In addition to the rigorous academic programme, students at School A enthusiastically embraced a wealth of **co-curricular opportunities**. The multitude of choices allowed them to expand their horizons, build networks, and develop a strong work ethic. The school's effort to cater to individual interests within the resources of a state school resonated positively with the students, contributing to their holistic educational experience.

Finally, students expressed gratitude for the **well-defined pathway** of preparation provided by School A, particularly in the context of Oxbridge, medicine, and veterinary schools. They conveyed a sense of confidence in the school's competence, acknowledging that School A exhibited a clear understanding of the preparation process. This assurance led them to trust the staff, believing that they would be adequately prepared for the subsequent stages of their academic journey.

- **Good academic results**
- **High expectations**
- **Location**
- **Emphasis on wellbeing and pastoral support**
- **Diversity and core values**
- **Well-defined pathway of preparation**