Title: Trinity Access 21: a large-scale longitudinal action research project aimed at widening participation in higher education

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1. Background

Although higher education participation rates have significantly expanded over the last few decades, there remains a persistent pattern of inequality of access by low socio-economic status (SES) students. High SES students[1] are three times more likely to enter a high-status university than low SES students in Australia, England and the US. Across selective institutions in the UK and the US, low SES students' account for just 1 in 20 enrolments (Jerrim, 2013). Even when low SES students succeed academically they are less likely to graduate than high SES students who do worse in school; and even if they do graduate, low SES students are worse-off in employment and in salary terms than low achieving high SES students (Jerrim, 2013).

The differences in the higher education experiences of low SES students compared to high SES students is of particular interest because education prepares people to engage more fully in society and economy. The historian David Labaree (1997) articulates three goals for education. The first is "democratic equality"–preparing an informed, engaged citizenry; the second is '"social efficiency"–the need to create a productive and innovative workforce; and the third is '"social mobility"'—education as a commodity which advances individual standing in social hierarchies. The first two goals advance the public interest while the third characterizes education as a private good. Labaree cautions against a system that inclines ever more towards this third goal, advocating instead for a balanced consideration of all three (Labaree, 1997). The

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[1] Low SES students are defined by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as those from non-manual, semi and unskilled socio-economic groups.

21st century global challenges to higher education, articulated above, demand a continual re-balancing of these three goals.

While many developing countries are still facing the challenge of "education for all" at the level of basic provision, developed economies are struggling to determine how best to fund a high-quality education system that provides access to all up to and through higher education. Yet a higher education qualification has never been more important. In the UK, for instance, 83% of all new employment in the next decade will be in professional areas (Milburn, 2012). The average earnings premium associated with an undergraduate degree for working-age adults is approximately 27% compared to possession of two or more GCE A-Levels (Million Plus, 2013). Similarly, in Ireland labour force participation rates increase as the level of education attained increases. In 2011, those with a third level qualification had an 87% likelihood of being in the labour force, while only 46% of those with primary level education were employed (Central Statistics Office, 2011). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evidence shows that, for young people, the higher their educational attainment at the start of the economic crisis, the more likely they were to be in employment throughout that period (OECD, 2013).

In Ireland, recent reports from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) identified the need for low SES second level students to receive more robust guidance, information and mentoring, so that they know where the jobs are today and where they will be a decade from now at an earlier stage in their educational cycle (ESRI, 2011; HEA, 2014). This research states that interventions aimed at closing this information gap will prevent students making subject choices early in second level that will limit their future opportunities.

In the early 1990s, Trinity College Dublin in Ireland and College for Every Student (CFES) in the US began to develop intervention programmes aimed at addressing these gaps for second level students in schools located in predominantly low SES communities. The CFES model does so through three

structured core practices: 'Leadership through Service', 'Mentoring' and 'Pathways to College', which are informed by the reformulated theory of Academic Capital Formation (St John & Fisher, 2006). The Trinity Access Programmes (TAP), Trinity College Dublin, has developed a range of developmental outreach activities, university 'foundation' courses and other alternative admissions routes, some of which now have a system-wide impact (TAP, 2010).

Evaluations of outreach and progression programmes highlight the importance of consistent and sustained interventions. The literature also stresses the key role of partnerships in ensuring that gaps are addressed and resources are maximised. Certain types of intensive interventions, such as summer programmes and mentoring, are particularly effective in supporting progression. However, several authors note a lack of rigor and consistency in evaluating progression and outreach activities (Keane, 2013). They also highlight some of the limitations in current evaluation models. In Ireland, for example, there is a dearth of qualitative, longitudinal studies examining the design and impact of educational outreach (Keane, 2013).

2. Theoretical Framework

National education policy often prioritises specific 'capital' domains that are relevant to the climate in which widening participation programmes are developed. For example, some programmes may be aimed at leading to productive engagement in areas of the economy currently showing skills deficits (Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007). In 2013, TAP adapted the CFES model to the Irish context in order to address Irish educational policy challenges in relation to educational attainment and post-secondary progression by low SES students. The 'Trinity Access 21 (TA21)-CFES' project aimed to build a school-university partnership which would scaffold the development of student educational capabilities and support them in Academic Capital Formation (2006), so that all students would be informed about and empowered to consider the full range of post-secondary options at an early stage in their second level education. The TA21-CFES model of widening participation aims to

support the development of specific forms of 'academic capital' underneath a canopy of the Capability Approach, drawn from theories of human development. The TA21-CFES research programme examines the relationship between the emergent theory of Academic Capital Formation proposed by St John (2013) and the Capability Approach of Sen (1999).

Academic Capital Formation combines propositions of social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) with human capital theory (Becker, 1962) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). It posits that the trusted networks within a student's community transmit information about college that can reinforce social stratification, such as "college is not for us" or "college is too expensive for us". It also states that cultural capital, that is accumulated knowledge of education in the cultural/family system of low SES students, can act as a barrier to educational progression. Academic Capital Formation proposed that school-university widening participation programmes would be more effective if targeted at developing specific forms of capital. It posits that low SES students have less likelihood of accessing higher education because there is limited explicit and implicit knowledge within their family of how to navigate the educational system. The reformulated model of Academic Capital Formation (Figure 1) highlights specific constructs from these larger theories of social, human and cultural capital, which influence college-going practices in low SES students.

The key idea of the Capability Approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities, which is the freedom to promote or achieve functioning's that are important to them[2].   In the context of widening participation, 'educational capabilities' refer to low SES students being empowered and informed to choose an educational path that they value. A Capability Approach to widening participation would therefore contend that it is more important to provide low SES students with the functioning's to choose a life of value – a 'good life' - rather than solely provide them with the means to pursue a life of economic productivity, notwithstanding the fact that economic security is a pressing concern for students in planning the future. The Capability

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[2] 'Functionings' are defined as the valuable activities and states that make up people's well-being.

Approach does not explain the causes of educational inequality but it provides a tool within which to conceptualise and evaluate them. Other approaches would note only the similar outcomes (human capital theory), the dissimilar structural settings of the schools (structuralist analysis) or the individual engagements with ideas of femininity and power (post-structuralist analysis). By contrast, the Capability Approach is concerned with exploring human diversity within unjust structures. The Capability Approach and its applicability to widening participation is an area of emerging interest for education researchers. The current study examines how capabilities develop as usable forms of capital through engagement in social, political and economic systems. Academic Capital Formation provides a lens for understanding the role of social processes in educational attainment but in the context of global challenges we also need integrated concepts of capital formation related to social justice and capability (St John, 2013).

This paper examines how the TA21-CFES project, which is a widening participation intervention, aims to build specific forms of academic capital, inform the college and career aspirations of low SES students, while considering issues related to social justice and human capability (St John, 2013; Sen, 1996).

3. Current Research

While there has been an increased focus since the 1990s on what targeted initiatives can most effectively widen access and participation of low SES groups in higher education, many of the existing school-university partnerships have focused on what higher education can do *to* the community through educational outreach, rather than *with* it through school 'in-reach' drawing on university resources and expertise. The TA21-CFES project is established as a school-university 'in-reach' model, leveraging university resources to build capacity within schools, so that all students are more informed and empowered regarding their post-secondary educational choices. The project involves a focused intervention of the TA21-CFES model in 11 Irish schools, with a longitudinal research project involving 1,100 second year students (age 14). This age group

is the inflection point at which most research identifies an educational disengagement, together with self-limiting subject choices. The paper presents findings from year one of a longitudinal research project that has examined the effectiveness of the TA21-CFES project in raising the college and career aspirations of students in schools located in predominantly low SES communities.

4. Method

Design

A cross-sectional, mixed method, repeated measures design was employed. Three student groups, (1) TA21-CFES group, (2) high control group (3) matched control group, completed surveys at the start (September) of their 2nd year in secondary school and at the end (May). Students from four TA21-CFES schools participated in additional focus groups and interviews at the end of the year (May).

TA21-CFES Programme

The TA21-CFES intervention was modelled on the CFES three core practices. These practices were introduced through a comprehensive framework of CFES support designed to help each participating school develop and strengthen partnerships with further and higher education and implement an annual plan of activities incorporating the core practices to create a strong college-going culture. The three core practices are:

Leadership through Service: this helps low SES students identify and express their leadership potential through activities that make their school and/or their communities a better place. In year one all students were required to participate in at least one leadership activity.

Mentoring: this fosters academic and personal growth by providing low SES students with a supportive relationship with an older, more experienced individual who can serve as a role model. In year one all students were required to have a minimum of six structured mentoring sessions with a college student or graduate from their school or local community. The mentoring content focused primarily on goal setting.

Pathways to College: this links schools with higher education institutions to provide opportunities for low SES students to visit higher education campuses, interact with students and the academic community, and develop knowledge of

the admissions processes. In year one, students were required to complete two college career investigations and to visit one college campus.

The TA21-CFES project therefore focuses on building the core practices which relate to the constructs identified in Academic Capital Formation with all second year students for an initial three year period of the project (i.e. age 14 through to age 16).

Participants

Eleven schools linked to the TAP by virtue of their lower than average progression rates to higher education were selected to participate in the three year longitudinal programme. In total, 1,005 2nd year students (14 years old) are the main focus of the TA21-CFES research programme. Following one year of TA21-CFES, 733 students had completed the pre and post survey (retention rate of 79% from pre survey). A matched control group was recruited from two schools linked to TAP who also had low higher education progression rates but were not participating in the TA21-CFES project. One hundred and forty seven students completed the pre and post survey (retention rate of 65% from pre survey). A further comparison group was recruited, classified herein as the high control group. These were two urban schools with high progression rates to higher education. One was a fee-paying school in South Dublin, another was a public school in an affluent region of North Dublin. One hundred and thirty one students completed the pre and post survey (retention rate of 69% from pre survey). For the qualitative analysis, four schools were randomly selected, two student interviews and one focus group involving five students was completed in each of the four schools.

Measures

Demographic information was collected, including gender, race, parents' qualification, and students' living circumstances. Information about students' participation in mentoring, leadership through service and pathways activities were also included in the demographic information.

Five items from the MetLife (2011) survey on preparing students for college and careers were adapted and used to establish how students rated their school in providing college going information. This was used as an indicator of college knowledge. Responses were on a 5 point Likert-type scale that ranged from "very poor" to "excellent".

A scale adapted from Wohn and colleagues (2013) was employed to measure expectations of college success. Responses were measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale that ranged from "not at all confident" to "very confident". Items were summed to calculate an overall score. Four items were adapted from Wohn et al.'s scale (2013) scale to measure students' confidence in applying to college. Responses were measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Items were summed to calculate an overall score. Two items (adapted from Metlife, 2011) were used to measure likelihood of going to college and confidence to achieve goals. Responses were measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely" and "not at all confident" to "very confident. Students were asked to select a maximum of three jobs that they would imagine for themselves. Jobs were categorized by SES groupings with four example jobs given for each – unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled, professional, higher professional, sports, arts, own business. An option of "other' was included and students could write in the job that interested them if it was not listed. Students were asked to state what their plans are in terms of education.

<u>Procedure</u>

The structured TA21-CFES programme described earlier was implemented in eleven schools across the greater Dublin region. Each school completed a planning document at the start of the year to specify when they would complete each activity under the core practices, and the schools then had follow up monthly visits by the TA21-CFEs project team to offer support and guidance in this process. In September of year one, all students completed the pre survey on Survey Monkey or by hand depending on the availability of computers in the

schools. The TA21 research coordinator supervised all data collection. In May of year one the post survey was complete.

5. Results

<u>Quantitative findings</u>

A three group (High, TA21, Matched) x 2 time (pre and post) mixed factoral ANOVA was performed on students' ratings of their teachers in preparing them for higher education, a significant group X time interaction was observed; F (1008) = 24.05, p = <.000. Post hoc analysis revealed that there was a significant increase in the High control group's ($p = .001)$ and the TA21-CFES group's ($p = .001$) rating of their teachers in preparing them for higher education between September and May of project year one, whereas there was a decrease in the Matched control group's ($p =.025$) rating of their teachers on the same scale (Figure 1).
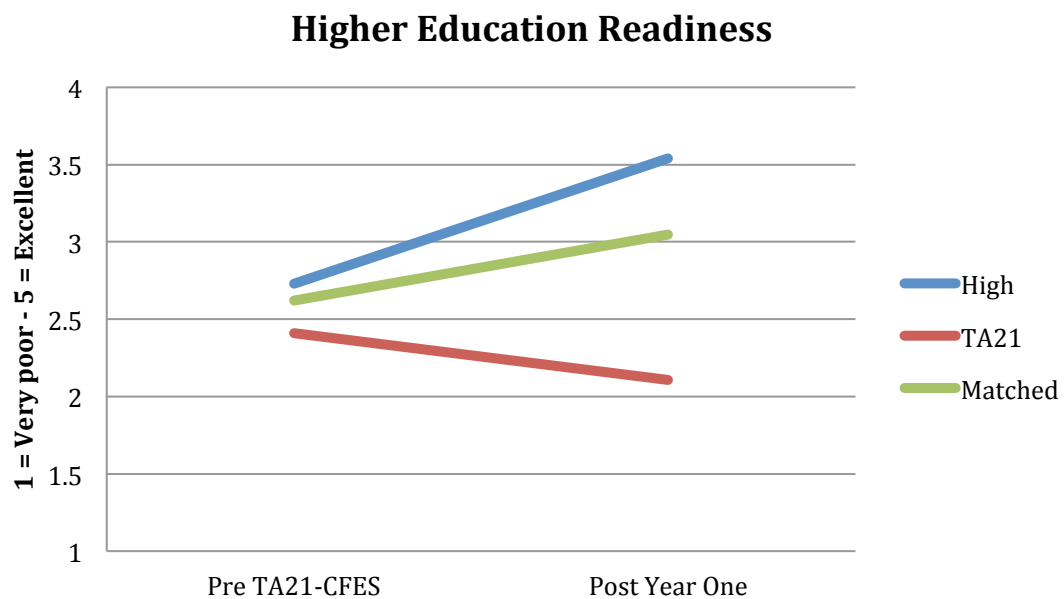
Higher Education Readiness

Figure 1: How the TA21-CFES, the Matched and the High control groups evaluated their teachers in preparing them for higher education in September and May of project year one.

A three group (High, TA21-CFES, Matched) x 2 time (pre and post) mixed factoral ANOVA was performed on students' ratings of their school in providing information on how to succeed in college; a significant group X time interaction was observed; F (1008) = 29.05, p = <.001. Post hoc analysis revealed that there was a significant increase in how the TA21-CFES group (p = .001) rated their teachers between September and May of project year one, whereas there was a decrease in the High control group's (p =.001) rating of their school on the same scale (Figure 2). There was no significant change in the Matched control group's rating.

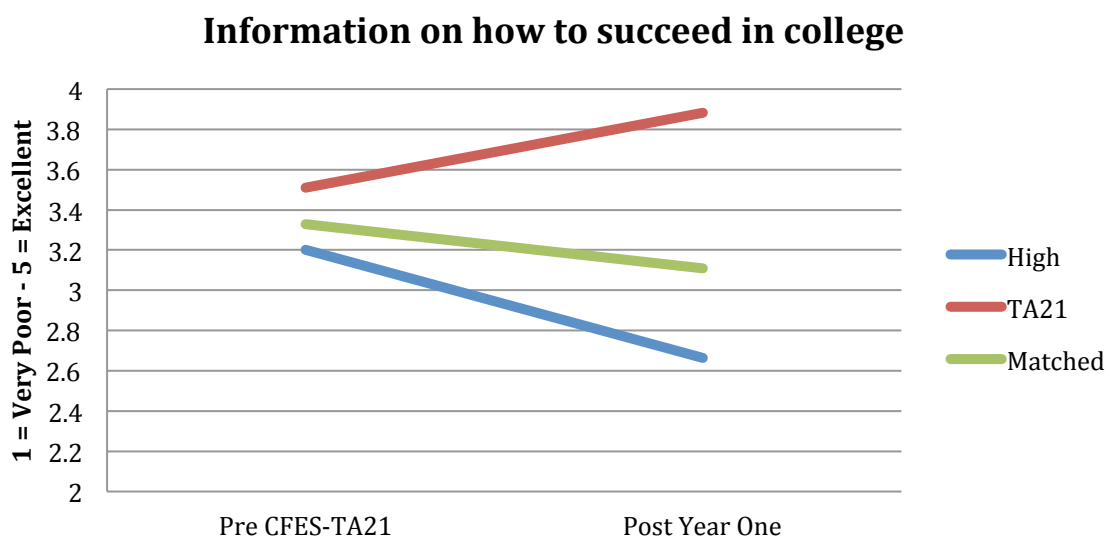**Information on how to succeed in college**

Figure 2: How the TA21-CFES, the Matched and the High control groups evaluate their schools in providing information on how to succeed in college, between September and May of project year one.

A three group (High, TA21-CFES, Matched) x 2 time (pre and post) mixed factoral ANOVA was performed on students' ratings of their school in providing information on financial supports for college; a significant group X time interaction was observed; $F_{(1008)} = 17.5$, $p = <.001$. Post hoc analysis revealed that there was a significant increase in how the TA21-CFES group ($p = .001$) rated their teachers between September and May of project year one, whereas there was a decrease in the High control group's ($p = .001$) ratings of their school on the same scale (Figure 3). There was no significant change in the Matched control group's rating.
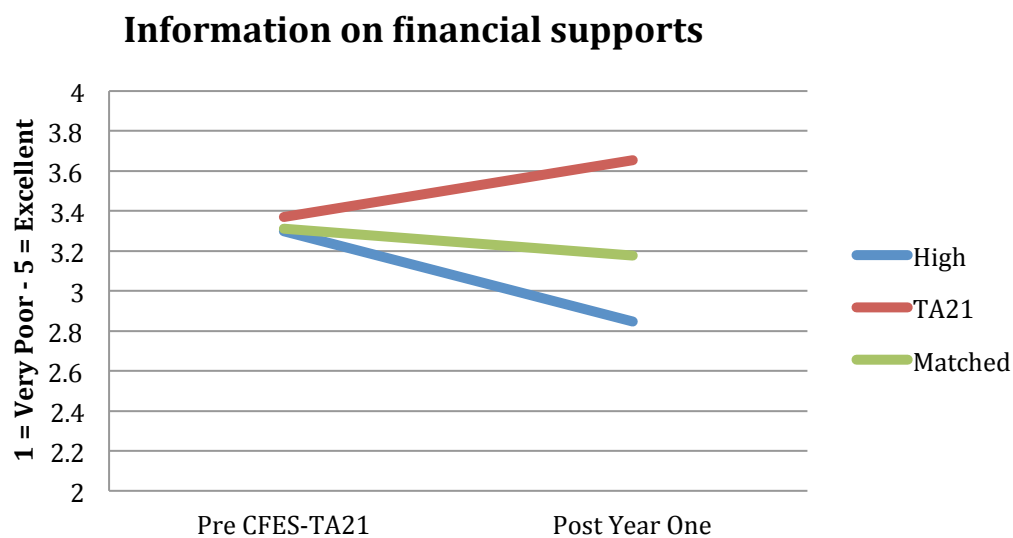
Information on financial supports

Figure 3: How the TA21-CFES, the Matched and the High control groups evaluate their schools in providing information on the financial supports for college in September and May of project year one.

A three group (High, TA21-CFES, Matched) x 2 time (pre and post) mixed factoral ANOVA was performed on students' ratings of their school in providing information on college entry requirements; a significant group X time interaction was observed; $F_{(1008)} = 18.5$, $p = <.001$. Post hoc analysis revealed that there was a significant increase in how the TA21-CFES group's ($p = .001$) rated their teachers between September and May of project year one, whereas there was a decrease in the High control group's ($p = .001$) rating of their school on the same scale (Figure 4). There was no significant change in the Matched control group's rating.

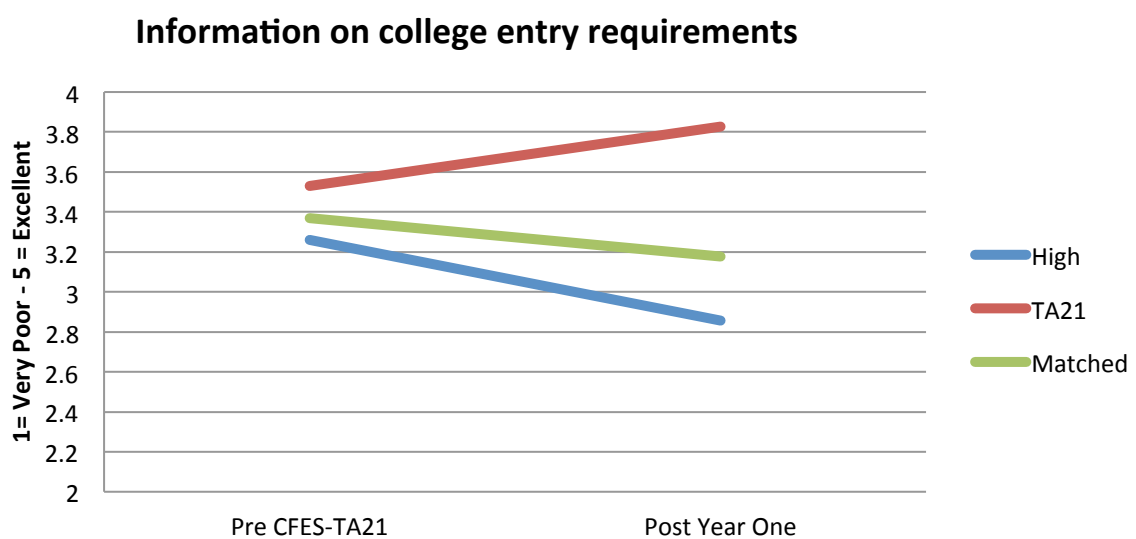## Information on college entry requirements

Figure 4: How the TA21-CFES, the Matched and the High control groups evaluate their schools in providing information on college entry requirements in September and May of project year one.

A three group (High, TA21-CFES, Matched) x 2 time (pre and post) mixed factoral ANOVA was performed on students' ratings of their schools in creating a 'college going culture'; a significant group X time interaction was observed; $F_{(1008)} = 17.16$, $p = <.001$. Post hoc analysis revealed that there was a significant increase in how the TA21-CFES group ($p = .001$) rated their teachers between September and May of project year one, whereas there was a decrease in the High control group's ($p = .001$) ratings of their school on the same scale (Figure 5). There was no significant change in the Matched control group's rating.
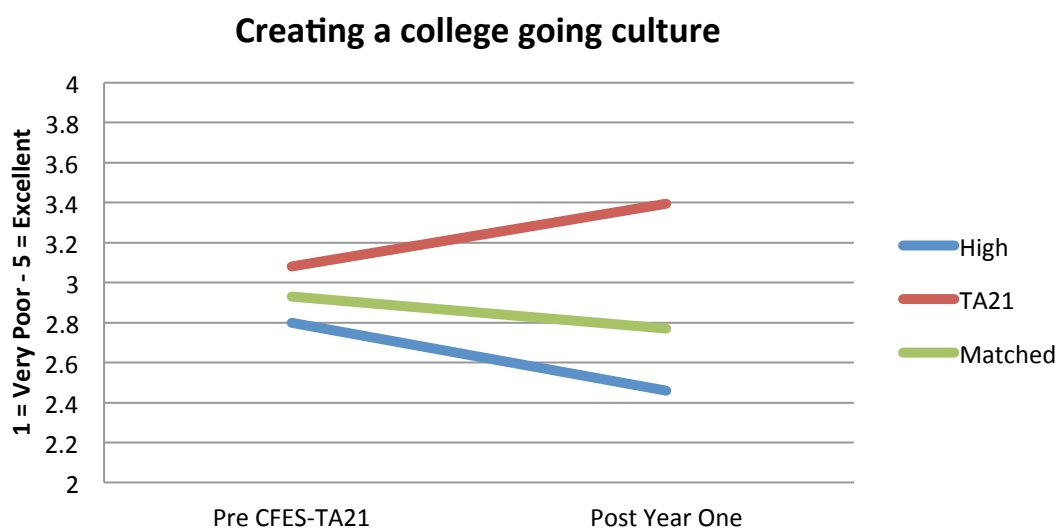
Creating a college going culture

Figure 5: How the TA21-CFES, the Matched and the High control groups evaluate their schools in creating a college going culture in September and May of project year one.

<u>Qualitative Findings</u>

Two student interviews and one focus group involving five students were completed in each of the four schools selected for qualitative data collection and analysis. Participants were randomly selected. The interviews and focus groups explored the connections between the ACF constructs that this project aims to develop and educational capabilities identified as important to developing a sense that post-secondary progression is a viable, personal choice. Preliminary findings are described below:

Autonomy & Cultural Capital, Information, Networks and Trust

> *'We believed in it, and we believed "right, we can do this and we're going to get it done".'*

There is evidence that participation in TA21 is influencing the development of autonomy. This is happening through improved experiences in the classroom and the development of skills that support the resilience of the students. For example, students note they have improved relationships with teachers as a result of TA21, which results in less conflict and higher trust. This higher trust with teachers and lower conflict supports enhanced self-belief and confidence. Improved relationships and the TA21 project has also influenced students' application to school work; they have made a connection through the *information* they have been exposed to between their efforts and their future, and they are talking about being responsible for their own futures. Alongside the improved application is the perception that they have an improved ability to work in teams and an understanding of the benefits of shared responsibility to complete a task, whereas they would have previously been sceptical about their confidence to complete tasks.

Overall there was a sense that being part of TA21 has helped students feel they have more control over their lives. Through participating in a project that involved group work, they have developed a sense of persistence and are demonstrating an awareness of their individual abilities.

Hope & Information and Networks

> *'It's not just because of who you are that you can't get into it. Like if you work hard, you will get somewhere'.*

The information students have acquired through the project has made them more hopeful about their prospects of going to college. This hope is particularly linked to the idea that if they 'work hard' they can achieve their goals. They are clearer on their role in achieving these goals and demonstrate an understanding of adversity; they also have plans regarding how to overcome obstacles that may get in the way of their plans.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups students talk about being more aware of what they want to do because of TA21, and in some cases they discuss how this has put them 'ahead of the older students in their schools', this would suggest that early planning and guidance has an impact on students application to work and on their future hopes.

There is some evidence that through participating in the TA21 project students are developing an understanding of the connection between college and a 'good job'. This knowledge is then contributing to hope, as it is giving them a vision of where they can go in the future, a vision that may not have been as obvious before the project. They also remark on family members who appear unhappy or unfulfilled in their jobs and how this makes them more determined to find something they enjoy doing:

> *Scholar 1:   You know you're happy doing it. You're not just doing it so you can have like a job.*

> *Scholar 2:   Emm I dunno it's just like me da does buildings. I don't think he actually likes it cause he always like- he comes home tired but ye you'd be tired after workin, but I think he just does it so he can like, help us with the money in the house and like, like with the food and all.*

There are, however, cases where students are still uncertain about the future and there may be times when informing students of the pathways to college and careers can act as a barrier to the development of hope; one scholar expresses this fear here,

>Scholar 3:   *I don't know if like in the future I'm going to be able to do what I want to do... like the job and everything and all this...*

Identity & Cultural capital, Networks, Habitual patterns

>*'But the teachers taught us like that we're no different to other people.'*

The students are conflicted about whether they would 'fit in' in college. But they are clear that going to college involves a more independent, self-directed life. While there is evidence that they are proud to be students there is also some ambivalence about whether they will 'fit in' in college, they do not fully see the college system matching their own identity, and they also query whether they will belong in certain professions. Some students think that college is usually for 'people with money' and 'smart people'. They show an awareness that it may be easier to 'fit in' in some colleges than in others and it is clear they have discussed this perception with their teachers.

The students note that involvement in the TA21 project has changed their behaviour. They are now more likely to complete homework as they see it as effort to achieve their future goals; this is more evidence of the development of an identity as future college students.

Knowledge & Habitual Patterns, Cultural Capital, Voice, College costs, Networks and Trust

>*'It shows you what you have to do to make a life, basically'.*

The knowledge students acquired through the project have pushed them to work harder. Early knowledge helps with harder work, as they remark that otherwise they would not have had college knowledge until 5th year (age 17). This knowledge has had a behavioural impact: *'I think we're a lot calmer in school now, we're not as like 'Ugh, I hate school' anymore'*. The students are changing *habitual*

patterns because of this knowledge. They are more aware of what is required, and show evidence of persistence provoked by the new knowledge. The project has helped them to build cultural capital, through discussing college with their parents and hearing their views on it. This has encouraged some of the students, as they now have higher trust that their parents are behind them in this ambition.

The knowledge is also strengthening the students' voice. They are more confident, curious and less fearful of asking questions: *'you learn how to ask the right questions'*. Knowledge around the cost of college has created more fear for some. There is concern about how they will manage those costs and also confusion about the scale of costs. They do, however, have a positive view of the college going networks they have developed, considering them as largely happy people, living a good life. There is a sense that '*if they can do it then so can I*';

Mentors have built their knowledge base about how to navigate difficulties in college and the alternative entry routes available. Mentors are considered more trustworthy and relatable when they are closer to their age and from their locality.

Students also noted the impact that college knowledge had on trust and cultural capital building with parents; giving them confidence that parents wanted the same future for them:

> Scholar 1:   *My ma and da were always kinda like backing me up on anything I'd ever dis- I'd done. But like when I brought up the college their faces lit up and like "Yes, you're going to college! If you want to go to college, you can go"*

Overall TA21 is providing students with new cultural capital, in some ways it is breaking the view within their own families that college is not important or possible. The students also talk about the pride it is bringing to their families that their children are planning to go to college now. In terms of habitual practices there is some evidence that students are adapting and changing their habits based on the information provided by TA21, they are more focused on work and studying.

Social relations, Cultural Capital and Habitual Patterns

> *'I think our year got mature, more mature than what we were last year and they taught us how to work in groups and all. It's like, all our skills, it just honed them.'*

The Leadership through Service project improved the students' ability to work in teams and they now see this teamwork as having enhanced their capacity to complete a project. They also note the value of shared responsibility. The students note the impact of the project on trusted relationships with their teachers. They talk about the importance of getting along with teachers and how this affects their grades:

> *Scholar 1: That you get along with some teachers so that they can actually like teach, like, know how to teach you and what's- which way you study more and get good grades in the best ways for you.*

6. Conclusion

Key findings after Year 1 show an increased intention to pursue higher education and to enter professional areas of work on graduation. Importantly, students reported they are more positive about their school experience and their relationships with their teachers, while teachers report that behavioural issues have reduced. Students have a stronger sense of autonomy and feel more confident to work in teams. Greater knowledge about post-secondary options has motivated many of them to work harder, as they now appreciate the benefits to their longer term goals. For some, the increased knowledge has raised issues about whether they will attain what is required academically as well as reservations about the cost of college and whether or not they will 'fit in'. Overall, however, students were hopeful about their future and demonstrated increased confidence in their ability to achieve their post-secondary education goals.

In year 2 of TA21, the team and its partners have developed an open source, digital tool-kit to scale use of its resources. A range of new schools has already

used these. Over the coming years, TA21 aims to continue to expand, in partnership with more schools and post-secondary institutions nationwide. It will also focus on building an evidence base for the project, to inform policy and practice nationally and internationally.

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