

# First in the Family to Attend University: Understanding and Enabling the Parent-child Support Relationship

**Joanna Apps**

Canterbury Christ Church University  
Canterbury, UK

**Sarah Christie**

Canterbury Christ Church University  
Canterbury, UK

There is very little qualitative research on parental support around transition to university in the UK. The objective of this study was to explore how parents who have not been to university support their children in making decisions about, and transitions to, university. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with parents and students (aged 16-18 years) from three schools, who would be the first in their family to go to university (FIFU). Parents and young people reported discussing whether they would go to university, what to study and where to go over a long period of time, as part of everyday activities. The emotional impact of children leaving home to go to university influenced how parents felt about their child's decisions to go, along with being unable to envisage what being at university would be like for their children. Parents often found online information confusing and not relevant to their child. They reported receiving little information from schools. Parents lacked basic information and sought answers from friends and colleagues with any experience of higher education. Parents most wanted personalised information, signposting to online resources and a timetable of what they needed to do to support their children's applications to university. The results are framed in terms of the cultural capital available to these parents and young people.

*Keywords:* parental support needs; First in Family to go to University (FIFU); parental engagement; social class; University; Higher Education; cultural capital.

## Introduction

There is now a comprehensive body of research showing an intergenerational association between parental social class, income and education and children's higher education- i.e. tertiary, university level - trajectories. For example, the likelihood of going to university for a state-educated young person in the UK, whose parents have an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, is five times higher than for those whose parents have few or no qualifications (Anders and Jerrim, 2014); and the likelihood of going to an elite or high-status university is three times higher (Jerrim, 2013). In addition, we know that the differences in educational trajectories towards university begin early - with poorer children who

are high achieving at age 11 being less likely to go on to be high achieving at the end of secondary school compared to their richer peers (Crawford et al., 2016). At the other end of the journey to a university education, 'first in family students' (FIFU: those young people who are the first in their family to access Higher Education) are also 71% more likely to drop out of university (Ishitani, 2003). Moreover, these findings have persisted even in the context of extensive efforts that have been made in the UK to 'widen participation' in university over the last three decades.

While the basic parental demographics associated with a greater likelihood of gaining a university level education are known, the processes and mechanisms by which education level is replicated through generations are infinitely more complex, operate at many levels and are not yet fully understood.

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Corresponding author: Joanna Apps  
(joanna.apps@canterbury.ac.uk)

For example, parental engagement in education is an important correlate of children's educational attainment and pathways (e.g. Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Dufur, Parcel and Troutman, 2012; Castro et al., 2015) throughout compulsory schooling but very little research focuses on parental engagement as young people make decisions about progression into higher education (Dietrich, Kracke and Nurmi, 2011). We therefore also know little about how schools, colleges and universities seeking to widen participation might support parents better, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, despite spending over £1 billion a year on programmes to widen participation (Elliot Major, 2013).

As young people progress out of compulsory education there may be a perception that their parallel transition towards adulthood and independence means that the influence of parents and families is reduced. However, parents are still young people's 'main partners' in career decisions during adolescence (Dietrich, Kracke and Nurmi, 2011; Tynkkynen, Nurmi, and Salmela-Aro, 2010). In a UK survey of 807 parents of young people aged 16 and above, and 2000 undergraduates, AGCAS (2014) found that one in seven students rated the importance of their parents' views over their own views; and that parents had three times the influence on decisions around whether to go to university of teachers and six times as much influence in choosing which university to apply to. For those who are first in family to go to university parental support may be especially important. A study of students who were part of the UK's Aim Higher programme aimed at increasing FIFU university participation, found that the probability of a young person progressing to higher education was strongly linked to the extent of support they had from parents to stay in education (Aim Higher, 2009).

Moreover, parental involvement in decision making is associated with increased satisfaction with the chosen course/university (Dietrich, Kracke and Nurmi, 2011) and with wellbeing in the first weeks at college (Wintre and Yaffe, 2000; Chang et al, 2010).

Access to relevant, accurate and up to date information can be an issue for all parents but is likely to be most acute for parents who have not themselves attended university. The processes by which parents support their children's decisions around, and applications to, university highlight fundamental social inequalities between different

groups of parents suggesting different forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Cultural capital can be thought of as those resources such as knowledge, behaviours and abilities that enable an individual to display and maintain social status in society and obtain associated privileges. Cultural capital, is seen as accumulated (and inherited) resources that serve to maintain social class differences. Bourdieu (1986) considered three interrelated concepts of capital. 'Embodied cultural capital' is accumulated skills, norms, and knowledge acquired over time through socialization, education and experience, and which we display in our interactions with other people. 'Objectified cultural capital' relates to material resources - the books, clothes, car, furniture, and food that we purchase and own - which signal to others our levels of cultural capital and our economic status. Thirdly, 'institutionalised cultural capital' relates to the way cultural capital is assessed, ordered and ranked in society. For example, educational qualifications are an institutionalized form of cultural capital, providing or denying status and access to opportunities for individuals.

However, more recently social capital has been conceptualised more broadly, particularly in relation to education (e.g. Lareau and Weininger, 2003). Researchers have considered that the 'resources that people are endowed with come in multiple dimensions' (van de Werfhorst, 2010) and that cultural capital is located within subcultures and groups-not just social classes-and serves to maintain in and out group identities (Tzanakis, 2011). In this sense one should be wary of assuming parental education level is de facto a proxy for possession of specific types of cultural capital. Further, it is not that certain groups of parents may 'lack' cultural capital but rather that the cultural capital that they draw on may be incompatible with or 'fail to comply' with the evaluative standards of educational and societal institutions (van de Werfhorst, 2010; Lareau and Weininger, 2003).

The cultural capital which parents can bring to supporting their child during the transition to university can be seen in differences in access to particular types of external and experiential information and resources. For example, Winterton and Irwin (2012) position this form of cultural capital in middle class (and, presumably, university educated) parents as:

“Middle class families possess the economic resources, social networks and cultural capital, including knowledge of the higher education system, which facilitate or even engender their children’s routes to university” (p. 860)

That this is acquired first hand by parents and is fine-grained is important. For example, McDonagh (1997), cited in Lareau and Weininger (p583, 2003, p.583), suggests parents’ knowledge of the college admission process and details such as understanding of the importance of SATs (Standard Assessment Test) scores is valuable cultural capital parents do not get from schools.

Cultural capital may impact on the roles taken by parents in supporting their children, for example the ‘confidence to assume the role of educational expert’ (Reay, 1998). FIFU students may receive the same moral support from parents as non-first generation students but lower levels of academic support and this contributes to a lower ‘identity compatibility’ between home and school (Covarrubias and Forbes, 2015). This usually comes after years of what Hill and Tyson (2009) call ‘academic socialisation’ as parents outline their expectations to their children and highlight links between what they are doing now and future goals such as going to college and getting a ‘good’ job. In this, and myriad other ways, many parents and carers from higher socio-economic backgrounds use their cultural capital to gain educational advantages for their children (e.g. Lareau, 2003; Epstein 2001; Crozier, 2000).

### Methods

The aim of this study was to understand more about how parents and children discuss and negotiate the transition towards higher education, with a specific focus on families where the young people concerned would be the First in Family at University (FIFU).

The research questions were:

1. How do/how often do parents talk with their children about university and when does this happen?
2. What are the emotional and social aspects of supporting decision making around HE? Do parents find this a difficult topic to talk to young people about?
3. How do parents approach help and information seeking? What social networks are drawn upon when seeking information and advice -and what happens when there

is no-one in the immediate family and social network who can advise from personal experience?

The study was funded by Kent and Medway Progression Federation ([www.kmpf.org](http://www.kmpf.org)) and the University for the Creative Arts (<http://www.uca.ac.uk>) and the fieldwork was undertaken between 2015-2016. The ethics were approved by the Research Ethics and Governance committee at Canterbury Christ Church University and was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the British Psychological Society ([www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)). Semi-structured, confidential interviews with 15 parents or guardians of students in years 12 and 13 (aged 16-18), and 15 interviews with students (not related) from these years were conducted. Interviewees came from three schools in the same area in Southern England. The three participating schools were selected by the project funders (an organisation that promotes increased participation in higher education) in advance of the study. Two of the schools were located in areas that had very low levels of young people’s and adult participation in higher education and the third was in an area with a higher level of participation.

We used multiple methods to recruit to the study: mail outs and emails to parents; posts on school websites; face to face recruitment at school events; posters put up around the schools; personal introductions to parents by teachers; and asking school staff to recruit students via lessons.

Students and parents were interviewed between October and March and thus provided perspectives from a range of points in the university decision and application process, which typically runs from October to the end of January in the UK.

Interviews were audio-recorded, with participants’ consent. Interviews were co-analysed by two researchers using a thematic, inductive approach to capture emerging shared themes across interviews as well as unique perspectives. All parents and students who completed an interview were sent a £10 voucher to thank them for their time.

### The Interview Sample

Most (10) student interviewees were in Year 13 (the year before entry into university, aged 17-18) and 5 from Year 12. Seven of the student interviewees were female and 8 were male. Two parent interviewees were male (one with a son

and one with a daughter) and 13 were female (10 of these having daughters, 3 having sons). Ten parents we interviewed had children in Year 12 and 5 had children in year 13. All but one of the parents interviewed (or spoken about in interview, by young people) had not gone to university themselves. The parent who had gone to university had done so as a mature student and gained a degree level qualification. The parents held jobs such as builders, mechanics, carers, nursery workers, shop assistants, administrative and human resources assistants or were in long term unemployment. All students and parents had English as a first language and were White British or White Irish but this was not part of any deliberative sampling strategy.

### Talking About University

All of the parents who were interviewed had children who had either decided to go to university or were considering it. Parents had positive views on their children's decisions to go to university, with no interviewees saying that they had disagreed with them on this or were not happy that they wanted to go. For many parents, their children's chance to go to university was seen positively, as a beneficial opportunity that parents had missed out on or a necessary step towards a chosen career:

*It's something I never had.* (Melanie, mother to daughter, year 12).

*I don't think my dad would mind what I did but my mum wishes she went to university so she'd probably like me to go to get a good job.* (Lisa, student, year 12).

*She's wanted to be a teacher since the age of about 10 or 11 but we only narrowed it down in terms of what she wanted to teach in the last few years, since she had to choose her GCSEs mainly.* (Jackie, mother to daughter, year 12).

Some students and parents of students who had a clear career choice said they had talked about university for a period of years but for others it was a very recent thing:

*We started talking about it two months ago when she had spoken to a careers advisor and was saying she wanted to go to university.* (Steve, father to daughter, year 13).

Talking about university and career decisions was a part of everyday family communication and

tended to occur spontaneously rather than as more formal discussions. Parents and students said they chatted about it in the car on the way to the shops, sitting in the lounge as a family in the evenings, in some cases finding information at the same time or as part of usual activities:

*It just kind of happens. It's quite relaxed...If we go out for a Costa [a coffee shop] or something, like mainly me and my mum, then we'll talk about that.* (Josh, student year 12).

Conversations at home seemed to be started by things that were happening at school and the child starting a conversation about this, or parents being aware of an impending deadline:

*It [talk about university application] comes up every week-more now it's getting nearer. They ask me 'how's your application going?' We have different discussions about it. It's helpful to talk about it cos it feels a lot less daunting.* (Michelle, student, year 13).

Some parents also gave examples of the topic arising because extended family asked questions about the child's plans for the future. All participants said that conversations about university occurred once a week or less. The earliest specific time given that families started talking about university was when considering GCSE exam options in year 9 (age 13-14). However, at the other end of the spectrum, for some, mostly where the child had not had a long term career goal, these conversations were only really beginning at the start of year 12 (aged 16-17) or, in one case, at the start of the university application process in year 13.

None of the parents we spoke to questioned their role in guiding and supporting their children's decisions about higher education. None felt it was an 'uncomfortable' subject to talk about in itself and no parent or young person reported having had an argument about it at home.

To support your child through the transition from school to university, a job or an apprenticeship, was seen as a normal part of being a parent, of parenting. At the same time, parents felt the decisions needed to be made by their children:

*We wouldn't push him in any direction-he needs to look at the options himself.* (Michael, father to son, year 12).

*I would leave it [decision about university] up to her...I am happy to let her lead-she is*

*sensible and will make a good choice.*  
(Mary, guardian to daughter, year 12).

The young people reaffirmed that the decision making was led by them and all, including those who described minimal involvement from their parents, said they believed that their parents would support their decision once they had made it.

Parents adapted their support to their children's personalities and aspirations. All parents, without being prompted to do so, used descriptions of their children's personalities to contextualize their involvement:

*(He) is really intelligent but lacks a little ambition and drive and doesn't really know what it is he wants to do* (Helen, mother to son, year 13).

*She's quite strong-minded....she'll make her own mind up and then just need reassurance* (Kath, mother to daughter, year 12).

They also needed to adapt to fluctuation of their children's interest in university:

*He has wavered but recently he has decided university is the way to go, so he applied.*  
(Leah, mother to son, year 13).

However, even young people with longstanding career goals still needed reassurance and parents' views were positioned as a trusted sounding board:

*They give me a good outside opinion.* (Kelly, student, year 12).

*They helped me decide between social work and youth work and we researched the courses.* (Chloe, student, year 13).

Parents described a collaborative approach to planning for university. Although tasks such as online research into courses, fact finding from social networks and considering course choices were usually carried out separately by either the parent or child, the planning became a cohesive project through regular discussions, through sharing of information sourced online and elsewhere. For some parents their main role was seen as keeping the momentum going on this:

*We first talked about it [going to university] at the end of year 12. He was looking at different options but he didn't have a clue. I said 'that's not good enough- go and talk to the [school] careers advisors.' We have had*

*ongoing talks with him. We've not left it at all.* (Sharon, mother to son, year 13).

*I'd say he's a typical teenage boy...we have to get on his back all the time to do things...have you looked at this? Have you done any research?* (Michael, father to son, year 12).

*They've talked every week with me about uni, they check up on me, if I want to go...*  
(Jamie, student, year 13)

Two parents referred to using timetables to enable them to keep track of what was required, whilst others were aware that they were lacking this information and reported that this was a cause of a great deal of anxiety for them.

Other parents were able to offer very specific support by using embodied cultural capital they had acquired through their employment. For example, one mother had helped her son with his personal statement [a supporting statement of why you wish to study your chosen subject and how you have the necessary attributes for university study] on his university application. This parent said she felt she could help her son because whilst she had not herself gone to university the personal statement was similar to a CV. In her job as a customer service manager in the public sector she saw a lot of CVs and knew 'how to present yourself well'.

### **The Emotional and Social Aspects of Supporting Decision Making**

Notwithstanding the positive attitudes to higher education observed, parents had some concerns about their children going to university. Some parents and students mentioned (parental) financial concerns:

*I need to know about finances...if she needs any grants.* (Linda, mother to daughter, year 12).

*...it's trying to get the reassurance that what she's doing is correct for her-that it isn't just money for someone else.* (Rachel, mother to daughter, year 12).

However, these seemed to derive from lack of information and/or appeared to have been tempered by weighing up the benefits. For example, Jackie, a mother to a student in year 12 described her first reaction to her daughter saying she wanted to go to university as:

*My first thing was, oh my God, how much is it going to cost?*

But she said she knew it was important for her daughter to go “for herself, as well as to get a good job” and she and her husband quickly became focused on practical aspects of the process and “what needs to be done next”.

A more prevalent set of concerns related to the emotional aspect of children leaving home and going ‘away’ to university:

*We suddenly realised-this is it, it’s the start of her moving out.* (Linda, mother to daughter, year 12).

*I slapped my forehead -I’m not ready for her to be in University yet, I’m not ready to be a parent of a child at university!! I know she has to go but I suppose I really don’t want her to leave me! (laughs)* (Nicola, mother to daughter, year 12).

*Emotionally we weren’t prepared for her going off to university.* (Jess, mother to daughter, year 13).

*I worry about her-the social life-and just being away from home.* (Mary, guardian to daughter, year 12).

Several young people were aware of their parents’ and guardians’ concerns in this area:

*Mum doesn’t want me to go too far away to uni.* (Chloe, student, year 13).

*Mum wants me to stay nearer to home.* (Darren, student, year 13).

*They don’t want me to go that far, they want to keep me local...but I wanna get away.* (Tom, student, year 12).

For parents, these kind of worries seemed to be exacerbated by the lack of a model of what being at university is like. Again, utilising her available cultural capital, one mother who had worked in London, described how she regularly took her sons on day trips to the commercial part of the city. She wanted them to experience what she described as the difference in culture and atmosphere to their home town. She hoped that this would help them imagine working there and raise their career aspirations beyond taking a lower status job in their local area. This mother’s strategic approach contrasted with her frustration at not herself being able to ‘imagine what the experience of attending university would be like’ and not being able to help her son understand

this, despite having carried out a great deal of fact finding.

Related to the need to envisage everyday life at university, there was a focus for some parents on very specific and practical information about things like parking and accommodation:

*Where will he be able to park?* (Lucy, mother to student, year 12).

*We talk about where to live, in the middle between the placement and the university or nearer to the university. Last weekend we talked about travel and car sharing, and where lectures are. They asked about it and I spoke to a friend and another friend who is going on a course there so she knew about it.* (Michelle, student, year 13).

*Parents don’t know much about university accommodation and they want to google shops nearby.* (Jamie, student, year 13).

### **How Parents Approach Help and Information Seeking**

None of the parents had received any written information on higher education from their child’s school at the time of the interviews. They accepted this and did not seem to expect that they would have received information in this way. Few parents mentioned any events laid on by the school. Aside from their own information searches (see below), parents predominantly received information verbally via their children rather than directly from the school. All parents were interested in receiving more information from schools (or elsewhere) on the process of applying to university:

*I would be glad of it, actually.* (Mary, guardian to student, year 12).

However, while most parents had used the internet to find information and some had approached universities directly, none had approached their child’s school for information. This did not seem to stem from poor relationships with the schools as all the parents said they would be happy to attend events at school and receive information from them.

All parents had sought some information on higher education. The earliest some had started looking for information was in year 12 (child aged 16-17). By far the most common approach was online searches and only one parent said they had not sought information online. Parents said they searched by phrases such as ‘best places to study

English', 'universities that offer teaching courses'. Parents appeared to use this method of seeking information so that they could try to get very specific information, related to their child's interest in going to university and their chances of being able to gain a place on particular courses. For example, Michael, a father to a son in year 12, said he and his wife had searched for individual local universities and also engineering, architecture and design courses "to see what [A level marks] they wanted"

No parent told us that they had found a definitive site that gave them the answers that they needed. Research involved a combination of using search engines and/or searching on specific University sites including their Facebook pages. Only two parents were aware of and had used the University Central Admissions Service (UCAS) website [the central website through which all UK university applications are made and which contains large amounts of information on courses].

Some parents expressed frustration at the overwhelming amount of information they found:

*It's really baffling...when you go onto the internet to find out about universities...I did it. I'm an intelligent person but I came off there really confused as to what goes on at what stage. (Sharon, mother to son, year 13).*

This confusion, unsurprisingly, was worst for parents who lacked information from other sources. Parents needed to know what was there and what they wanted to find out before they searched:

*He has no idea of what path to take...he's interested in product design and engineering but not sure exactly what yet...the problem is we don't really know what's out there in terms of courses".(Michael, father to son, year 12).*

Because of these kinds of issues, while providing a wealth of relevant information, without informed guidance or some contextual knowledge, the internet in itself was inadequate as an information source for most parents.

Some parents had tried to get information directly from universities. For example, one mother had contacted various local universities and asked them to email their prospectuses. She said she had done this at least a month before but that she had received none yet. She had also emailed a university with some questions about

the entry requirements but had had no reply. Another parent had tried 'phoning a university admissions department for information' but had been unable to get through on more than one occasion.

Some had gone to open days and found these very helpful:

*We didn't know a thing to start with. We asked for info at open days. Asked 'where can I find this information?' (Donna, mother to son, year 13).*

Interviewees gave examples of using a wide range of networks to try to gather information, including work colleagues:

*I asked people at work and they said "where are the universities he wants to go on the league table?" (Donna, mother to son, year 13).*

One mother to a daughter who wanted to do an Early Years degree, worked in a nursery. This had helped inform her and her daughter, about different kinds of Early Years' qualifications:

I told her about different qualifications [held by staff at the nursery].

She and her daughter had also talked to the manager of the nursery who had a daughter who had trained to be a teacher.

Extended family members and friends also served the role of providing information. These included: the family of a student's boyfriend (he himself was not going to university), a cousin who was first in family to go to university, a friend whose son had gone to university, a sister in law who had not gone to university but worked in a college. Parents and students sought both general and personalised support/information from these contacts, for example:

- For help about subjects [that could be taken as a degree].
- If they knew any good unis, if going to uni would be right for me- just to get another opinion.
- If he could help with her application form if needed.

Some parents were aware that the information they received from these sources might not be accurate:

*I didn't go through university, I know of the system basically through friends who did, but that was 20 years ago. (Rachel, mother to daughter, year 12).*

Parents were asked what types of information and support they would like/would have liked. A key theme was the wish for basic but personalised, face to face information for example:

*I just want someone to sit me down and tell me what [teaching] courses there are. (Carol, mother to daughter, year 12).*

*If I went to the school I'm sure they would give me leaflets and booklets about how the process works but I also want the advice on how that applies to her on a much more personal level. (Jackie, mother to daughter, year 12).*

Receiving information from schools earlier was suggested by most participants:

*I'd feel like we need it brought up to us earlier so it isn't like at year 13 you got to decide all at once what you like to do with your life. (Kelly, student, year 12).*

*I could have done with a conversation before the A level choices were made because I was the one left steering her, on information from 20 years ago. (Rachel, mother to student, year 12).*

Most of the parents said a timetable of what they could be doing, what their child needed to be doing and what happened next in the application process would be helpful as the following comments from year 13 parents illustrate:

*I wish I had a check list of what you have to do when.*

*We've been mindful of the deadlines but it's felt like there wasn't enough notice.*

*I am the kind of person that needs to be clear. I just need all the facts. A diary or list would be brilliant. A timetable would be reassuring, cos we've never done it before...and it's so intense.*

All the parents we spoke to would be/would have been, happy to go into their children's school to get information. Young people who had described their parents as less involved in planning for university, on the other hand, felt that a leaflet which they could use as a "conversation starter" and which was easy understand would be of benefit.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study corresponded with research literature that shows parents remain important throughout the transition to university and that parents both need and want more support from schools (e.g. Dietrich, Kracke and Nurmi, 2011; AGCAS, 2014; Aim Higher, 2009).

It additionally highlighted how talk about university was 'normalised' by the participants and part of day to day life, over a period of time, while at the same time a subject with often high emotional impact for parents, which has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Aim Higher, 2009). Parental engagement programmes in North America such as Puente and Futures and Families, which support low income children towards higher education, include discussion of parents' concerns about sending their children away from home to study. However, this seems yet to have been widely addressed in widening participation work in the UK.

We approached this study without preconceptions about, or overt focus on, what kinds of cultural capital FIFU parents might draw upon or possess, but considered cultural capital as a theoretical framework, retrospectively, as one which might be of value, to some extent, in understanding and framing the results seen. There was tentative evidence that different types of cultural capital were utilised by parents and also the circulatory, effortful and sometimes frustrating nature of this activity when these forms of cultural capital did not match those needed to adequately navigate the 'institutional system' of access to university.

Most parents reported receiving no direct information from their children's schools and so online information and information from family, friends and colleagues were the principle resources drawn upon. We found that parents tended to use online search engines to find information. The lack of signposting to relevant information frustrated parents' searches for both practical, personally relevant information and a parallel search for a sense of what going to university would be like on a day to day basis for their children. This highlighted the impact of parents' limited embodied cultural capital in this particular respect and the importance of experiential as well as informational resources.

Parents used all and any available forms of social and cultural capital to gain important 'inside' information to help their children make decisions and move towards specific career goals. In this



respect, social networks in particular seemed to be used in 'compensatory' way similar to Crozier and Davis', (2005) work with Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents. However, often the information these contacts could provide was tenuous and outdated and some parents were very aware of this and how it disadvantaged them.

We noted the collaborative and shared search for information reported by parents and student. Brooks (2004) in one of the very few studies that looked at parental support between the start of year 12 and end of year 13 noted a passivity typified by decision-making around higher education in low income families; and in all families where parental engagement was low during this period:

Neither parent made any suggestion about a specific [Higher Education] institution; there was little or no discussion about choices during the period of application; and a parent accompanied the young person on no more than one visit to a university (p. 500)

Unlike Brooks, the majority of the young people in our study had decided to go to university and there was evidence of a good deal of discussion with parents over often reasonably long periods. We did note a somewhat 'passive' acceptance with which some parents responded to their lack of information from school; and our parents were led by their child and acted in reaction to external prompts rather than proactively. However, we did not infer from this that they were not active, interested or involved - they all were and some had been involved in a wide range of activities such as gathering information from contacts, attending open days, online information seeking, and personal statement support. Rather, on the whole they lacked both specific information or answers to questions or concerns they had and the knowledge of where these could be quickly found. In this way, they may have lacked the 'self-efficacy' seen by some as necessary to parental engagement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). Moreover, it seemed that the role of the child's emotional supporter and a deliberative stance to support them with 'whatever they chose' meant that the

onus was more on the child to find information or relay information provided by the school than for the parent to find this. In this way, moral and emotional support was a key resource that parents were able to offer at a time that was marked by uncertainty and anxiety for both parents and young people. In the absence of being able also to offer more practical and instrumental support, these parents did their best for their children by utilising their cultural capital in resourceful and often highly effortful ways.

The results of this study suggest that schools, colleges, local authorities and others could play a more direct role in the provision of, or signposting to, relevant information for parents. They should consider providing parents with clear 'timetables' detailing what they and students can/need to do to progress their decisions about university through years 12 and 13, offering opportunities for personalised advice and more information on the 'lived experience' of attending university.

Our interviewees were FIFU parents whose children were mostly already decided on going to university. We cannot know how their experience compares with parents whose children had decided not to go (with or without much parental involvement in this decision) or those who were going but where there was little parental involvement. These other groups of families need to be the focus of future qualitative research to expand our understanding of the processes involved and forms of cultural capital and utilisation of these across all FIFU families, along with more comparative research involving non-FIFU families.

Multiple political, economic, social and psychological structural barriers exist which reproduce low university participation rates and high drop-out rates for FIFU students. There are no simple solutions but understanding the importance of the family *throughout* children's education and ensuring schools, colleges and universities provide better support to the families of FIFU students and equality of access to information remain basic minimums in beginning to address these inequalities.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Kent and Medway Progression Federation (KMPF) and the University of the Creative Arts (UCA) for funding this project. Thanks go to all those parents, guardians, young people and educational professionals who contributed their ideas, views and support to the project.

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