

The influence of career guidance and open days on first-generation students' university choices

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Abstract

This article sets out to investigate the role of career guidance and university open days in shaping the higher education choices of first-generation students. Using Careership as a theoretical framework (Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009), it draws on qualitative data from surveys conducted across three post-16 education providers and semi-structured interviews with first-generation students and staff. Thematic analysis reveals that while university is often viewed as a natural next step for these students, opportunities for career guidance to expand their horizon for action are frequently missed or not recognised. In-person open days emerge as pivotal moments in a first-generation student's decision-making by offering critical 'turning points' that influence both what and where they choose to study.

Key words: career guidance, careership, open days, first-generation students

Introduction

In recent decades, the number of young people attending university has increased significantly. Recent data from the University Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (2025) indicates that nearly two-thirds of graduates are first-generation students, defined in this study as individuals whose parents did not attend university. This study focuses specifically on first-

generation students, while acknowledging that many may also come from low socio-economic backgrounds and reside in areas with historically low participation in higher education (HE). Despite growing numbers, evidence of inequality remains in the types of universities first-generation students attend. Admissions data show that these students are more likely to enrol in local institutions and less likely to access elite universities (Coombs, 2022).

The young people in this study were all first-generation students making university choices in a higher education landscape that has undergone significant changes. This landscape is not only focused on fair access but has also become increasingly marketised and consumer-led, with a growing emphasis on value for money (Furedi, 2010; Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2010).

The relationship between career guidance and university open days in students' decision-making processes remains under-researched. Existing studies have primarily focused on conversion, how effectively universities turn open day attendees into applicants, rather than exploring the broader role open days and career guidance play in shaping students' educational choices. To address this gap, this research applies Careership theory (Hodkinson et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009) to offer a unique perspective on how career guidance and open day experiences influence first-generation students within the current higher education landscape.

It is important to note that partway through this research, the UK was placed under restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This inevitably had an impact on the direction of the study and the subsequent findings. This has been acknowledged where appropriate.

Careership theory

Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009) was developed as a response to gaps in traditional theories around career decision making. They argue that many career guidance practices in the UK are underpinned by what they refer to as a 'folk theory of careers'. They claim that folk theories often include many of the following assumptions:

- Career decisions involve matching a person with a career opportunity
- Career decisions are, or should be, cognitive and rational
- Career decision-making is a process which results in an event (career decision)
- Career decisions are solely made by the person making the decision.
- Career decisions are made at the start of a linear career
- Career progression is usually straightforward if a good decision has been made.

However, Hodkinson and Sparkes suggest that folk theory is flawed because actual career decision-making is not rational in the ways assumed. That career progression is often non-linear and is strongly influenced by actions, events and circumstances which lie beyond a person's control.

Hodkinson (1997) critiques several earlier career theorists, including Holland (1997) and Super (1957), for portraying career decision-making as a purely rational process. His central criticism is that these theories treat the individual as the sole agent in career

decisions, largely ignoring the social and cultural context in which such decisions occur. For instance, Holland's RIASEC theory emphasises the alignment between personal traits and job characteristics, assuming that individuals have the freedom to choose careers that match their traits. However, Hodkinson argues that this assumption is often unrealistic. Career choices are not made in a vacuum; they are shaped by the cultural, social, and economic contexts surrounding the individual.

Drawing on concepts developed by Bourdieu (1986), Careership Theory comprises three overlapping themes: the individual's position (*habitus*), the forces within the decision-making field, and the ongoing career journey. Bourdieu's notion of 'field' adds a deeper dimension to what is often referred to as the external environment. Field theory suggests that the external environment is dynamic, complex and consists of interacting and, often, unequal forces. This made this an appropriate theoretical lens to investigate the university decision-making process of first-generation students.

When conceptualising higher education as a distinct 'field', it is important to consider its position relative to other fields, such as employment or alternative training pathways like apprenticeships (Thomson, 2016). For young people from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds, the decision to pursue higher education is often shaped by perceived risks and uncertainties (Callender, 2008; Esson & Ertl, 2016). The benefits of attending university may appear ambiguous, particularly when weighed against examples of low-earning or unemployed graduates, or jobs that do not require a degree (Watts & Bridges, 2006). In such comparisons, higher education is frequently viewed as offering poor value, with no guaranteed return on investment (Jones, 2016). First-generation students often approach higher education with a sense of uncertainty, lacking familial templates to guide them. In contrast, second-generation students, those whose family members have previously attended university, tend to engage with the process with greater confidence and clarity (Reay, 1998). This contrast suggests that for first-generation and disadvantaged students, the decision to enter higher education is significantly more complex than it is for their more privileged, middle-class peers.

A central concept within Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009) is that career decision-making is bounded by an individual's 'horizons for action.' This suggests that what individuals perceive as possible is shaped by their position within a social field. Their location influences a person's horizon for action in a particular field, the characteristics of that field, and their embodied dispositions. These elements interact to form a framework within which choices are made. Horizons for action define the scope of what is visible and conceivable to the individual, while obscuring possibilities beyond that scope. This research explores explicitly the extent to which careers education and guidance can influence a young person's horizon for action, particularly in relation to university choice.

Another key element of Careership theory relevant to this study is the concept of 'turning points.' Traditional views of career progression often depict it as a linear and predictable trajectory, where deviations are seen as occasional anomalies, merely shifts from one career ladder to another (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). However, earlier theorists have argued that such models fail to capture the lived experiences of individuals. Turning points refer to moments when individuals reassess, revise, or redirect their career paths. While the concept itself is not new, Hodkinson and Sparkes sought to classify the different

types of turning points encountered in career development. They identified three main categories: structural, self-initiated, and forced. Structural turning points are shaped by external systems, such as the need to choose between further education, employment, or training at the end of compulsory schooling. Self-initiated turning points arise from personal decisions to instigate change, often in response to life events. Forced turning points, by contrast, result from external pressures or disruptions, such as redundancy. These moments can be planned or unanticipated and may not consistently be recognised as significant until viewed in retrospect. This challenges trajectory-based models of career development, which often overlook the unpredictable nature of individuals' lives and the labour market. Turning points can lead to dramatic shifts or gradual transformations, ultimately altering an individual's habitus. In the context of this study, the concept of turning points was central to exploring whether events such as university open days could serve as catalysts for change. These events, along with careers education and guidance, represent structured interactions between the education system, labour market, and individual dispositions. While the significance of such moments is often subjective and may have been oversimplified in previous research, they hold the potential to be transformative, particularly for first-generation university applicants.

Traditional theories of career decision-making often assume that the ideal process is one of technical rationality; logical, objective, and based on the comprehensive analysis of all available information. In the context of university choice, this would involve applicants systematically comparing data such as league tables, graduate outcomes, and student satisfaction scores to make an informed decision. These models also imply that a good decision leads to a stable, long-term career and that such decisions are singular, pivotal events. Hodkinson (1997), however, challenges this view by introducing the concept of 'pragmatic rationality.' His research found that young people often make career decisions that are not purely logical but are shaped by practical, emotional, and cultural factors. Many participants were unable to clearly articulate their preferences or provide rational justifications for their choices. Instead, decisions were frequently based on partial information, often obtained from trusted individuals, referred to as 'hot' sources, rather than official or impersonal 'cold' sources. This highlights the importance of understanding how different groups access and interpret information, a theme explored further in this study. Careership theory also emphasises that career decisions are rarely made in isolation; they typically involve input from multiple people and are influenced by chance and serendipity. This broader, more nuanced understanding of decision-making is particularly relevant when examining how young people, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, navigate the complex process of choosing a university.

Methodology

This study employed an interpretive approach to explore the career decision-making behaviours of first-generation students, with a particular focus on their university choices and the role of open days in shaping these decisions. Data was collected from three separate post-16 institutions:

- A school sixth form college
- A sixth form college
- a further education college

A survey was sent out to all three institutions aimed at all students who were in their first year of post-16 education. The survey received 96 responses, with the proportion of responses being relatively equal across all three schools and colleges. It is essential to note that, although the survey was open to all students in the year group, each of the providers had a high number of students who fit the profile of first-generation students and were located in areas classified as Quintile 2 in the POLAR4 data. POLAR measures the proportion of young people in a particular area who participate in higher education. POLAR4 is the most recent version of this data. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups based on the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. For a student to be eligible for an interview, they needed to be classed as a first-generation student and be planning on applying to a university. As a result of this criterion, two students per institution were identified as being suitable for a follow-up interview. In addition to the student interviews, the named Careers Leader for each institution was interviewed, and the published careers programme was used as documentary evidence. The research and any decision-making involved were framed by the guidelines and principles laid down by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Informed consent was built into the survey, and a consent form was given to all interview participants before any interviews took place. I also obtained permission from the schools and colleges to conduct the research project.

As the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, my research questions were also adapted to understand the initial impact of the pandemic on university choice. My methodological approach was also modified to consider issues surrounding a series of national lockdowns. The introduction of surveys, in addition to semi-structured interviews, added another layer of data, which allowed me to refine my interview approach. To generate a rich dataset, I employed a qualitative research strategy that allowed me to delve deeply into an individual's perceptions and interpretations, while offering sufficient flexibility to address any unanticipated issues that arose. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis, which allowed me to identify themes and analyse these using the theoretical lens of Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009).

Findings

The influence of career guidance

Participants in this study were asked to reflect on their experiences of career guidance throughout their time in education. Still, there was a specific focus on the support they had received while making their post-16 and post-18 choices. The survey inquired about students' experiences with career guidance interviews, as well as careers support more broadly, and these themes were explored in more detail during the interviews. A consistent theme emerged: young people expressed a desire for more frequent and meaningful career guidance. However, the definition of meaningful appears to differ between students and staff. From a student perspective, meaningful refers to a career intervention that focuses on information rather than an intervention that allows students to engage in the wider career guidance process.

It appears that opportunities for career guidance to influence a young person's horizon for action are either being missed or not fully recognised by the students themselves. This finding aligns with Hodkinson's (2001) argument that the impact of career guidance is often limited, not due to its potential, but because it operates within restrictive policy and funding frameworks. This was evident in the study, where all participating educational institutions employed qualified careers advisers to conduct one-to-one interviews, in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). However, it became clear that this provision was insufficient to meet the needs of the student population. The findings suggest a disconnect between policy intentions and the lived experiences of students, raising important questions about how career guidance can be better resourced and structured to expand young people's horizons for meaningful action.

In this study, the term 'careers support' encompasses more than just the one-to-one careers interview, often referred to as personal guidance. Staff participants emphasised that personal guidance represented only a small component of their broader careers programme, which was structured around achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). Staff reported that these benchmarks were well embedded within their provision and that their performance aligned with national data from the Careers and Enterprise Company. However, the findings suggest a need to reflect on the quality and purpose of the guidance being delivered. Echoing the findings of Moote and Archer (2018), students in this study described personal guidance sessions that primarily focused on information delivery and subject choices, rather than offering space to explore their interests, values, and future opportunities. It became clear throughout the study that the students not only expected the interaction to focus on information, but it was also the aspect of guidance they rated most highly. This was clear in the responses from the survey, which was open to all students, not just those who were considered first-generation. This highlights a potential disconnect between a guidance practitioner's perception of career guidance and the expectations of young people.

Following on from this was the widespread misunderstanding amongst the first-generation students regarding the purpose and timing of personal guidance. These students articulated in the research interview that they believed that career interviews were intended only for those who had already decided on a career path, rather than as a space to explore potential options. Given this misconception, it is perhaps unsurprising that students were not actively requesting interviews, even when they were available. In addition to not knowing how to request an interview, students were often unclear about when it would be most appropriate or beneficial to do so. Because personal guidance was perceived primarily as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an opportunity for reflection or exploration, it is reasonable to conclude that the students did not view it as a mechanism for expanding their horizons for action. These findings support recent research by O'Regan and Bhattacharyya (2022), which suggests that career interviews are often viewed as instrumental rather than transformative processes.

It is important to acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the availability and accessibility of career guidance. During this period, career interviews were moved online, which had two notable consequences for students. First, many students reported feeling uncomfortable or awkward during virtual interactions, with some lacking the confidence to engage effectively in an online setting. Second, there was confusion around how to access these services. While students were previously familiar with the physical

location of the careers office and could easily request an in-person interview, the process for arranging an online appointment was not clearly communicated. As a result, many students missed out on receiving guidance altogether. These findings highlight the need for more accessible and clearly structured systems for delivering career support, particularly in times of disruption.

The emphasis on information continued to be a prominent theme, with students noting a strong focus on higher education compared to alternative pathways. Although the education providers involved in this study were compliant with the Provider Access Legislation (2023), higher education was consistently promoted as the preferred and expected destination for Level 3 students. Opportunities to explore apprenticeships or other vocational routes were limited. As in previous research, parents were identified as the most influential source of advice regarding university (Youthsight, 2014). First-generation students in this study acknowledged that their parents had limited personal experience with higher education. Still, they described their parents as viewing the decision to apply to university very positively. Notably, none of the participants reported being encouraged by their parents to consider alternatives to university. This suggests that higher education now firmly resides within the horizons for action not only of students and staff, but also of their parents. These findings challenge earlier studies (e.g., Norris, 2011; Bailey, 2021), which suggested that parents without higher education experience were more likely to support non-university routes. The perceived link between university attendance and future employment success underpins this shift in outlook for both the students and their parents, echoing the conclusions of Purcell (2008). Subject choices were also influenced by employment considerations, with some students referencing the COVID-19 pandemic as a factor shaping their decisions. Students stated that the pandemic had made them more interested in health and media-related careers and less interested in careers in education, specifically teaching. Staff interviews supported this data as they noted an increase in students being interested in health-related subjects and a decline in those looking at teacher training.

While attending university has become an expected destination for a growing number of young people, their choice of institution remains shaped by traditional horizons for action. All participants in this study chose to apply to a local university. Although future employability was cited as the primary motivation for pursuing higher education, this rationale did not appear to influence the specific choice of university. None of the participants reported using league tables or graduate outcome statistics to inform their decisions. Instead, they emphasised factors such as proximity, the availability of their chosen subject at the local institution, financial considerations, and the ability to remain at home. When discussing finance, the students were referring to the cost of living rather than the tuition fees charged by the university. They expressed concerns about the cost of accommodation and linked this directly to their choice to choose a local university and live at home. Students also valued the support offered by local universities and expressed a sense of gratitude that their preferred course was available nearby. Staff participants highlighted the role of cultural capital, noting that students often selected universities where they felt a sense of belonging or familiarity. These findings suggest that while higher education is firmly within the horizon for action of students, staff, and parents, the decision-making process remains bounded by local, cultural, and economic factors.

Although the primary focus of this research was not the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the pandemic influenced participants' university choices. Concerns

about the potential return of restrictions and lockdowns led many students to view local universities as safer and more practical options. Studying locally offered the reassurance of being able to remain at home and continue learning remotely if necessary. This behaviour aligns with the concept of pragmatic rationality as described in Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009). Rather than making decisions based solely on objective data, such as league tables or graduate employment statistics, students made choices grounded in emotional, cultural, and practical considerations. These findings further illustrate how career decisions are shaped by context and lived experience, rather than by purely technical rationality.

The role of open days

Both staff and students in this study identified open days as influential in the university decision-making process. All the first-generation students who were interviewed had visited a university in person either for an open day or a taster day organised by their school, and they had all attended at least one virtual open day. However, there were notable differences between the experiences of attending in-person versus virtual open days. This research explored whether open days could act as a turning point for university applicants, an aspect of open days which has previously gone largely unacknowledged. The findings suggest that in-person events held on campus often act as a turning point. These events allow prospective students to experience the university environment firsthand, offering a sense of the institution's character and culture. They also provide an opportunity to explore the surrounding area, helping students assess whether they feel a sense of belonging, an important factor in university choice. These findings align with research by The Student Room (2023), which highlighted the importance of open days in shaping applicant decisions.

The concept of student-institutional fit (Reay & Ball, 2010), though difficult to quantify, is central to this process. It reflects how students feel about a university and contributes to the kind of pragmatically rational decisions described in Careership theory (Hodkinson, et al., 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2009). Rather than relying solely on data such as league tables, students make decisions based on emotional and cultural resonance. In-person open days foster this by enabling unplanned interactions, such as meeting student ambassadors or staff or witnessing campus life, which can significantly influence both university and subject choice. These experiences support the idea that 'seeing is believing,' as noted in the work of Pampaloni (2010) and Raven (2020), and demonstrate how such events can serve as meaningful turning points in the higher education decision-making journey.

In contrast to in-person events, virtual open days were perceived by both staff and students as less likely to act as turning points in the university decision-making process. While feedback on virtual events was generally positive, often accompanied by the caveat that universities had no alternative during COVID-19 restrictions, participants consistently described the experience as fundamentally different. Unlike in-person open days, which evoked emotional responses and a sense of connection to the institution, virtual events were seen as functional and information-driven. They were highly structured, with applicants self-selecting sessions rather than encountering spontaneous or unplanned experiences that might influence their decisions more deeply.

Participants noted that virtual open days did not effectively convey the personality of the institution, with many describing them as indistinguishable from one another. Although

some universities offered virtual campus tours or opportunities to meet current students, these features were often underutilised. As a result, virtual events lacked the immersive and affective qualities that contribute to a sense of belonging or institutional fit, key elements in the formation of pragmatically rational decisions and potential turning points, as described in Careership theory. These findings underscore the limitations of virtual formats in replicating the transformative potential of in-person engagement.

Additionally, young people's confidence in interacting and participating in an online event played a part. Participants spoke of not engaging with staff during online talks, even if they were supposed to be interactive, as they did not have the confidence to speak as part of a large online group. Given the timing of the study and the fact that online events were relatively new, it is difficult to say whether this was an issue just for first-generation students or an issue for young people more broadly.

Discussion

This research highlights an apparent disconnect between the perspectives of young people and career guidance practitioners regarding the role and purpose of career guidance. As a result, the potential for guidance to expand first-generation students' horizons for action is often unrecognised by the very individuals it aims to support. To address this gap, it is essential to explore student perceptions more deeply. Do these views stem from a lack of clear communication from the sector about the aims and scope of career guidance? Or do young people hold fundamentally different expectations, perhaps viewing guidance as a more directive, instrumental process focused on practical support rather than exploration and reflection?

These questions have important implications not only for how career guidance is delivered but also for how practitioners are trained. If young people do not perceive guidance as a space for expanding their aspirations and exploring possibilities, then its transformative potential is diminished. Understanding and addressing this misalignment is crucial for ensuring that career guidance can fulfil its broader developmental role, particularly for those whose horizons for action may already be constrained by social or cultural factors.

This research highlights the central role of information in student career decision-making. Student participants raised concerns about its type, volume, and frequency. While staff viewed information provision as a strength, students often felt overwhelmed and disengaged due to a lack of personalisation. This appears to contrast with the students' expectations of career guidance interviews. The findings suggest that personalisation is key to effective information delivery, calling for more tailored, student-centred approaches.

Students noted a strong emphasis on higher education, with limited exposure to alternative pathways such as apprenticeships or vocational training. Although all student participants indicated that the university was their intended destination, many expressed a desire to learn more about other options. These findings support previous research highlighting concerns about the narrow focus of information provision and the promotion of higher education as the default route.

This study suggests that higher education now sits firmly within the horizons for action of students studying Level 3 qualifications, more so than previously recognised. While this

reflects the success of widening participation initiatives, it also signals a need to shift focus. Future efforts should not only aim to increase access to higher education but also ensure that students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, are supported in making informed choices about what and where they study.

Although this group of first-generation students viewed university as a natural progression, their choice of institution was primarily influenced by location. All participants chose to apply to local universities, with proximity emerging as the most significant factor in their decision-making. While employability was consistently cited as the main reason for attending university, this was often expressed in general terms. Students did not typically link their choice of institution or subject to specific career outcomes. Instead, subject choices were primarily determined by what was available at nearby universities. This supports the concepts put forward by Careership theory, which relate to young people making pragmatically rational decisions, as opposed to technically rational decisions. The findings in this study demonstrated that first-generation students were making pragmatically rational decisions, which were driven by culture and emotions rather than data.

The educational institutions involved in this study were in areas with a relatively high density of universities, offering students a broad range of subjects and institutions to choose from. However, this raises important questions about how location might influence decision-making in areas with fewer higher education options. Further research into the experiences of first-generation students in rural or geographically isolated regions would provide valuable insights into how location and subject availability interact in shaping university choice.

These findings have clear implications for both professional practice and policy, not only within career guidance, but also in the realms of higher education marketing and the use of consumer data. Notably, none of the students in this study reported using consumer data such as university league tables, institutional rankings, or Graduate Outcomes statistics in their decision-making process. This suggests a disconnect between the data-driven strategies employed by universities and the actual behaviours and priorities of prospective students. It raises important questions about the effectiveness of current marketing approaches and the assumptions underpinning them. If students are not engaging with this type of information, institutions may need to reconsider how they present and personalise data to better align with how young people make decisions about their futures.

Conclusion

The suggestion that university applicants are making pragmatically rational decisions is further supported by the findings related to open days. This study found that open days can act as significant turning points in the university decision-making process, particularly when experienced in person. In-person open days provide institutions with a unique opportunity to convey the 'personality' of the university, something that is difficult to replicate in a virtual format. This sense of personality contributes to a student's ability to assess whether they feel a sense of belonging, which is a key factor in pragmatically rational decision-making.

In-person events also allow for unplanned or serendipitous experiences, such as informal conversations with staff or students, or spontaneous encounters with aspects of campus

life, that can influence both university and subject choice. While feedback on virtual open days was generally positive, they were perceived as more structured and information-focused, offering limited opportunities to develop an emotional connection with the institution. As the sector continues to operate in a hybrid environment, with virtual open days remaining a feature of university marketing, particularly for international applicants, there is a need for institutions to consider how they can better convey their identity and foster a sense of belonging in virtual formats.

Recommendations

The findings from this research and subsequent recommendations offer career development practitioners, universities and policy makers opportunities to reflect on the decision-making journey of first-generation students and the role of both career guidance and open days on university choice.

- There needs to be a clear definition of career guidance and personal guidance, which is clearly communicated to staff and students. This should be driven by the sector's professional body to ensure consistency across the profession.
- Schools and Colleges should be held accountable for their approach to the Provider Access Legislation (2023) to ensure that career guidance activities can focus on all available options, including apprenticeships and employment.
- The sector should review the use of consumer data, as it is not being used as extensively as policymakers and universities believe. There is scope for policymakers and universities to work more closely with the career guidance sector to ensure that the information being presented is meaningful in supporting decisions relating to higher education choice.
- Universities would benefit from acknowledging the potential for a university open day to act as a Turning Point in the decision-making process of applicants and to work with career guidance professionals in ensuring that the information presented is helpful for those young people making decisions about where and what to study.
- Applicants attending virtual events would benefit from support when booking the event and prior to attending to ensure they are making the most of the opportunity to speak to staff and students.



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