

# NOT ENOUGH CAPITAL?

EXPLORING EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT  
PROGRESSION IN FURTHER EDUCATION

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## **ABOUT THE RSA**

The RSA has been a source of ideas, innovation and civic enterprise for over 250 years. In the light of new challenges and opportunities for the human race our purpose is to encourage the development of a principled, prosperous society by identifying and releasing human potential. This is reflected in the organisation's recent commitment to the pursuit of what it calls 21st century enlightenment.

Through lectures, events, pamphlets and commissions, the RSA provides a flow of rich ideas and inspiration for what might be realised in a more enlightened world; essential to progress but insufficient without action. RSA Projects aim to bridge this gap between thinking and action. We put our ideas to work for the common good. By researching, designing and testing new ways of living, we hope to foster a more inventive, resourceful and fulfilled society. Through our Fellowship of 27,000 people and through the partnerships we forge, the RSA aims to be a source of capacity, commitment and innovation in communities from the global to the local. Fellows are actively encouraged to engage and to develop local and issue-based initiatives.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Any mistakes or errors that remain are the author's own.

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The socio-economic gap in educational achievement remains wide and intractable despite numerous attempts to address it. Social class is the strongest predictor of educational attainment. Whether it is because your parents can pay your rent during an internship, use their contacts to secure work experience or simply provide a lifestyle that familiarises you with the predominantly middle-class worlds of higher education and elite progressions, who your parents are will have a bigger impact on your life chances than your ability. Young people from low-income backgrounds need better formal and informal support to help them traverse this gap, make decisions about progression and ultimately have fulfilling careers.

The RSA is exploring how civil society organisations can support disadvantaged young people in both educational attainment and progression into the workplace. In order to develop this work, in early 2011 the RSA held a series of focus groups with young people and practitioners in Further Education (FE) colleges. This research supported the development of a mentoring partnership between the RSA and the FE sector. But the research also provided insight into the perspectives of young people and their teachers about the difficulties that young people from low-income backgrounds face when making crucial decisions about education and careers. These perspectives, supported by a literature review and desk research, are shared in this paper.

Our research focuses on the FE sector because this is where a majority of young people from low-income families are concentrated in their post-16 studies. Working well, the FE sector can support disadvantaged young people into fulfilling careers, perhaps via higher education. But at the moment the sector is constrained in this role due to its comparative under-funding, lack of policy attention and low status compared to higher education and school sixth forms. This paper describes the barriers that the young people we spoke to face when progressing in education and the workplace, and supported by existing research provides suggestions for how the FE sector can better support them.

## FINDINGS

This paper adds to a considerable body of research which shows that cultural, economic and institutional capital – or lack of it – has a detrimental effect on young people from low-income backgrounds in the FE sector, and in their progression into education or the workplace. Our main findings are:

- The disadvantage faced by young people from low-income backgrounds in secondary education continues into FE. Young people from low-income backgrounds face cultural, financial and institutional barriers compared to young people from higher-income groups.
- Many of the young people we spoke to were unaware of how important networks and other forms of cultural capital are for progression. In particular we found that young people from low-income backgrounds often have a strong aversion to using cultural capital to further their own ends. They considered this ‘cheating’ and instead drew on ‘rags to riches’ stories of securing independent success.
- Young people from low-income groups struggle to meet the everyday costs of college and feel priced out of higher education as a result of spiralling fees.
- Whilst doing the best they can for their students, because of the sector’s own lack of capital FE colleges are not always able to provide the advice, guidance and support that these young people need.

## 1. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

It has been said elsewhere that young people from high-income groups are like ‘fish in water’ in higher education and elite careers. Equally, young people from low-income groups are like fish out of water. They are profoundly disadvantaged by their lack of inculcation into the environments of education and professions. Our research underlined how young people from low-income families who study in the FE sector were simply unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with the mechanisms that facilitate progression within education sectors and through to professional work. They lacked the social networks and contacts to gain work experience and other valuable CV material. Their parents and role models are, on the whole, very supportive but lack experience and knowledge about which courses will open doors in chosen careers.

Perhaps most significantly, our research revealed that many young people from low-income families do not feel comfortable using cultural and social capital to further their own ends. Drawing on 'rags to riches' style success stories, these young people wanted to claim their achievements without help or support, which whether they know it or not, further compounds their disadvantage. Middle class students have no gap to traverse: they simply have to replicate their parents' achievements.

## **2. ECONOMIC CAPITAL**

Unsurprisingly, finance has a direct and negative impact on disadvantaged young people in terms of both their short and longer term progression. A lack of money restricted their participation in FE courses and influenced their decisions about progression, particularly amongst those young people considering higher education. Young people and their teachers were very worried about the impact of withdrawing the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and explained that students were struggling to meet the basic costs of education: transport, books, trips and even sustenance. In some instances FE colleges had to rearrange course timetables, cramming a week's worth of lessons into two days because students could not afford bus fares every day. Financial problems also limit the progression choices of young people. Our research reaffirmed existing findings on the link between social class and debt aversion: young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately deterred from higher education due to a fear of its costs and the debts they will incur.

## **3. INSTITUTIONAL CAPITAL**

Finally, FE institutions themselves have a significant impact on the progression choices and opportunities of their students. FE colleges have long been regarded as the 'Cinderella sector' of the education system because of their relative under-funding and poor status. The lack of both social and economic capital in the sector adversely affects its students in numerous ways. Research participants thought there has been under-investment in careers services, likely to worsen as cuts to Connexions start to take hold. They also felt that the inferior status of FE colleges amongst employers makes it difficult for colleges to build the institutional networks and contacts necessary to secure work experience and advice for students. This is most pronounced in cities where FE colleges are in direct competition with universities for opportunities and relationships.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The FE sector, supported by government, employers and other stakeholders, must find ways of addressing the cultural, financial and institutional challenges that compromise the progression of many disadvantaged young people. The paper outlines a number of approaches, recommendations and areas for further work that could support this, including the potential of civil society organisations such as the RSA to share cultural capital with young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Our main recommendations and ideas for ways forward include:

- Finding innovative ways to transmit cultural and social capital to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. FE colleges must build relationships with organisations that have high social and cultural capital. The ability of civil society organisations such as the RSA to share their cultural and social capital is currently not utilised. The type of support civil society organisations could provide includes mentoring/advocacy schemes for students and staff, and/or in-depth work with parents to help them develop their knowledge of progression routes and decisions.
- More work needs to be done on how social and cultural capital from low-income groups can be made valuable in progression. At the moment it disadvantages young people from low-income backgrounds and contributes to feelings of alienation.
- Consistent and accessible financial support is necessary to ensure disadvantaged students can access the FE sector and successfully progress. The government should consider the implications of this for the removal of the EMA. It is also necessary to provide early and in-depth information about financial support available for students in higher education.
- Detailed careers advice is sometimes difficult to access for FE students. The all-age careers service planned for launch in 2012 must provide high-quality, detailed careers advice as per the Wolf Report and make provision for specific careers advice that can be accessed in FE colleges.

- The FE sector needs to further strengthen its networks and contacts. FE practitioners could take some responsibility for maintaining these networks and contacts if they are provided with Continued Professional Development (CPD) opportunities that facilitate this. Building relationships with local employers needs particular attention to ensure FE provision is sensitive to their needs. This could be achieved by rejuvenating employer advisory boards that are subject-specific and expanding the role of FE colleges as ‘community hubs’ as proposed in the recent 2020 Public Services Hub report (Kippin et al, 2011).

### **RSA ‘FURTHERING OPPORTUNITIES’ INITIATIVE**

The RSA is exploring the ability of civil society organisations to support disadvantaged young people in more detail. This includes the design of an intervention to help share cultural and social capital with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to inform those with social capital about FE, and the lives of young people within it. This will take the form of a mentoring initiative between RSA Fellows and FE colleges. The scheme is intended to bring together young people studying in Further Education colleges with RSA Fellows who are experts in particular subject areas. In doing so, the project will equip young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with greater capital in negotiating school-to-work trajectories by accessing the experience, networks, advocacy and skills of RSA Fellows. The project will also provide RSA Fellows with an opportunity to use their skills and experience in the interests of a younger generation, develop meaningful connections with young people and become advocates for the Further Education sector.

The RSA wanted to involve FE students and their teachers in the design of this initiative in order to ensure it met their needs. Students and staff who participated in our research were extremely supportive of the proposed scheme and provided valuable advice about how the role of RSA Fellows should be conceived and what they could provide in colleges. On this basis, the following mentoring principles have been formulated and will guide the design of our own initiative:

- **Bring the workplace to the classroom:** mentors should provide students with an enhanced understanding of what a particular career involves and how classroom learning is relevant to it. This could include mentors working with groups or classes of students from a relevant discipline, providing an overview of their own career journey and a portrait of their sector as it stands today. Mentors could also advise FE practitioners on the design of course content and projects to ensure they are relevant for industry and employers today. In this latter role they would act as mentors for FE staff rather than students.
- **Spread social capital:** mentors should use their social capital and networks to help institutions, students and staff establish and rejuvenate education and employer networks. This could include supporting FE colleges and staff in brokering relationships with local employers and helping students to develop work experience opportunities.
- **Work collectively:** mentors should work with groups of students as well as individuals to promote social mixing and ensure no students are left behind, providing them with careers and education advice, helping them consider and evaluate different career options and supporting the development of a deeper understanding of the employment opportunities available in relevant sectors.
- **Build on shared experience:** where possible, mentors should be from similar backgrounds to the young people they are supporting to ensure there is mutual understanding and that they can act as an inspiration to young people, showing them what is possible.

<sup>1</sup> 'Social class' remains a controversial concept, with some commentators arguing that social class distinctions have faded or rapidly changed in recent decades, and others pointing out that inequalities and distinctions according to socio-economic background have grown greater than ever. Sociologists argue for a retention of the concept of 'class', as it incorporates cultural as well as financial factors (see e.g. Reay, 1998; Savage, 2007). For simplicity, we usually refer to young people from 'low-income backgrounds' in this paper.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Social justice is a key issue for the RSA education programme: our commitment to enabling young people to fulfil their potential is part of our broader drive for 21st century enlightenment (Taylor, 2010). Clearly there are many interpretations of and routes for achieving social justice, but the focus of this paper is on tackling the social class<sup>1</sup> gap in education. This is the gap in achievement and resultant life chances between young people from low-income backgrounds and young people from more affluent families. Social class remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement, undermining government claims to meritocracy, and strongly impeding both social mobility and social justice. The RSA is exploring how civil society organisations can support disadvantaged young people in both educational attainment and progression into the workplace.

This research has been informed by a wide-ranging literature review and a series of expert seminars, which identified a need to build interventions that direct attention to vocational as well as academic routes; and value and enhance the knowledge and social capital of low-income students and families. These principles are embedded in the design of our mentoring scheme. Our research focuses on the FE sector because this is where a majority of young people from low-income families are concentrated in their post-16 studies. Working well, the FE sector can support disadvantaged young people into fulfilling careers, perhaps via higher education. But at the moment the sector is constrained in this role due to its comparative under-funding, lack of policy attention and low status compared to higher education and school sixth forms.

Our literature review also highlighted the importance of engaging directly with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and giving them the opportunity to shape interventions. To this end, in early 2011 the RSA held a series of focus groups with young people and practitioners in Further Education (FE) colleges. This research supported the development of a mentoring partnership between the RSA and the FE sector. But the research also provided insight into the perspectives of young people and their teachers about the difficulties that young people from low-income backgrounds face when making crucial decisions about education and careers. These perspectives are shared in this paper.

The report is therefore in two parts: the first analyses and summarises student and practitioner attitudes and beliefs about the challenges young people from low-income backgrounds face in Further Education and progression. The second part summarises student and staff responses to our suggested initiative on the role of civil society organisations in sharing social and cultural capital; what value it adds and how it could work in practice. The concluding section draws both parts together, outlining recommendations for policy and practice in narrowing the social class gap through the Further Education sector.

**2** E. Perry and B. Francis, *The social class gap for educational achievement: a review of the literature*, 2010

**3** Although of course the low pay concerned and high rents in metropolitan areas means that even paid internships are often beyond the reach of disadvantaged young people beyond the immediate locality.

## 3. BACKGROUND

### WHY IS THE SOCIAL CLASS GAP IMPORTANT?

Social mobility — or lack of it — has again caught the imagination of our politicians. A new study into class shines a light on the continuing influence social background has on the course of all of our lives (Jones, 2011). Indeed, the considerable impact of social class has been well documented by sociologists (see e.g. Savage, 2007; Sayer, 2005; Walkerdine and Lucey, 2001; Reay et al, 2001), and underlined in the recent debates about internships and university fees, bringing to the fore how difficult it can be for young people with limited social capital and financial means to progress in education and employment. A recent LSE study showed that social mobility has decreased, rather than increased, over the last four decades (LSE, 2010) and the National Equality Panel has shown that British children's educational attainment and broader life chances remain overwhelmingly linked to parental occupation, income, and qualifications (Lupton 2009, Sodha and Margo, 2010). Social class, not ability, remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Although the class gap is a widespread international phenomenon, the UK has a particularly high degree of social segregation and is one of the nations with the most highly differentiated results among OECD countries (OECD, 2007).

There have been a range of strategies for tackling this problem. The previous government's target to achieve 50% of 18-30 year olds participating in higher education aimed to widen access to university amongst disadvantaged young people. And the slow move towards paid internships reflects concerns that many young people are excluded from exciting opportunities in expanding industries such as fashion, politics and media because they do not have the resources to fund themselves (Lawton and Potter, 2010)<sup>3</sup>. There have also been wide-ranging interventions targeting children in the early years to break generational cycles of poverty and disadvantage. Flagship initiatives such as Sure Start and parenting programmes including Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) and Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) aim to provide all young people with the best possible start in life.

Many of these interventions have had positive impacts. For instance, the most recent evaluation of Sure Start showed that children who participated experienced improved parenting (NESS, 2010), which is in turn likely to result in better life outcomes for young people. Yet by comparison to the multiple and wide-ranging interventions in the areas outlined above, this paper argues that the potential of Further Education (FE) to help tackle inequality and promote social mobility is being neglected.

### WHY FOCUS ON FURTHER EDUCATION?

Further education is known as the 'last chance' sector because for many of its students it is their final opportunity to gain educational qualifications and improve their life chances. FE colleges work with more young people than schools and independent sixth forms combined: in 2008/09 there were over one million learners aged under-19 participating in government-funded further education. Many of these young people have struggled in education and are from disadvantaged backgrounds: 56% of FE learners are from the bottom three socio-economic groups, compared with only 22% in maintained school sixth forms (Buddery, Kippin and Lucas, 2010). Working with these groups presents challenges in terms of learner support, attendance and attainment. But it also means the sector has a huge opportunity to promote and sustain social mobility and employment.

The hard task of supporting disadvantaged students is compounded by a persistent image problem in the sector. FE has suffered from low status and — at least until recently — underfunding compared to school and independent sixth forms. Employers and education professionals have little understanding of the sector and often perceive it and its students as 'second division' (LSC, 2007). This can leave colleges struggling to define their identity and value. Naturally, this can disadvantage its students in their own progression.

However, far from being 'second division' the FE sector can and should strengthen its role in improving the prospects of disadvantaged students and tackling broader social injustices. This report is based on research undertaken with FE students and staff, exploring what holds these young people back and how the sector and its students can be better supported.

4 A brief note on the qualitative methods (focus groups) that are the main source of evidence for this paper: qualitative research is sometimes considered less weighty than quantitative research. However, there is already ample quantitative research attesting to the persistent social class gap in our education system (NAO, 2010). Rather than reaffirm the social class gap, this paper seeks to understand why this gap exists, providing an insight into the views and concerns of students and staff learning and working in the FE sector. Qualitative research provides a depth of understanding that cannot be achieved in quantitative research by giving voice to those whom policy and other interventions target. We hope that this will provide much needed insight into how students from lower socio-economic backgrounds can be best supported and how government and other actors can better support social mobility and social justice.

## 4. METHODS

Three different methods have been employed during this project: a literature review on social class and educational achievement, desk research on the FE sector and eight focus groups with FE practitioners and students. The results of these methods are embedded throughout this paper and we draw on all methods to inform our findings.

### LITERATURE REVIEW ON SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

This RSA literature review analysed existing academic and policy literature on social class and educational achievement. The review begins by establishing the scale and persistence of the social class gap for educational achievement, acknowledging how patterns are complicated by other factors such as gender and ethnicity, and exploring the social class gap from the early years through to post-16. It then analyses approaches taken to tackle this gap by the previous government, before outlining what types of initiative are likely to have most success in addressing working-class achievement in the context of financial austerity. The literature review has informed the questions we examined with FE students and staff in our focus groups, the scope of supplementary desk research and the policy context of this paper.

### DESK RESEARCH

In addition to the RSA literature review on social class and educational achievement, supplementary desk research has been undertaken to inform this paper. In particular, recent academic and policy research papers with a focus on the Further Education sector have been used to place the comments of the students and staff who took part in this research in a wider context. A full bibliography is available in the appendices.

### FOCUS GROUPS<sup>4</sup>

The findings in this report are based on views gathered from a total of eight focus groups held with staff and students in Further Education colleges. A total of 30 staff and a total of 32 students took part in the research. These focus groups were held at four case study colleges in London (×2), Nottingham and Leicester. Each focus group lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Students and staff were asked about:

- The barriers young people encounter when making decisions about progression
- Information, advice and guidance services
- The relationship between the classroom and the workplace
- The feasibility of membership-based organisations supporting the FE sector

It is important to note that the case-study institutions were selected according to the socio-economic profile of their learners, rather than as being a typical or representative cross-section of FE educational establishments. Senior management in participating colleges identified young people and staff members to take part. Recruitment also happened by 'snowballing' (where students would invite their friends or acquaintances in college). Fieldwork took place between March and May 2011.

Verbatim comments provide evidence for the qualitative findings. To protect participants' anonymity, their comments have been attributed simply according to their institutional location.



*‘Parents from certain backgrounds have a better understanding of how the system works, they have an awareness.’*

(FE practitioner, Leicester)

## 5. FINDINGS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND PRACTITIONERS IN THE FE SECTOR

This section shares the perspectives of young people and their teachers on the difficulties that young people from low-income backgrounds face when making crucial decisions about education and careers. Their contributions demonstrate that the disadvantage faced by young people from low-income backgrounds in secondary education continues into further education. In particular, cultural, economic and institutional capital — or lack of it — has a detrimental effect on young people from low-income backgrounds in the FE sector, and in their progression into education and the workplace. Existing research demonstrates that capitals of various kinds significantly impact life chances: a raft of research in education and sociology demonstrates how this works (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2001; Walkerdine et al, 2001; Archer, 2007). We do not wish to imply that the young people concerned in this research do not have social capital, or are in deficit in some way. Rather, we are arguing that they lack specific kinds of cultural, financial and institutional capital that facilitate progress in education and prestigious (especially professional) careers.

Key findings include:

- Many of the young people we spoke too were unaware of how important networks and other forms of cultural capital are for progression. In particular we found that young people from low-income backgrounds often have a strong aversion to using cultural capital to further their own ends. They considered this ‘cheating’ and preferred to ‘make their own way’.
- Disadvantaged young people struggle to meet the everyday costs of college and feel priced out of higher education as a result of spiralling fees.
- Whilst doing the best they can for their students, FE colleges are not always able to provide the advice, guidance and support that these young people need because of the sector’s own lack of capital.

### CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

*‘Parents from certain backgrounds have a better understanding of how the system works, they have an awareness.’ (FE practitioner, Leicester)*

One of the most significant barriers to successful progression in the FE sector is the lack of cultural and social capital among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In this context, cultural and social capital refers to the non-financial advantages that students have access to, and which many middle-class parents can use to further their children’s ambitions. These include general inculcation into a middle class ‘habitus’ and set of assumptions; large networks of professional and social contacts; detailed knowledge of how the education system works; and transferable experience in soft skills such as interview manner. There is a considerable body of research highlighting the impact of social and cultural capital in education already, that shows how middle-class parents are better able to ‘play the game’ (Reay, 2001; Reay & Lucey 2003) and ensure that their children experience smooth progression in education and the workplace (Walkerdine et al, 2001). On the other hand, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds find progression more complex and alienating (Walkerdine, et al, 2001; Reay et al, 2001; Archer, 2007). This section draws out some examples of how FE students from low-come backgrounds are disadvantaged by their lack of social and cultural capital and recommendations for how this can be addressed.

### PARENTAL GUIDANCE AND ROLE MODELS

When making decisions about progression in education and employment, young people often rely either directly or indirectly on their parents or guardians for direction (ipp, 2007). Parents indirectly influence their children as role models and directly influence their children’s decisions by giving them advice about the future. Middle-class parents are able to use their experience and knowledge of education and careers (their cultural and social capital) to provide their children with such advice. In contrast, a number of students that participated in our research said they would be unlikely

to approach their parents for progression advice because of their parents' limited experience. Others had only very few family members who they would confidently approach:

*'I wouldn't go back to my parents for advice, just because they're from different backgrounds'* (FE student, Nottingham)

*'I mean whoever actually works in your family is the one you're actually going to pick [to ask for advice]'* (FE student, London)

Parents with limited experience of the education system want the best for their children but lack knowledge about how to help them (Wolf, 2011). This finding is reiterated by previous RSA work focussing on working class sixth form students in London, which challenges policy assumptions that working class parents lack aspiration for their children. On the contrary, these young people said their parents wanted the very best for their futures, but lacked the information, experiences and networks necessary for helpful advice. In our FE research we have found that this high aspiration but lack of information/experience sometimes manifests itself by parents having 'unrealistically' high expectations of their children, for instance because they do not understand the competition for places in higher education or elite careers. FE staff we spoke to worried that students are not being given realistic notions of how challenging particular progression routes are, or the level of dedication and financial commitment that these routes entail. Staff were not necessarily worried about the abilities of young people, but rather that the young people concerned do not have realistic and accurate knowledge about some progression routes.

*'There is more likely to be awareness and an understanding of needs and what can be done and what is realistic or what is totally unrealistic [amongst middle-class parents].'* (FE practitioner, Leicester)

*'There is also some [students] that have unrealistic expectations that often come from the parents. These parents have actually got very few qualifications themselves, but they just have this fixed idea that their son or daughter, they're doing science and therefore they must be able to go to university and do medicine and that's what will happen without much work or effort. They're just totally unrealistic. I think in many cases it's just that parents don't know what is available and they don't know what the processes are, what grades are needed in what subjects, they don't understand education, they don't understand what sort of routes are best for their kids.'* Clearly we want to avoid an understanding of parents from low-income groups as 'inadequate' in this regard: indeed, the our findings suggest that working class parents want the very best for their children, which refutes the image of such parents often presented by policymakers. What our findings demonstrate, however, is that these parents urgently need to be provided with proper sources of information in order to support their children in decision-making (see also Wolf, 2011).

Less commonly, a few young people said their parents' own negative or limited educational experiences prevented them from providing support and encouragement in relation to education. According to research participants, this is because their parents' negative experiences alienated them from their children's education. This tendency is well documented in existing research (e.g. Reay, 1998; ippr, 2000; Lucey & Reay, 2002; DCSF, 2008) and has inspired many interventions to better involve parents in their children's education.

*'My mum just doesn't get it. Like, she isn't against me going, although she said 'why aren't you getting a job?' when I first went [to FE]... You know my dad left school when he was 14.'* (FE student, Leicester)

## **CONFIDENCE AND EXPERIENCE**

Our research also suggested that FE students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to feel confident about their ability to integrate into higher education and elite careers. Educational researchers have shown that young people from low-income groups quickly feel less confident in education, and experience feelings of alienation and disjuncture as they progress. Middle-class young people, by contrast, adapt more easily, given that the cultural expectations of school are more similar to home (Bernstein, 1971; Reay, 2006). This further highlights the role of cultural and social capital. Disadvantaged young people are less able to navigate further education as they often haven't been exposed to professional work settings and are less likely to have family experience of higher education; whereas middle-class young people are already likely to possess this cultural capital.

*'It's completely, you know, they don't know to turn up in your smart attire... and that is your interview and things like that, but they don't understand.'* (FE practitioner, Nottingham)

*'[Working-class young people] get to university and lecturers says 'This what I'm going to say' and they do a big lecture and then you have to leave and there's no questions, there's no 'Can you repeat that please?', there's none of that and [working-class young people] find that really difficult.'* (FE practitioner, Nottingham)

Some FE students that took part in our research also lacked the cultural capital and resulting self-confidence helpful for navigating formal progression processes, e.g. interviews. Young people from affluent backgrounds find it easier to navigate these processes, having learnt relevant behaviours and knowledge from parents and wider social networks. In contrast, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are unlikely to be able to draw on such connections and familiarity to help them prepare. A few research participants felt self-conscious about comparisons between themselves and their middle-class counterparts. One young woman talked in detail about affluent neighbours who were friends of her family. The neighbours had a son who was a similar age to her, and as a result they would often ask about exam results. Whilst she liked the neighbours, she felt uncomfortable telling them about her exam results and career aspirations because of the inevitable comparison with their son.

*'You know I was saying about my neighbours? They're really nice and everything, they're really nice people. When it was my exams they were saying, you know, how did they go, what are you doing next? I felt alright about my results but I didn't want to say, it just felt a bit... their son got all As and he wants to go to Oxford. So I just felt...'* (FE student, Leicester)

Staff told us that low confidence and a lack of experience can lead to young people becoming extremely risk-averse when making choices about education and employment. It also makes it hard for young people from low-income backgrounds to compete with their more affluent counterparts who are naturally at ease in these settings and situations.

*'If they're exposing themselves and taking the risk, well it is completely out of the question. Like if it's taking the risk by putting in a UCAS application for something that's ambitious.... we get a small handful that are brimming with confidence and will ...but by and large, quite a lot of our learners, and even on the active courses, are very averse to taking that risk of feeling foolish or failing at something. I think that this is a well-worn tale, and I have said it many times but it always sticks in my mind – the story of a 19 year old lad I was working with, extracurricular activity, this was in Richmond and he got to go to a conference in Birmingham and he said to me it was the first time he had ever been on a train. I thought 'wow'. That's what we take for granted, getting on a train, but he had never been on a train.'* (FE practitioner, London)

## NETWORKS

Middle-class parents are able to harness their networks to support the progression of their children (Perry and Francis, 2011). When faced with decisions about progression, middle-class children are able to draw upon their parents' professional and other contacts to mobilise information and expertise (Horvat et al, 2003). Parents also use their contacts to gain valuable work experience opportunities for their children. This was highlighted in the recent BBC documentary, *Posh and Posher*, which showed wealthy parents arranging work experience through contacts or in some cases buying work experience at 'internship auctions' (BBC, 2011). This has also been established by more rigorous academic works. For example, Francis et al's (2004) analysis of work experience placement practices revealed a laissez-faire institutional approach to pupils securing their own work experience placements. This allowed middle class parents to draw on their networks to provide highly stimulating professional placements for their children, whereas students from low-income groups were more restricted financially and in terms of connections. Hence work experience placements were reproducing inequalities, and for disadvantaged pupils often narrowing, rather than extending, horizons (see also Hatcher et al, 2008). Most FE students lack access to the kinds of social networks that facilitate professional or managerial work experience and as such are excluded from experiences that would help inform their decisions about progression as well as make them more attractive candidates in higher education and the workplace. One FE practitioner in our research complained that none of her students studying for a law NVQ were able to access any local placements with legal firms because they lacked the social capital necessary to secure them.

*‘Law students suffer significantly in [the college] because in Nottingham we have two tremendously wonderful law schools... so our students don’t stand a chance. Yet these are the students that actually need those placements more and they haven’t got the networks, the connections, parents, have they?’*

**(FE practitioner, Nottingham)**

*‘Law students suffer significantly in [the college] because in Nottingham we have two tremendously wonderful law schools... so our students don’t stand a chance. Yet these are the students that actually need those placements more and they haven’t got the networks, the connections, parents, have they?’* **(FE practitioner, Nottingham)**

### **CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS**

FE practitioners and students that participated in our research suggested that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds did not feel comfortable using cultural and social capital to further their own ends. A number of students talked about ‘making your own way’ or ‘making it by yourself.’ There appeared to be a strong aversion among students to the idea of using contacts, family connections or other networks in order to progress in education or the workplace. For these students, their concepts of success seemed to be more located in independence, or myths of ‘self-made’ men and women. Using anything but your own ability and luck was considered ‘cheating.’ This is in stark contrast to young people from higher socio-economic groups, for whom (as discussed) networks and connections are an important feature of their success and progression.

*‘I want to be able to hold my head up and say ‘I’ve found my own way here... and it’s not through people that I know.’* **(FE student, London)**

*‘When I’m doing dance and shows, you know I want people to notice me because I’m good at it. Sometimes when we go on trips we get to talk to the dancers and so we do have [contacts] I suppose... but it doesn’t mean as much to bother them does it?’* **(FE student, Leicester)**

The ‘belts and bootstraps’ and ‘rags to riches’ narratives which appeared to underpin such assertions evoke both a different cultural approach, but also a complete lack of recognition of the practices adopted by others. As Victor Adebowale recently commented, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds ‘do not understand how society works’ (2011). Middle class students have no need for such ideals of independent ‘rags to riches’ achievements, as they have no gap to traverse: they simply have to replicate their parents’ achievements.

### **Implications:**

Students from low-income backgrounds are profoundly disadvantaged by their lack of inculcation into middle-class behaviours and experiences that are reflected in all elite educational and professional progression routes. This includes the lack of role models and networks that aid swift progression. But it extends to undermining the confidence and self-assurance of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in negotiating these routes. On the basis of our qualitative and desk research we have identified some ways to begin tackling the barrier that social and cultural capital presents for young people from low-income backgrounds.

- Transmitters of cultural and social capital: the FE sector needs to find innovative means of transmitting cultural and social capital to disadvantaged students. The ability of civil society organisations such as the RSA to share their cultural and social capital is currently under-utilised. The type of support civil society organisations could provide includes mentoring/advocacy schemes for students and staff, and/or in-depth work with parents to help them develop their knowledge of progression routes and decisions. Such information and contacts enable agency among low-income families.

It is worth noting that existing mentoring schemes tend to target small numbers of disadvantaged young people who are likely to be high-achievers: a challenge is to find ways to make mentoring work for larger numbers of students.

- Work with parents: too often, working-class parents are portrayed as lacking aspiration for their children. Our research refutes this, suggesting that parents have high expectations of their children but lack the social and cultural capital to help realise them. Finding ways to help parents support their children is crucial to progression. For instance, ensuring parents have access to high-quality, detailed education and careers information as early on as possible.
- Value the ‘capital’ of low-income families: in order to increase confidence among disadvantaged young people and promote social justice in education, young people need to feel valued and listened to. Finding ways to value and/or use the cultural capital of low-income families could increase confidence and support progression among disadvantaged students.

*They need the [EMA] to sustain themselves. It is not for going out and getting drunk, it really is for the basics.'*  
(FE practitioner, Nottingham)

## ECONOMIC CAPITAL

*'These kids don't have a financial back-up.'* (FE practitioner, Nottingham)

Money has a direct impact on disadvantaged young people in both the short and longer-term. It restricts their participation in FE courses and influences decisions about their future in higher education. Given that most FE students are from low-income families it is unsurprising that money is important. Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) take-up figures show that in 2010 at least 643,000 16-18 year olds in education came from families with less than £31,000 annual income. The EMA sliding scale of financial support provided these young people with both an incentive to stay in education and with much-needed money for basic items. Without it the prospect of moving straight into the workplace – either to contribute to family income or to live independently – might well have been a more realistic and attractive option due to very real financial constraints. The EMA has now been cut, despite rigorous evidence suggesting that it increased the number of young people staying on in education (IFS, 2011). This section explores the main reasons that lack of money/financial constraints/lack of financial resources represent a barrier for young people in the FE sector.

### THE BASICS

*'Nearly half the students here cannot afford the uniform – and the parents can't either'*  
(FE practitioner, Leicester)

*'This is another thing they are up against: they just can't afford it. They need the [EMA] to sustain themselves. It is not for going out and getting drunk, it really is for the basics.'*  
(FE practitioner, Nottingham)

Many of the students we spoke to struggled to afford the most basic items necessary for their education. This included uniform, basic supplies such as notepads, and school trips. Struggling to afford basic items compromised their enjoyment of study and forced them to miss valuable educational experiences. In extreme cases, some young people even found it difficult to afford enough food, which meant they were tired and found it difficult to concentrate. A number of recent research studies have similarly found that poverty can force students from low-income backgrounds to forgo items that most of us consider essential (ATL, 2011; ESRC, 2008). The Association of Teachers and Lecturers surveyed thousands of education staff, finding that some 80% of them said poverty had a direct impact on their students' ability to perform, with students regularly coming in hungry or tired (ATL, 2011).

*'Students that were timetabled for four days – they couldn't afford the bus fare for that many days. Now we bring them in on big long days, to save them the bus fare. The students want it squashing into two or three days so they can work alongside it. We're designing our timetables around their money concerns.'* (FE practitioner, London)

Transport costs were singled out by the young people we spoke to, especially if they lived far away from college. According to the ATL study, 66% of education staff said that unaffordable transport costs caused absences from classes. The problem has become so acute that two of the colleges we spoke to have redesigned college timetables to limit transport costs for students, squashing a week's worth of lessons into two days. Whilst this saved students' money, it damaged concentration levels as their days were often extremely long and full. It also put a strain on colleges' teaching resources and classroom facilities as attendance was concentrated on particular days rather than being evenly spread throughout the week.

### DEBT AVERSION

Financial concerns presented a barrier not only in the immediate term but also had implications for progression to higher education. The students we spoke to were very concerned about the recent decision to lift the cap on top-up fees, and said it would cause them to reassess the viability of higher education. There is a considerable body of research to support the assertion that financial concerns play a major role in young people's decisions about higher education (NAO 2002; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003) and that the *'overriding negative perception of going to university, for all the potential entrants, was its cost'* (Connor et al, 2001). Costs are often understood very broadly to include not only the direct costs of attending university, but also the opportunity costs in terms of lost earnings while at university (Connor et al, 2001).

*‘The local kids can’t get into their local universities – Nottingham – not a chance. And yet they can’t afford to live away from home, even more so with the new fee system that’s coming in’*

**(FE practitioner, Nottingham)**

There is also agreement in the literature that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are *more* likely than those from affluent families to be deterred by the costs of HE (Connor et al 2001; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003;), as are mature students in contrast to younger students (Ross et al, 2002). This is pertinent for FE, which caters for a broader age range than school-maintained sixth-forms. In addition, several of these studies cite debt and the prospect of building up large debts, particularly student loan debt, as a deterrent to university entrance among qualified students from low-socio-economic groups (Archer et al, 2003; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). Rather than representing ignorance or lack of commitment, this aversion commonly reflects first or second-hand experience of the potentially devastating consequences of debt, and the proportional impact of fees on a far smaller family resource (in comparison to middle class families).

### **LIMITING CHOICE**

Financial expediency also influences the decisions of students who have decided to attend higher education. Studying at a local institution was an attractive option amongst the FE students that participated in our research, as it enabled them to continue living at home and limit their outgoings. This is part of a broader trend of students – particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds - choosing to live at home and is strongly influenced by debt aversion. A recent survey carried out by Liverpool University showed that 78% of students who lived at home were doing so in order to save money (Liverpool University, 2009). The same study also showed that students who lived at home were more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Whilst living at home is not negative in itself, this research does suggest young people from low-income groups are making decisions about which institutions to attend on the basis of cost rather than suitability.

*‘The local kids can’t get into their local universities – Nottingham – not a chance. And yet they can’t afford to live away from home, even more so with the new fee system that’s coming in’*

**(FE practitioner, Nottingham)**

It should be noted that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were also more likely to live at home for other reasons. For instance, with no family experience of higher education to draw on, moving away from home felt more alienating.

*‘Actually I was planning to go to [an HEI] near the house, it’s not far from there, like half an hour from the bus so I was thinking, you know, I don’t have to move to nowhere which is actually very cheap. And you’re still in contact with your friends and family.’* **(FE student, Leicester)**

A small number of FE practitioners worried that students were too easily influenced by the earning potential of particular careers, as students are keen to secure ample salaries that had been unavailable at home. Recent survey data supports this, showing that disadvantaged young people are strongly motivated by improving their earning potential (NUS, 2011). This means students could choose to pursue careers unsuitable for their interests or abilities, or could be discouraged from applying to higher education unless they are certain it will increase their earnings.

*‘And if they are from poorer backgrounds the thing about becoming a barrister, you know, you look and you think that barrister there is earning one million pounds a year, I think I’ll have a bit of that because I’ve had nothing all my life.’* **(FE practitioner, Leicester)**

### **Implications**

A lack of financial capital and limited financial support from government compromises the experiences and achievements of students from low-income groups in further education and disproportionately deters them from costly progression routes such as higher education. Our research identified the following means of tackling financial disadvantage:

- Financial support: students and FE practitioners that participated in our research were unequivocal that the withdrawal of the EMA would have a negative impact on the most disadvantaged students. Money should not be a barrier to young people fulfilling their potential, so with this in mind financial support mechanisms must be provided for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Information on finance: consistent, accurate and early information about financial support must be made available to disadvantaged students to help counter the negative impact of debt aversion. Information about any schemes to replace the EMA must also be made widely available at the earliest opportunity.

## FE: INSTITUTIONAL LACK OF CAPITAL?

The FE sector has been branded ‘the Cinderella Sector’ due to its comparative under-funding and poor status in comparison to other sectors such as higher education and – at least until recently – school sixth forms. This reputational problem is well-established: Andrew Foster called it the ‘disadvantaged and neglected middle child’ of the education system (Foster, 2005) and Phillip Blond recently referred to the persistent ‘image problem’ that FE suffers amongst parents and employers (2011). The lack of financial and social capital in the sector has a negative impact on the prospects of the students studying within it.

FE students, perhaps more than young people studying in higher education and schools, need support from educational institutions in making decisions about their futures. Unable to rely on broader social networks or draw on the cultural capital of parents, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds look to FE colleges for formal and informal support. However as this section will detail, FE students and staff feel that colleges sometimes struggle to provide this support. This section highlights three areas in which institutions could improve in order to help young people with progression: **i)** information, advice and guidance (IAG) and work experience, **ii)** qualifications, and **iii)** employer engagement.

### INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

Our conversations with learners and their teachers reinforced how valuable informed and impartial IAG can be for progression. IAG is crucial to the decision-making processes of young people and its effects can be felt throughout their lives. This was underlined by the then government when it devolved IAG services to local authorities in 2008, formalising the need for local authorities to provide ‘*the information [young people] need to make well-informed and realistic decisions about learning and career options*’ (DCSF, 2008) and again recently in the Wolf Report which describes the need for high-quality and honest careers advice in order to support young people to make decisions (Wolf, 2011).

### ACCURATE ADVICE

Despite its importance, the students who participated in our research had encountered difficulties with careers advice in FE colleges. In FE, more even than schools, learners are looking for specific and detailed advice and information. Alison Wolf touches on this in her recent report on vocational education, emphasising that students need detailed data about entry qualifications and destinations to help them understand what qualifications are needed to successfully enrol on particular courses and pursue particular careers (Wolf, 2011). The students we spoke to did not feel that such detailed advice was always available, and observed that one-stop careers services in colleges can be too generic.

*‘Really a big challenge all the time to make sure that there’s a good purpose to send a careers advisor in to a curriculum area, and talk about a pathway or a route way, and I don’t think that we’ve got enough resources. I mean one of the things that I’ve asked the careers advisors to do at the moment, literally as we speak, is to be making contact with particular employers in the workplace in Leicestershire and go and see them, go and talk to them, and find out what is it, what is going on now.’ (FE practitioner, Leicester)*

Staff said that instead of approaching careers services students would often look to their subject teachers for advice. FE staff thought this was problematic because they felt too distant from industry and the workplace to provide high-quality and accurate advice. The staff that participated in our research had often been out of industry for long periods, and did not have time to keep their knowledge and contacts current. Staff thought that links to employers could help students receive much-needed advice and guidance (as well as work experience). But such links are not sufficiently utilised, partly because pressures on staff own time preclude the networking necessary to establish such links and partly because local employers often forge links with local higher education institutions instead of FE colleges.

### REALISTIC ADVICE

The need for *realistic* advice featured strongly in our conversations with practitioners. Staff saw it as their role to guide students onto appropriate and fulfilling education and employment trajectories. But their ability to provide realistic advice is compromised in two ways.

*‘...I think that in a sense we have failed our students by giving them... instead of saying ‘Oh well you know what, you could look at going down this path’ we just went ‘Oh yeah that’s the natural progression’.*  
(FE practitioner, Nottingham)

Firstly, by the approach to IAG that Alison Wolf has described as ‘well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is worth the same as everything else’ (Wolf 2011). Meaning that there is not always a culture of honesty about which courses and decisions are likely to help you become a lawyer or an IT specialist, and which are not. This is a real problem for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who — as discussed — are not always able to fall back on the experiences of their parents to provide them with realistic guidance about which courses are well-regarded and which are not.

Secondly, some FE practitioners said that students are not fully aware of the diversity of jobs available in different sectors. This leads them to develop aspirations that are neither determined by their ability nor based on a comprehensive understanding of the types of jobs available. As discussed earlier in this report, FE learners do not find it easy to access people who have experience of the careers or education they would like to pursue. As a result, their understanding of particular sectors is often restricted to only the most visible roles and jobs, for instance in law — a barrister; in television — an actor. FE learners who decide to pursue law, or broadcasting consequently direct their energies into attaining the most desirable, competitive and visible jobs in these disciplines as they are the only jobs they know of. Of course, having high aspirations should be encouraged. But practitioners were clear that ability and realism should also guide progression. Staff said they wanted students to understand just how diverse the employment market is, and to realise that there are many routes into the arts, law and other disciplines if the most exclusive jobs are out of reach.

*‘They’re seeing people on television with limited talent and it is aspirational for them, but it’s kind of broadening that horizon and seeing there’s a whole career in the arts that doesn’t necessarily involve being on telly.’* (FE practitioner, London)

*‘Okay, this is what it’s like, this is reality, this is how much you get’ and just somebody to be able to say — bring us back down a little bit and say — ‘this is real life now’, and what areas there is to go into rather than just ‘I’ll be a dance teacher or I’ll go and work for somebody’. There’s so many more opportunities in there that you just don’t get to know about.’*  
(FE practitioner, Nottingham)

FE students need careers advice that does not constrain or dampen their ambitions, but rather enhances their understanding of options that are available. Without this, staff said the FE sector lets students down.

*‘The foundation degree is a standalone qualification; they don’t actually have to go on to Trent to do the full LLB, so what we were trying to think is, you know, working on looking at other things that they can do if they don’t want to go to university. Some of them really shouldn’t go, you know, they might get in because of the foundation degree that they’ve managed to squeeze past. But they will fail once they get to university and I think that in a sense we have failed our students by giving them... instead of saying ‘Oh well you know what, you could look at going down this path’ we just went ‘Oh yeah that’s the natural progression’.’* (FE practitioner, Nottingham)

## **WORK EXPERIENCE**

As discussed, affluent young people are often able to secure placements and experience through parents or other social networks. Young people from low income families are less likely to have this advantage, and are more reliant on FE colleges to provide these opportunities for them. The staff we spoke to acknowledged how important their role in facilitating work experience is, but said there are difficulties in delivering this.

Most colleges have formal work experience programmes organised, administered and delivered by in-house careers advisers. However, both staff and students said that these placements tend to be generic and can bear little relation to the qualifications and careers that learners are working towards. This results in students relying on practitioners as their source for relevant opportunities. As with careers advice, staff said they find it very difficult to maintain the contacts necessary for more bespoke work placements. Busy in the classroom, they simply do not have the time to nurture professional networks. The difficulty learners experience in gaining relevant work experience can compromise their progression.

*‘The industry changes so quickly that some contacts get out of date because we run progressions fairly as well and we built up contacts there and again you tend to maintain contacts when you know people don’t you but it always needs to be refreshed in fact.’* (FE practitioner, London)



## QUALIFICATIONS

Research participants suggested that the FE sector could support the progression of young people by providing more flexible qualifications. Of students working towards the most common FE qualifications (NVQs and BTECs), non-completion rates have stabilised around 15% (Simm et al, 2007). But some staff were concerned that non-completion is more common amongst vulnerable students and said changes to qualifications could better support their progression in FE and beyond. A great deal of robust and detailed research has already been undertaken to explore the factors driving non-completion, including the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (2011) and the Youth Cohort Study (2010). Our conversations with FE staff and students endorsed their findings; that students are most likely to leave for reasons specific to the course (wrong choice or perceived poor teaching) or for external reasons (unable to combine it with family or work commitments, or ill health).

Staff and students suggested thought that more young people would complete qualifications if courses had greater flexibility. As observed by one practitioner, the FE system is dominated by long-term qualifications. Whilst this suits most learners, for a minority having flexible or shorter, modular qualifications would suit their learning style. It would also provide valuable and realistic options for disadvantaged young people who have financial or family difficulties which make full-time and longer-term study difficult. Courses that incorporate standalone qualifications if they are not completed could increase retention by giving learners a sense of achievement early on. Such courses could also support progression as they would provide students with evidence of study, even if they have not completed a full course.

As one practitioner asserted,

*'We need to develop the curriculum so we are giving people a sense of achievement really early on. Having a more modular curriculum so there is something they can take with them if they do drop out. We need to give them more flexible qualifications that are achievable in a shorter space of time.'* (FE practitioner, Leicester)

Arguments for increasing flexibility in the education system have been gaining currency under the Coalition government, but have tended to focus on higher education, e.g. mainstreaming two year degrees and making part-time study easier (Cable, 2011). These suggestions have been unpopular amongst some high profile educationalists who suggested this would devalue British graduates in the international market. However this thinking could have more traction in the FE sector which is historically more open and flexible. Such ideas certainly resonate with the 2020 Public Services Hub (Kippin et al, 2011) which has said the sector should position itself as a learning hub for the local community, into which people can dip in and out as they wish or need.

## EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

The final area in which FE colleges could have a positive institutional impact on the progression of disadvantaged students is by improving employer engagement in the sector. By working closely with employers, the FE sector can ensure its provision is meeting the needs of local and national economies and making its students competitive. Employer engagement also extends the influence of colleges outside of their buildings by giving teachers and assessors the opportunity to work directly with the local community. As the Foster Review of FE (DfES, 2005), the National Employers Skills Survey (LSC, 2005), the FE White Paper, (DfES, 2006) and the Leitch Review (HMT, 2006) have all suggested, the employer engagement agenda is vital for providing further education with a clearer mission: addressing the educational needs of local people and businesses whilst also addressing the wider economic and social challenge of up-skilling learners for what industry will require of them.

Research participants said FE could still do more in this area. Staff said that NVQ qualifications tended to trail behind what is required in the workplace, with provision sometimes failing to anticipate what is attractive to industry or to provide a real taste of the types of projects learners will encounter in the workplace. Ensuring that FE keeps pace with industry at a local, national and even international level is crucial to meeting wider economic challenges and ensuring FE learners are competitive in the employment market.

*'New jobs we need to identify and this is one of the issues really in the curriculum or how do we keep up with new skills, you know, a simple working example: soon 25% of European car sales will be hybrids. Well, who is teaching hybrid technology? It should be FE.'*

**(FE practitioner, Leicester)**

*'NVQs can be a little bit long in the tooth – employers accept them, but they do need updating'*

**(FE practitioner, Nottingham)**

### **Implications**

In order to support the progression of learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, FE colleges need to prioritise the development of advice, employability skills and experience amongst learners. This can be delivered in a number of ways: high-quality and accurate IAG, employer engagement, work experience and flexible qualifications. Evidently, the FE sector alone cannot address the social inequalities that underpin different levels of social and cultural capital in relation to high status learning and career routes, or indeed remedy the very real financial barriers that preclude equality of opportunity. However, some of the constraints experienced by disadvantaged students *are* possible to tackle, and doing so is imperative to support social mobility and confirm the value of the sector.

Our research identified a number of routes forward:

- Better information: accurate and high-quality IAG should be provided throughout the FE system. With cuts to existing IAG provision including Connexions, this is more crucial than ever. The government aims to launch an all-age careers service in 2012 and this report recommends that this service is integrated with the FE sector and responsive to the needs of its students.
- In-house work experience: the sector needs to find innovative ways of providing realistic and relevant work experience environments for students. In part this will rely on rejuvenating relationships with employers but colleges could also explore the possibilities of providing some experience in-house. For instance, West London College provides its catering students with work experience in college-owned cafes to supplement external work experience opportunities.
- Continued Professional Development (CPD) amongst FE staff: the FE sector needs to remain alert to developments in local and national economies both to ensure provision is matched to employer needs, and to ensure that course content prepares students for what they will encounter in the workplace. Partly this will be achieved by developing stronger relationships with employers. But the Continued Professional Development (CPD) of FE staff is another route for making FE provision as relevant and contemporary as possible. Colleges should explore means of keeping their staff 'fresh' and abreast of industry standards. This could be achieved by staff spending away-days in industry and/or having industry mentors or coaches.
- Employer boards: the importance of employers in shaping FE provision cannot be underestimated. To ensure FE providers and employers are working together as closely as possible, employers should be formally invited to take part in course design and consulted on provision where this is not already taking place.

## 6. MENTORING SCHEME FEASIBILITY

As outlined in earlier sections of this report, one means of supporting the progression of low-income students is through finding innovative ways to share cultural and social capital. We believe the ability of civil society organisations such as the RSA to share their cultural and social capital is currently under-utilised. This section of the report explores one possible means for activating the cultural and social capital of the RSA for the benefit of FE colleges.

An RSA literature review on the social class gap in educational achievement supported the need for social and cultural capital transfer, and in particular identified the need for educational interventions that: **a)** focus on vocational as well as academic qualifications and **b)** facilitate social and cultural capital exchange (Perry and Francis, 2010). On the basis of this research, the RSA is designing a mentoring scheme that will be located in FE colleges. The scheme will provide RSA Fellows with the opportunity to share and exchange social and cultural capital with young people from low-income backgrounds. But before developing the scheme, we wanted to test these ideas, and the feasibility of the proposed initiative, with students and teachers from the FE sector.

The scheme is intended to bring together young people studying in Further Education colleges with RSA Fellows who are experts in particular subject areas. In doing so, the project will equip young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with greater capital in negotiating school-to-work trajectories by accessing the experience, networks, advocacy and skills of RSA Fellows. The project will also provide RSA Fellows with an opportunity to use their valuable skills and experience in the interests of a younger generation and develop a greater understanding of the Further Education sector in general.

In keeping with the findings of the RSA literature review on the social class gap, we wanted to directly involve students in designing the mentoring initiative (see also Colley, 2003). On this basis, we asked FE students and staff to comment on our plans. First, we asked participants what the challenges are in education and employment progression, and whether a mentoring scheme could help meet some of these challenges. Second, assuming participants supported the initiative, we sought their advice on the details of design including which subjects areas mentors should work on and how mentors should spend their time. Our main findings are outlined below.

### OVERALL REFLECTIONS ON FURTHERING OPPORTUNITY MENTORING SCHEME

All the FE colleges that participated in our research were positive about the prospect of an RSA mentoring initiative located in the FE sector. As a sector that is in need of resources, staff welcomed any cost-free support being offered. Alongside the desire for general support, there are attributes of a mentoring scheme that both students and staff thought would suit the FE sector. These included the possibility of social and cultural capital transfer and the strengthening of FE college networks.

### PRINCIPLES FOR A MENTORING SCHEME

The following mentoring principles have been formulated on the basis of our research and will guide the design of our own initiative:

- **Bring the workplace to the classroom:** mentors should enhance students' understanding of particular careers and how classroom learning is relevant to it. This could include mentors working with groups or classes of students from a relevant discipline, providing an overview of their own career journey and a portrait of their sector as it stands today. Mentors could also advise FE practitioners on the design of course content to ensure it is relevant for industry and employers today.
- **Spread social capital:** mentors should use their social capital and networks to help institutions, students and staff establish and rejuvenate education and employer networks. This could include helping FE colleges broker relationships with local employers and helping students find work experience opportunities.
- **Work collectively:** mentors should work with groups of students as well as individuals, providing them with independent advice and guidance.
- **Build on shared experience:** where practical, mentors should be from similar backgrounds to the young people they are supporting to ensure there is mutual understanding and that they be an inspiration to young people by showing them what is possible.

The remainder of this section will identify how these principles can be realised in practice.

*‘The idea that it might be particularly inspirational to have somebody from, yeah, perhaps who has come from a disadvantaged or deprived background themselves but has gone on to achieve well in their chosen sector, so I think that is absolutely right’*  
(FE practitioner, Leicester)

## WHICH SUBJECTS SHOULD A MENTORING SCHEME TARGET?

Whilst the FE sector would happily receive support in all disciplines, both students and staff expressed a preference for mentoring initiatives to target vocational subjects. Many of the reasons for this have been outlined in our broader analysis of the challenges facing young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including a lack of social and cultural capital and the relatively weak links between FE colleges and employers. Students studying vocational subjects require work experience, a broader understanding of the diversity of jobs available in vocational sectors and advice about any further or higher education choices that might be on their horizons.

There was consensus amongst FE staff that even within the vocational arena, there are specific subjects that would disproportionately benefit from the input of RSA Fellows. These were: art and design, IT, business, law, health and social care and performing arts. Although these were not the only subject areas suggested, they were the subjects that were most frequently nominated. RSA Fellow support would be particularly useful in these subject areas because some (IT, business and art and design) are ‘fall-back’ subjects that are chosen by young people who have no firm path for their future. As such, students of these subjects would benefit from bespoke advice and guidance. Performing arts and law were identified as subjects that young people with high aspirations choose, but often lack the social, cultural and institutional capital crucial to realising their ambitions in such competitive professions.

## HOW SHOULD MENTORS USE THEIR TIME IN FE COLLEGES?

Understandably there were a very broad range of suggestions for how a mentoring initiative could work in practice. It is worth noting that many research participants – both staff and students — suggested that any initiative should be college-specific, and defined by the needs of individual colleges and RSA Fellows. In this scenario, the RSA would play only a brokering role in establishing contact between Fellows and colleges. This would allow initiatives to be responsive to local needs. For instance, one college might benefit most from an enhanced offer around careers advice, whereas another would be most usefully supported in developing relationships with local employers.

This aside, the roles most frequently suggested for Fellows were as follows:

- **Master-classes and life stories:** RSA Fellows work with groups or classes of students from a relevant discipline, providing an overview of their career journey and a portrait of their sector as it stands today.
- **Curriculum design:** RSA Fellows work with FE practitioners to advise on the design of course content and projects to ensure they are relevant for industry and employers today. In this role they would act as mentors for FE staff rather than students.
- **Network enhancement:** RSA Fellows use their considerable social capital and networks to help institutions, students and staff establish and rejuvenate education and employer networks.
- **Group work:** RSA Fellows provide more traditional mentoring, spending time with small groups of students, providing them with careers and education advice, helping them consider and evaluate different career options and supporting the development of a deeper understanding of the employment opportunities available in relevant sectors.

These are not distinct options which must be chosen between. RSA Fellows could play a multitude of roles within a college and combine different approaches depending on the inclination, need and skills of those involved. These options merely represent the ideas offered by colleges and students for how best RSA Fellows could contribute to tackling some of the challenges faced by young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

## WHO SHOULD THE FELLOWS BE?

There was some limited but interesting discussion amongst research participants about who the mentors should be. By this, participants meant what ‘type’ of Fellow would be most suited to providing a supportive role for students. Whilst research participants were clear that students would benefit from the support of all RSA Fellows, a few staff members and students emphasised the particular value of identifying RSA Fellows who come from a similar background to the students they would be working with. It was suggested that students would find it easier to relate to and take seriously the advice of RSA Fellows from lower socio-economic backgrounds. By meeting with someone from a similar background who had gone on to distinguish themselves in their field, students might also benefit from the sense of possibility that follows.

*‘I think for our students it would be really nice if the people from the RSA who came from poor backgrounds’* (FE practitioner, Nottingham)

## 7. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Our research with FE students and staff has highlighted the numerous barriers faced by young people, particularly young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, when considering education and employment progression. The barriers can be roughly organised into three main areas: barriers relating to cultural and social capital, barriers relating to economic capital and barriers relating to FE colleges on an institutional level. Our findings and their implications for policy and practice have been summarised throughout the report, this section merely draws out the most pertinent findings, recommendations for routes forward and areas in which the RSA will pursue further research.

As had been found in previous education research, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack the middle-class ‘habitus’ and other forms of social and cultural capital that dominate higher education and elite career paths. This challenge featured strongly in our own conversations with young people and their teachers, who talked about their lack of role models and social networks. This disadvantage was reinforced a broader sense of alienation and unease about replicating middle-class modes of behaviour that are beneficial and even necessary for certain types of progression. We suggest a number of ways to limit the disadvantage this creates for young people from low-income backgrounds:

- Find **innovative ways to transfer cultural and social capital** to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. FE colleges must build relationships with organisations that have high social and cultural capital. The ability of civil society organisations such as the RSA to share their cultural and social capital is currently not utilised. This is an area in which the RSA will be developing future work.
- More work needs to be done on **how the ‘capital’ of low-income families can be made valuable in progression**. At the moment it disadvantages young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and contributes to feelings of alienation.

Young people from low-income backgrounds continue to be negatively affected by their lack of financial capital and were very concerned about the withdrawal of the EMA. During their studies in further education, poverty meant some young people struggled to pay for transport to college, could not afford educational trips and in extreme circumstances even went hungry, which affected their ability to concentrate in class. Staff reiterated this, with practitioners from two colleges explaining they had had to organise two-day timetables for some subjects, so students did not have to pay transport costs throughout the week. As has been established in previous research, financial concerns directly affect the progression choices of students, with research participants telling us they might reconsider higher education on the basis of its cost. We outline some broad routes forward:

- Consistent and accessible financial support is necessary to ensure disadvantaged students can access the FE sector and successfully progress. The government should consider the implications of this for EMA. It is also necessary to provide **early and in-depth information about financial support** available for students in higher education.

Our research also suggested that FE students are at an institutional disadvantage when it comes to progression because of careers advice and institutional networks, and difficulties with insufficiently flexible qualifications. These issues had disproportionately negative consequences for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, because they rely on the networks of their colleges for advice and opportunities in the absence of family connections. They are also more likely to require flexible learning to accommodate work and family commitments. Suggested routes forward include:

- Detailed careers advice is sometimes difficult to access for FE students. The all-age careers service planned for launch in 2012 must provide **high-quality, realistic careers advice** as per the Wolf Report and it must make provision for specific careers advice for 16-24 year olds that can be accessed in FE colleges.
- Continue to **expand the flexibility of FE institutions**, allowing them to award shorter qualifications and develop their role as a ‘community hub’ that reflects and responds to local needs.

- **The FE sector needs to further strengthen its networks and contacts.** FE practitioners could take some responsibility for maintaining these networks and contacts if they are provided with CPD opportunities that facilitate this. Building relationships with local employers needs particular attention in order to ensure FE provision is sensitive to their needs. This could be achieved by rejuvenating employer advisory boards that are subject-specific.

Evidently, the FE sector alone cannot address the social inequalities that underpin different levels of social, cultural and economic capital, or indeed remedy the very real structural barriers that preclude equality of opportunity. However, some of the constraints that disadvantaged students experience *are* possible to tackle. By better aligning FE provision to economic needs, by providing new means of transferring social capital and through the timely provision of information and support on financial hardship, young people from low-income backgrounds can be better supported in education and eventual progression into the workplace. Far from being ‘second division’, the FE sector should further develop its role in improving the prospects of disadvantaged students and tackling broader social injustices.

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