



Future selves

Authors

Dr Adam Formby
Laura Fenwick

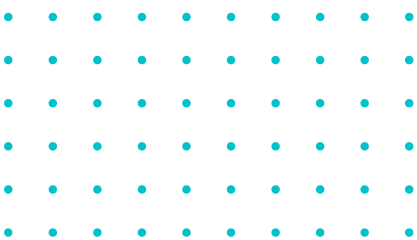
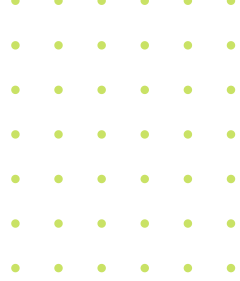


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Introduction

For many young people, access to higher education (HE) in the UK is shaped by extensive and deep inequality (Office for Students; OfS, 2021; Bolton & Lewis, 2023). In particular, the UK continues to see a significant amount of young people with characteristics such as free school meals, and geographical inequalities underrepresented in higher education pathways (OfS, 2021). The UK government acknowledges the nature of place-based, social inequality, and specific groups (e.g., care experienced) and a need to support young people (OfS, 2021). Despite this, recent policy changes have cut Uni Connect funding from £30million to £20million annually (Department for Education; DfE, 2024). Research and analysis continue to emphasise how 'place' shapes opportunities to enter HE in England and Wales (OfS, 2021). Across North Yorkshire, there are significant numbers of learners underrepresented in Higher Education. It is a varied region with several key inequalities that can limit learners and young people from attending higher education. It has significant variation regarding its differing community, and overall make-up. Many of the young people in the area come from rural communities. Nationally, 42.2% of young people from state schools in England enter higher education aged 18 or 19 (OfS, 2021). Yorkshire and the Humber is not far behind the national picture with 39.7%. However, by looking at the whole region, it does not consider the intra-regional disparities which are often on a very local scale (OfS, 2021). Many of the places with the lowest participation in England are coastal towns, and ex-industrial towns across the north and midlands (OfS, 2021).

North Yorkshire is the largest county in the UK, and putting its 90-mile coastline into context, there are two physical geographical barriers: on one side is the sea, and on the other is the wide-open North Yorkshire Moors. The coastline, with its stunning views, beaches and headlands is perceived as one of the most desirable holiday destinations in the UK and yet it is a significant area of social and economic deprivation. The striking landscape hides the reality of this deprivation, identified as one of the 12 Opportunity Areas created in 2017 (DfE, 2017a). As a popular tourist destination, the area boasts a very high number of seasonal jobs, particularly within hospitality and retail, and young people in the area often access these roles from a young age. Initially this could be seen as a positive integration into the workforce; anecdotally, we know that young people as young as 12 years old are employed in various part time roles. However, as those young people approach transition points post-16 and post- 18 what was a positive can become a psychological barrier to progression. Moving away from home, moving into a different employment sector or into higher education become barriers, in part, because of the strong sense of identify and attachment young people have to their own communities.

Furthermore, there are unique dynamics of inequality at play regarding how young people reflect on such choices in coastal communities. Wider barriers such as transport, internet accessibility (Playford et al., 2023), uncertainty about debt (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), limited higher education-experienced role models, and high attachment to local community compounded by uncertainty about urban settings (IntoUniversity, 2015). Indeed, understanding the biographical journeys and feelings of young people as they frame and reflect on their futures, and how they reflect on making informed choices can help articulate more nuanced understandings of how to support young people in such community settings. Further, this is integral in creating more reflexive forms of widening participation (WP) provisions capable of responding to different forms of social need of marginalised communities.

Possible Selves

The Future Selves project was inspired by the concept of possible selves proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986). “Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming,” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p.954). This approach is where future goals and outcomes are realised through agency of the past and present. Wider structural factors such as past academic experience, socioeconomic status and psychological wellbeing, will likely impact which version of their possible selves an individual will aim to embrace or to avoid (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). Possible selves are dynamic and constantly change as individuals reimagine the selves they could become as experiences develop in their everyday lives (Harrison, 2018). An individual can create many possible selves and the pool of possible selves acts as an incentive to approach or avoid particular outcomes in an individual’s life (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

This Study

In partnership with an academic at the University of Lincoln, this study examined how young people in coastal communities reflected on how they see higher education, their community, and the key influences regarding their future choices and how this was shifting as they progressed through year 10. It takes the form of a longitudinal evaluation involving repeated discussions with young people from the North Yorkshire coast. The young people who were recruited attended a school that works with Inspiring Choices because many of their learners are underrepresented in higher education.

Furthermore, there are unique dynamics of inequality at play regarding how young people reflect on such choices in coastal communities. Wider barriers such as transport, internet accessibility (Playford et al., 2023), uncertainty about debt (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), limited higher education-experienced role models, and high attachment to local community compounded by uncertainty about urban settings (IntoUniversity, 2015). Indeed, understanding the biographical journeys and feelings of young people as they frame and reflect on their futures, and how they reflect on making informed choices can help articulate more nuanced understandings of how to support young people in such community settings. Further, this is integral in creating more reflexive forms of widening participation (WP) provisions capable of responding to different forms of social need of marginalised communities.

The aim of the study was to answer three research questions:

- *How do young people imagine their journey into higher education and Future-selves?*
- *In what way does the Inspiring Choices Programme support change in young people's sense of self?*
- *If not Inspiring Choices, who does support change in young people's sense of self?*

In the first part of the study, 10 young people in year 10, from one of our target schools participated. The first session took place in April 2023 and started with a group session which included an ice breaker game of 'this or that' where the young people were asked to choose one option from the board and move across to the designated side of the classroom. The next activity was a group activity of 'Who matters to me?' where the young people answered three versions of this question (Who matters to me in general? who matters to me when making decisions? who matters to me when thinking about the future?). Then the young people created an individual timeline which included prompts of important things in their past, what they expect after Year 11, and something outside of education in the future. These three activities were designed to introduce the young people to the research questions and to begin thinking about how their futures could be. The young people then had a one-to-one interview, ranging from 06:22 minutes to 16:13 minutes.

The second session took place in July 2023, where five of the original young people wanted to continue their participation. The second session included another ice breaker activity and a group activity discussing achievements (personal/academic) and why they were important to the individual. The young people then completed an individual activity drawing/writing a self-portrait of themselves in the future. The young people could choose how far in the future and were encouraged to think about all aspects of life not just education and careers. To finish the project the young people had another one-to-one interview ranging from minutes 08:01 minutes to 14:08 minutes. The transcripts from these interviews were analysed and organised into seven emerging themes. Three themes related to the young people's opinions of higher education, two themes on their other possible futures and finally, two themes on the influences that could help with their decision making.

Themes

Normalisation of HE

Throughout the responses, it is evident that the idea of higher education has been normalised. The young people are not only used to the idea of HE, but also are actively considering attending. This normalisation is specifically important due to the remoteness of coastal learners as North Yorkshire has limited HE provision compared to other parts of the country – meaning that young people could be less familiar with HE institutions.

The young people looked at HE as one pathway of many:

RES: Well, I know like university is quite expensive and stuff. So, there's that, apart from that I think I would probably consider it. ”

INT: Do you think can anybody go to university?

RES: I think so if they put their mind to it and want to go anyone can do it.

This normalisation could also be observed when the young people considered higher education as a part of a deeper journey to a desired future:

INT: So, do you think that you would or could apply to higher education? I know you just touched on this but if you want to maybe tell me a bit more about that?

RES: Yes, I've always known I'm going to go university when I'm older.

INT: Yes, okay. What would you apply for?

RES: Biology or like animal care.

RES: I know it's like you go there for like higher education to get the degree and to learn more about what you're interested in to do later in life. I always thought they sounded a bit scary before we had the assembly on them because I thought it was like in my head ever since I was little it was always like incredibly high standards that it's just impossible to keep up and then after that assembly like it was like you're an adult like if you haven't got time to finish this like completely okay as long as you get it done eventually. ”

Concerns of HE

Feelings of uncertainty regarding higher education as a path forward is a common experience. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to move away from home to attend higher education (Bridge Group, 2019). In some rural communities, the poor transport connections and lack of local higher education provision means that the only option to attend higher education is to move away from home (DfE, 2017b). This means these individuals are faced with more complex decision making whether to attend and higher costs of studying away may be one barrier too many especially for those who are already less confident that HE is right for them (DfE, 2017b). For those uncertain about HE, some of this was down to the relative unfamiliarity of HE (often framed as moving away from home) which could be seen as challenging for young people so embedded in their community identities.

INT: How do you feel about the idea of moving away?

RES: I don't like it.

“ RES: I like the comfort of my own home, I like me own bed so normally just staying round close to home just doing what I enjoy, normal sort of things. I wouldn't like, I have been on holiday but I wouldn't really like, I didn't really, it wasn't anything special really. I like the comfort of my own home and bed and stuff so yes.

The young people reflected on the purpose of HE generally, and whether it is the right path for them or represents an opportunity for learners in their lives:

INT: Yes, that's fair. How do you feel about higher education?

RES: Is that like uni and stuff?

INT: Yes.

RES: It depends because I just feel like- I don't know, I don't like school. So, I feel like paying to go for longer is a bit torturous, but- It depends, I don't know, because what I want to do when I'm older might change. So, it might be different.

Informed Choice not to go to HE

For those that were less ambivalent about HE, it was often because they had alternative notions of the future including degree apprenticeships or different career goals. These were often informed decisions based on community identity. Community setting, and ‘place’ significantly shapes the pathways of learners (OfS, 2021):

“ RES: I don’t particularly like school, but I get that I have to do it, so I do try at it but yes, I like, that’s what I do in my, I enjoy fishing and I’d like to do it as a job so yes.

The young people had knowledge of the labour market and some had clear plans of how they would reach their desired future selves:

RES: So, like leave once I’ve done my GCSEs and go to Sea School, ... there’s four bits of training you have to do like sea survival and fire, if there’s a fire at sea on the boat. So, I’d do them when I’m 16 then I can be like official crew for a boat and when I’m about 20/21 I’ve got a bit of experience I’ll go back and train to be my own skipper like own my own boat and then I’d like to have my own boat and just fisherman ”

For others, there was evidence of some extent of self-elimination, in how learners could frame “what is and what is not ‘for us’” (Friedman & Laurison, 2020, p.173) regarding higher education:

INT: That’s right. Do you think that you would or could apply to higher education?

RES: Probably not.

INT: Is it something that you could see yourself doing or?

RES: I’ve never liked the idea of universities, no. Can’t see myself doing it

Many of the young people saw HE as positive, but just not necessary for their trajectories at this point in their lives and requiring a purpose to attend HE. Therefore, emphasising the importance of explaining different options for young people to support their future and alternative selves:

INT: What would stop you going to higher education?

RES: Not having any idea of what I wanted to do. I’d feel the whole time that I was working towards nothing, like rather than you know having at least something in mind to go towards.

Multiple Opportunities for Future Selves

The young people expressed multiple outcomes of their possible selves which can contextualise their motivations around the future. Young people that were interested in going to HE, had also made an informed choice to do so. They often saw HE as a stage in a process which would help to obtain that hypothetical and possible future.

HE becomes a steppingstone in that journey:

INT: What's that involve?

RES: The ocean. I know what it is I just can't remember because I haven't looked at it in a while, but I know when I read it, I really thought it was something I wanted to do.

INT: So, how would you get there, what would be your path?

RES: You have to take geography and biology type things for the Sixth Form A-levels and then you can take oceanography at certain universities.

INT: Okay, what was the other option that you mentioned.

RES: Climate change analysisist person.

INT: Amazing, have you looked into the pathway for that as well?

RES: Yes, it's kind of the same thing as geography and science.

INT: That's cool. So, have you looked at any university courses for that?

RES: I've looked at some in Scotland and I looked at St John's.

Often alternative possible selves would emerge (and sometimes end) as time went on. Even within the small timeframe between interviews, the later interviews emphasised how the young people reflected on different options moving forward, as experiences started to vary. Indeed, this sense that young people were negotiating options in the context of wide-ranging and substantial influences: new experiences, current interests, feelings towards HE, work and deeper conceptions of past and future self. Often, when these different aspects converged (or diverged), young people's notion of HE became reliant on whether it was part of an overall journey to a desired future:

INT: Could you remind me- Do you have any ideas about what you want to do in your future?

RES: Well, it's changed since last time because- It was like hair and beauty and stuff, but I did do work experience at a nursery, and it was actually the funnest thing I've ever done in- I want to go back, that is actually what I want to do.

INT: That's amazing. So, what has that- Has that changed the way you see your future?

RES: Yes, a bit, I don't know. I think I still want to do hair and beauty but I want to do like the nursery thing at the same time.

The responses illuminated young people's complicated feelings about their trajectories. They articulated the inherent complexity in planning for the future, with some young people extensively considering how multiple outcomes could develop:

INT: How would you get to your sort of desired future? What steps will you take?

RES: See I haven't looked that much into it but I think for me I'd, because my teacher was saying about like looking at performing arts based sixth forms. However, if that didn't happen then I'd just take like musical theatre in a normal sixth form and like other subjects that I like...and then go on to looking at musical theatre university, like a drama college school or whatever. And then from there like if I was going to move out because I don't want to go. I don't want to live back at home after uni because if I've lived away from home for three years it's like rather just get...go in like maybe live somewhere like close to London rather than in London because like that's expensive and then from there like get an agent and try and just book jobs and do like...take like master classes and like get a job on the side and stuff, yes.

Drawing from their pool of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the young people conveyed options for alternative careers away from HE which was concentrated in spaces outside of their educational lives. Personal interests mattered significantly for the young people and were clearly influencing their ideas of possible future self:

RES: Yes I would. Yes, I can see myself maybe even teaching the guitar when I'm older to people.

INT: ...so if you could see yourself teaching guitar then do you have any ideas of how you would get to do something like that? Like what you have to do to get there?

RES: Well obviously learn all of the, all of the stuff on the guitar. I'm not too sure whether you need to do a university course but I'm sure you'd need to do something like that and then I think you just advertise it.

RES: Yes, well I wanna be on the West End, because I've done dance all my life. So, I knew that I'd always like keep that and something would be involved in that, I'll always have that in my life, even later on if I went back to, like teaching or something. And then when I came to secondary school, I started doing drama and that, and then I've always done singing. So, I've kind of put two and two together. And now with an academy I'm with, I've done shows and stuff. ”

Like-to-Avoid Futures

Like-to-avoid selves can be as motivating as like-to-be selves (Harrison, 2018). These like-to-avoid selves can also have impact on how the young people make decisions (Harrison, 2018).

INT: So is there a type of future that you've like to avoid?

RES: Yes I don't want to ever be alone. I don't want to, I want to have kids and a family and I don't want to, and I don't want to be doing a job that I don't like either but I also want to always feel secure like with money wise and that. I don't want to have a fear of like if I'm doing something I love but I'm like suffering money wise it's going to be, I don't want that to happen so yes.

As the young people reflected on their futures, they often drew on current personal interests and school subject choices, ones which they enjoyed and ones they did not enjoy. One such example, is an aversion to subjects some learners did not enjoy in the context of education and this became internalised regarding future career choices.

INT: So, can you see anything kind of like in the future that you'd like to avoid? It's a hard question, isn't it?

RES: Jobs in maths.

When answering this question, the young people drew on their experiences of the people around them for example, family members. The young people didn't want to be in careers that they perceived to be boring. Interestingly, these like-to-avoid selves often referred quickly back to a like-to-be possible self.

INT: Is there a type of future that you'd like to avoid?

RES: Probably something like my Dad, sitting in like a council, he does council stuff. I wouldn't really, not really interested in that.

RES: Office worker or something. I couldn't sit in an office or I'd like to be outdoors. Anything indoors I'd want to avoid.

RES: Type of future where I just can't be bothered for it, like where you can't be bothered to wake up and like go to work or can't think of anything exciting to do what I want to do.

RES: I want to move away from here...Because everybody kind of, I don't know it's just very small. I want to live somewhere that's a bit bigger but I really don't want to sit in an office every day. ... I want to be out and doing things and talking to people.

Influence of Inspiring Choices

As well as taking part in the Future Selves project, the young people had undergone employability focused provision from Inspiring Choices (including transferable skills, how to make a good impression, and CV and cover letter writing) and one of young people in the study also participated in a drama workshop. The workshops offered by Inspiring Choices aim to support young people to make informed choices about their future and reduce the gap between the most and least represented in higher education. The impact of Inspiring Choices can be seen in how young people responded to the workshops:

INT: So, I think since we met back in April, we've done two things. We did the drama workshop and then we've done some of the employability things, where we've come in, the CV, that sort of thing. How have you found those things?

RES: Yes, I really liked them. I thought the drama thing really helpful for our course work and getting the GCSE, because it was like valuable stuff. Especially for written, where you have to do. And I thought that the CV stuff, and all that was really important. It was good to bring it up because we hadn't really had anything on that before.

RES: I think, again, like the stuff with the CVs and learning all that, obviously I'd had an interview before, but doing all this stuff like work surrounding that end. Obviously, it's probably not benefitting me now, but I know it will. So, having that knowledge, especially like- Yes.

RES: Yes, I think so, like talking about everything I want to do and making me actually like, think about it. And then all the games we did, the first time, like thinking about where I want to be, like staying here or going somewhere and things. It's given me like a bit more confidence just knowing that if I have an interview in the future that I kind of know a bit more about what's going to happen.

The impact of Inspiring Choices was quite small but positive. The young people found the employability sessions useful but perhaps would not use the skills until later in their lives. The future selves project demonstrated that young people are already thinking about their futures but participation in an invention focusing on future selves could facilitate more active thinking on what young people want to do and what path they need to take to get there.

Importance of Community

The community setting and 'place' significantly shapes the pathways of learners (OfS, 2021), yet there are unique dynamics of inequality at play regarding coastal communities. Many of the choices made by young people occur amongst the backdrop of structural inequality - shaping the relationship the young people have with the possibility of going into higher education.

For those where HE was important in terms of future career, there seemed to be less barriers and more confidence when approaching it.

INT: Do you have any ideas of what your future might look like?

RES: Like, I mean, I hope that I'm in a city really because I don't, as much as Whitby is okay but it's not good for too many opportunities because it's quite a small place. So, I want to be in a city where I can do loads of things and I want to be like a therapist when I'm older so I'll probably want to continue with that and hopefully I'll have like a nice office and stuff.

The young people also recognised the importance of their community when reflecting on the future:

RES: I don't want to move too far away from home but quite like to live somewhere else like other than Whitby because that's what I've like, I've lived here my whole life, so I'd like a bit of a change but also I don't want to live too far because obviously my family and everyone else is living here so.

Mostly, where the young people indicated little interest and were less engaged with HE, it was an informed choice to pursue another future identity instead. This was often linked to community role models and alternative pathways. For much of this cohort, they were making decisions taking into account numerous influences they had built up over their life trajectory. The role of the community was extremely important for the young people here:

INT: Brilliant and just the last one, who is your biggest influencer?

RES: People around me like fishermen because that's what I'll be when I'm older so that's like my whole life. That's, like my Mum, Mum is an artist but I didn't take that on so I don't think that's influenced me as much as other people, I think. So, I'd say fishermen around me.

The combination of young people's different experiences, role models and communities shape how the young people imagine their future selves. Here the complexity of multiple influences is demonstrated in how important personal interests and role models are, when it comes understanding how they see their future:

INT: Are there any hobbies and activities that you do now that you'd like to continue doing?

RES: My cricket definitely

Int: Who is your biggest influencer?

RES: I'd say probably my cousin because he's like he's done everything that I want, like kind of want to do with cricket and stuff....So I kind of want to just like follow on from him.

Role models in the form of parental/carers and other family members were integral to making decisions about the future not just in terms of higher education, but also future career identity and self-concept.

INT: Is there someone that you talk to that's really good at helping you make decisions?

RES: Probably my Mum and my sister.

In particular, it was apparent how important such roles were in terms of normalising the idea of HE as an option - many in the sample noted the importance of seeing their siblings go to education pathways first:

“ RES: My Mum helped me with that and then one of, I call her my older sister....She's not my older sister, she's just really like absolutely close [...]. So I see her like she's my sister and she is currently in college, I think, so she helped me, like she like told me what some of the courses were like and that was one that like she'd help me through if it got difficult but yes my Mum and not my real sister but my sister.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates young people are continuously reflecting on multiple alternate selves and futures, particularly regarding higher education-based choices and work. Reflecting on life-course trajectories of young people raises questions of when support should be provided regarding facilitating informed decisions. Indeed, it is evident that young people are reflecting on their futures at early ages. Therefore, early intervention, perhaps before ages 14 or 15 (year 10), which considers community identities could significantly enhance provision for young people. However, the responsibility does not lie with individuals and further work should be done to address the structural inequalities and barriers to progression uniquely faced by those in more isolated communities (Bridge Group, 2019).

In answering the three research questions it was found that the young people in the study were fairly informed about higher education and other pathways. The young people were flexible in their approach to the future and were unravelling the complexities of multiple opportunities in their individual pools of future selves. Like the findings by the Bridge Group (2019), this study has demonstrated that many young people have well-formed, realistic aspirations for their future even when they are unsure about the exact pathway they need to take to become that version of their future self. The young people saw a benefit in taking part in the project and the Inspiring Choices workshops which assisted them in gaining knowledge and confidence. However, the biggest impacts and influences for these young people tended to be their parents and carers. Other family members and people throughout their local community (i.e., those that support with their personal interests) also play an important part in shaping the young people's future selves.

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Who are Inspiring Choices?

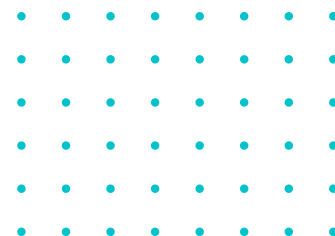
Inspiring Choices is part of the Office for Students Uni Connect Programme. Running since 2017, our aim is to support young people and adults who live in York and North Yorkshire to make well informed decisions about their future education. Our work is particularly focused on geographic areas in York and North Yorkshire where participation in higher education is low overall and lower than expected given local GCSE results. Our outreach activity is focused in 10 target wards: Selby North Selby South Westfield (York) Woodfield (Harrogate) Skipton South Woodlands (Scarborough) Scarborough Central Streonshalh (Whitby) Northallerton Central Colburn. In addition to working with target schools, we are also continuing to support discrete learners' groups such as Care Experienced young people, young people from the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community, military service children, and adult learners.



<https://www.inspiring-choices.co.uk/>



inspiringchoices@yorks.ac.uk



**inspiring
choices**

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