UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Faculty of Education

Creative Subject Choices: Student Pathways through Education and into Employment

Final Report

March 2026

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Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the individual participants in further and higher education institutions, as well as those working in the creative sector, who have engaged with the project and contributed their time, experiences, and insights.

Support with qualitative data collection was provided by Linjun (Estelle) Wu.

The research team would like to thank all members of the advisory group for their meaningful insights and for their engagement with the project:
Dr Scott Caizley, Prof Cristina Iannelli, Dr Josh Patel, and Dr Emily Tanner.

Disclaimers

Any opinions expressed here are those of the author(s) and not those of the University of Cambridge.

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Part of this work was undertaken in the Secure Lab facility of the UK Data Service, using data supplied by the UK Data Service and other owners. This does not imply the endorsement of the UK Data Service or other data owners.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examined how students made creative subject choices across critical educational transitions; how individual, local, and institutional factors shaped these; and whether these creative subject choices translated into later creative employment.

Understanding these pathways is essential because of persistent concerns about inequitable access to creative education and creative employment in the UK. This is despite personal benefits to individuals that go beyond the intrinsic value of creative education, and the economic benefits to the UK economy from the creative sector.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative analysis of large-scale administrative and cohort data with qualitative and arts-based participatory approaches. The quantitative component analysed administrative education records for three cohorts of English students, following them from age 16 onwards into post-16 options and, if relevant, into higher education. This component also included data from the Next Steps longitudinal cohort study, also linked to administrative education records. The qualitative component included participatory arts-based workshops and a qualitative open-ended-questions survey.

Creative subjects were defined consistently across educational stages, from age 16 qualifications to higher education, to include art and design, dance, drama and theatre studies, film and TV studies, media studies, music, and photography, amongst others. This definition offers comparability with previous studies on creative subjects and ensures consistency within the analysis reported here.

CREATIVE SUBJECT PREFERENCES

The research revealed substantial early interest in creative subjects among young people. These creative preferences showed a U-shape pattern, whereby high and relatively uniform creative subject preferences decreased from age 14 onwards and then increased again around key educational transition points, especially for those who intended to pursue higher education. The results also showed modest gender and socio-economic differences in these preferences.

CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICES

Importantly, early creative preferences did not translate into students making a creative subject choice later on. Students' chances to make a creative subject choice across their educational pathways were shaped by gender, personal economic circumstances, as well as prior educational choices and attainment, and the deprivation level of the areas where they lived. These factors were reflected in the stage-specific probability of students making a creative subject choice: at age 16, in post-16 education, specifically in post-16 further education, and in higher education for those who accessed it.

At age 16, students facing economic disadvantage (eligible for free school meals, FSM) were slightly more likely than their non-eligible peers to make a creative subject choice. However, post-16, this pattern reversed and widened: FSM-eligible students became less likely to have made a creative subject choice, even after accounting for other personal characteristics and their educational trajectory, including prior outcomes. The economic gap narrowed again in higher education, though FSM-eligible students remained less likely to have made creative subject choices, even after accounting for the HE institutions they attended, as well as their prior attainment and earlier subject choices.

This socio-economic flip suggests that while initial interest in creative subjects may be relatively evenly distributed or even higher among students facing economic disadvantage, the resources, cultural capital, and institutional support required to continue in creative pathways post-16 may be unequally available.

These complex socio-economic disparities were experienced by students and staff responding in the qualitative component of this study. Insights from both groups highlighted how economic disadvantage operated through accumulated barriers to cultural capital and early creative experiences. Multiple participants described lacking the foundational skills, portfolio materials, or perceived required resources in younger years that would make creative subject into viable options. Financial considerations also fundamentally influenced educational and career choices beyond initial subject selection, with several respondents describing how perceived economic stability drove choices away from creative subjects, even when these choices went against personal interests.

On the one hand, this evidence emphasises the complexity of how economic deprivation shapes creative choices. On the other, it highlights the post-16 transition as a key juncture where economic barriers become more visible.

Gender also emerged as an interesting factor in shaping creative subject choices, operating differently at different educational stages. Girls consistently reported higher creative subject preferences than boys early on. This pattern largely translated into actual choices at age 16. Statistical modelling corroborated this and suggested that, when controlling for prior attainment and school characteristics, girls were more likely than boys to make creative subject choices at age 16, and in post-16 education, including in further education. However, this gender gap reversed in higher education, where boys became slightly more likely to have made a creative subject choice, all other factors considered.

INTERSECTING GENDER AND ECONOMIC INFLUENCES

The interaction between gender and economic disadvantage revealed particularly distinct constraints on creative pathways for women facing economic disadvantage (FSM-eligible girls). At age 16, girls and FSM-eligible students were, separately, more likely to have made a creative subject choice, other socio-demographic and educational factors considered. When considered together, FSM-eligible girls were, however, less likely than their otherwise similar counterparts to have made a creative subject choice. This pattern was present at age 16 and intensified post-16, with the largest interaction effect observed in post-16 further education, suggesting heightened drop-off from the creative subject pathway among disadvantaged female students during this transition. In higher education, the interaction between gender and economic disadvantage remained negative, suggesting

that women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were still less likely to have made a creative subject choice.

These findings point to a differential functioning of economic deprivation by gender, placing women facing economic deprivation at additional disadvantage in terms of their opportunities to make creative subject choices. They also suggest that socio-economic differences post-16 and in higher education reflect differential continuation rather than differences in initial choices alone.

FURTHER EDUCATION

Further education emerged as an important and distinct pathway into creative subject study. In the administrative data, students studying age 16 qualifications in FE or other colleges were substantially more likely to make a creative subject choice compared to their peers in other school types. Even more strikingly, attending FE post-16 was associated with some of the largest positive effects on the probability of making a creative subject choice observed across the analysis.

However, students who attended FE were less likely to be observed making a later creative subject choice in higher education. Given evidence, outlined below, that creative degrees were important for creative employment, this suggests clear barriers to progression. Workshop participants highlighted the value of FE for practical and vocational skills development, and for the intrinsic value of creative subjects. Some FE students had chosen this route specifically to develop creative and technical skills but still appreciated the academic nature of some of their qualifications.

Qualitative evidence from FE students and staff revealed significant challenges, including limited resources, precarious funding, and inadequate career guidance. Students in FE creative programmes often reported a lack of clarity about progression routes and struggled to access professional networks in creative industries. They appreciated the freedom to make their own choices within the many options that the FE route offered them; but also identified the risks and uncertainties involved in navigating alone what they perceived as complex combinations of qualifications, subjects, opportunities, and risks.

FE staff emphasised the importance of supporting students, who often had to contend with insufficient resources and constraints. Staff described working in resource-constrained environments where they could not provide the level of support and equipment that might be available in HE or private creative education settings.

EMPLOYMENT IN CREATIVE OCCUPATIONS

The analysis then explored the last key transition point in the realisation of making a creative subject choice: employment. This was possible because the Next Steps longitudinal study traced people into their young adulthood and employment. Having a creative higher education degree (conditional on engaging with higher education in the first place), emerged as strongly associated with being in a creative occupation at two points in early adulthood (ages 25 and 32), over and above all other economic and socio-demographic factors. The analysis also explored how creative occupations were sustained, finding that having a creative occupation at age 25 was the strongest explanatory factor for having a creative occupation at age 32, all economic, socio-demographic and educational

factors considered. This is consistent with evidence of high graduate representation in the creative sector.

The qualitative evidence suggested that the relationship between a prior creative subject choice and creative employment was however not straightforward. Some graduates responding in workshops, as well as some survey respondents (all of whom were working in the creative sector), outlined that even when they did secure employment in the creative sector, this was not necessarily in artistically fulfilling roles. Survey respondents further described the precarious nature of their creative careers, involving multiple income streams and the need to balance creative work with non-creative income generation.

INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCE AND INFLUENCE

The analysis further revealed how institutional structures and cultures fundamentally shaped creative subject choices at all stages. Students in workshops and survey respondents reported sometimes having faced limited availability of creative options in school, as well as guidance away from creative subjects, and restrictive timetabling that forced their choices. For them, the framing of creative subjects as risky or illegitimate choices appeared embedded in some institutional cultures. These students saw careers and subject guidance focused primarily on achieving good grades rather than exploring genuine interests.

Further from an institutional perspective, FE and HE staff in the qualitative component of this study observed differences between these sectors and acknowledged the different positionings of FE and HE institutions in relation to the education sector and to the creative sector. They also discussed how students could acquire, via family, schools and others, a useful grasp of the structure of each of the relevant institutional fields (FE and/or HE); but that this grasp differed by the background resources of each individual, and therefore the support required from FE and HE institutions needed to be different and to reflect students' needs, so as to enable the realisation of individuals' creative intentions and preferences.

Workshop participants' insights also revealed that institutional positionings varied significantly, especially around further and higher. These shaped both the reasons students chose these institutions, often for their perceived strong connections to the creative sector, and what institutions emphasised in their creative curricula. Skills and employability were important in both FE and HE, but FE respondents' experiences suggested a less instrumentalised role (that is, exclusively aimed at raising employability) of skills in FE.

Both FE and HE staff recognised degrees, not just in creative subjects, as important for progression into creative employment. Staff also acknowledged the importance of non-academic or non-traditional routes and expressed concerns about non-HE routes into creative employment not being available. FE staff were particularly explicit that their students' varied sets of qualifications, subject choices, experiences, resources, and outcomes should be seen as assets when moving into employment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides comprehensive evidence of a progressively narrowing pathway from early creative preferences, into creative subject choices, and to creative employment. The

narrowing operates through multiple mechanisms at different educational stages, with cumulative effects that create substantial inequalities in who ultimately accesses creative careers.

Socioeconomic disadvantage increasingly constrains creative participation as students progress through education. While early creative interests show only modest socioeconomic gradients, the influence of economic disadvantage intensify post-16 and through higher education. Interactions with gender point to women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds facing greater challenges to accessing creative subjects than their peers, which might explain some of the later gender imbalances in creative employment.

The strong association between creative higher education and subsequent creative employment, combined with the barriers faced by economically disadvantaged students in sustaining creative pathways, suggests that current patterns are more likely to perpetuate, rather than disrupt, existing inequalities in the creative sector. The role of place and geography adds further complexity, with local deprivation and regional creative sector strength shaping both opportunities and constraints in ways that interact with individual and institutional factors.

Policy recommendations therefore focus on actively promoting the value of creative subjects for all while recognizing the complexities of progression into, and experience of, creative employment. Emerging from the evidence is a strong push to challenge existing hierarchies: between further and higher education institutions; between creative and non-creative subjects; between different types of routes into later creative study or into creative employment. One way this could be achieved is by building on existing best practice around cross-sector collaboration, expanding links between further and higher education and the creative sectors in ways that some institutions already do. Another way is by supporting the post-16 transitions which the evidence points to as being particularly important for sustaining creative subject choices: a simpler qualification framework, clearer communication to students about their options, and support to address any prior disadvantages emerging from available resources, personal or otherwise could address this and highlight further education as a key route into creative study and creative employment.

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the interplay of socio-economic background, gender, type of educational provision, and geography (location) in shaping students' creative subject choices in compulsory, further, and higher education.

The study uses a mixed-methods approach that combines administrative data about individuals in the English educational system, longitudinal survey data and data emerging from qualitative arts-based approaches.

The study aims to offer multiple perspectives into trajectories around creative subject choice and the personal and institutional contexts which may shape them. Specifically, the study looks to understand how individuals' creative subject choices evolve over time in education and also into employment. This focus emerges in response to enduring concerns that barriers to creative subject choices may result in inequitable access to cultural capital (Dilnot, 2016; Thomson & Hall, 2022). Such inequities have consequences for gender and class representation in the arts and other parts of the creative sector (O'Brien, Brook, & Taylor, 2018).

The study includes a focus on place and regional differences. This perspective builds on evidence that shows that areas with strong creative industries offer a wide array of arts and cultural activities, but also that neighbourhood deprivation shapes engagement with such opportunities, in and through education (Mak, Coulter & Fancourt, 2021). This potentially limits people's chances around creative study and creative employment.

BRIEF EVIDENCE BACKGROUND

Engagement with arts and creative subjects supports children's and young people's cognitive, social and emotional development (Baker, 2013; Bowen & Kisida, 2023; Hetland & Winner, 2004). Studying subjects whose curriculum is creative fosters imagination and creativity (Donnelly, 2004); engagement with culture and education (Thomson & Hall, 2022; Garrett, 2013); and personal expression (Lassig, 2020).

Creative education also offers individuals benefits in terms of enabling them to access creative employment (Bakhshi et al., 2013; Holt-White et al., 2024; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2019). The skills considered essential for employment in a future economy (Bocock, Scott & Hillary, 2025) include those around creative thinking, normally generated by a creative education. Creative education further makes an economic contribution, nationally (Bilan et al., 2019; Klein, 2022), regionally, and locally (Comunian, Gilmore & Jacobi, 2015). Beyond their economic benefits, creative education and creative subjects are important for the intrinsic value their hold for individuals (Arens et al., 2025).

The evidence base around such benefits is growing (Martin et al., 2013; Thomson & Hall, 2023). Yet, creative subjects remain undervalued in the English state education system. Curriculum design, accountability measures, and funding structures prioritise subjects

perceived as economically instrumental; this arguably contributes to the marginalisation of creative subjects in education (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2023).

At the same time, substantial evidence (Holochwost, Wolf & Brown, 2025; Holt-White et al. 2025; RISE, 2026) points to unequal access to creative education and unequal employment in the creative sector. Within this, the mechanisms of educational stratification and individual subject choice, including their relationship to later outcomes, are unevenly understood across different stages of education.

A substantial interdisciplinary literature shows that creative subject choices are socially patterned (Elpus, 2022; Etherington, 2013). Persistent inequalities are structured by socio-economic background, gender, and ethnicity (O'Brien et al., 2016). These disparities emerge early in schooling and persist through secondary education (Francis, 2000; Francis, 2002, Henderson et al., 2018; Van der Vleuten et al, 2016; Van de Werfhorst et al., 2003).

In England, policy changes have further narrowed the curriculum, which has limited sustained access to creative education (Neumann et al., 2020). Research on music education shows that, despite its statutory status, opportunities to engage meaningfully are uneven, particularly in disadvantaged contexts, due to funding cuts, accountability pressures and reduced specialist teaching (Bath et al., 2000). As a result, pupils' opportunities to engage meaningfully with music and to develop the skills, confidence, and creative understanding vary substantially by school and socio-economic context.

Inequalities continue into higher education. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented in creative degrees, and particularly at elite institutions (Holt-White et al., 2024). At the same time, students from more affluent backgrounds are disproportionately represented in prestigious courses such as Music and Art (Holt-White et al., 2024). Financial considerations shape subject choice (Callender & Jackson, 2008), but earlier differences in access and encouragement also influence who perceives creative pathways as viable. Unequal school provision therefore shapes progression into creative higher education and access to advanced forms of creative study.

The creative sector also exhibits persistent employment imbalances by socio-economic background, gender and geography (Been, Wijngaarden & Loots, 2024; Pinnock, 2019). Estimates of economic returns are often used to evaluate the value of creative degrees (Britton et al., 2016). However, such measures capture only part of what creative education offers; they also do not reflect its broader cultural and societal contributions (Comunian, Faggian & Sewell, 2011). Moreover, inequalities established in education are compounded in the labour market. O'Brien et al. (2016) show that women and individuals from working-class backgrounds earn significantly less than men and middle-class entrants within creative occupations.

Place-based inequalities further shape patterns of engagement. Living in more deprived neighbourhoods is associated with lower participation in arts, cultural, and heritage activities, independent of individual characteristics (Mak, Coulter & Fancourt, 2021). This suggests that access to creative experience is structured not only by individual resources, but also by local cultural infrastructure.

Taken together, the evidence indicates socially stratified creative pathways that begin early in schooling and extend into higher education and employment. Such pathways are associated with unequal opportunities for individuals to benefit from the expressive, cultural and developmental dimensions of creative education.

This study seeks to study the mechanisms through which these unequal opportunities emerge and develop across educational stages and beyond. In doing so, it uses a predominantly sociological lens guided by Bourdieu (1989, 1996). The full conceptual background is provided in Appendix 1.

STUDY AIMS AND REPORT STRUCTURE

This study maps the trajectories from compulsory education into creative subjects in further and higher education, and into creative sector employment. The study pays specific attention to the role of socio-demographic characteristics, educational pathways and outcomes, as well as institutions and place, in shaping opportunities to engage with creative subjects at each respective stage. The research questions are outlined in Box 1.

The report first outlines the research design and the approach to using a variety of data sources, including longitudinal data and arts-based qualitative approaches

The Results then first trace preferences and intentions around creative subjects, including by educational background and socio-demographic characteristics.

Creative subject choices are then explored, specifically at each respective stage in education, at age 16, post-16 and in further education and higher education; and the overall to provide a comprehensive exploration of educational pathways. These pathways are also explored by gender, economic background, and by place and deprivation of areas of origin.

The report then addresses the transitions into creative occupations. Following, the focus turns to further education, a sector which emerges from the evidence in this study as critical for creative study and creative employment.

Box 1 Research Questions

1. What are the educational pathways into creative subject study in school, further and higher education?

2. How do socio-demographic and educational characteristics shape young people's creative subject choices over time, in school, further and higher education, and into employment?

3. What are the current experiences of students, and the prior experiences of people working in the creative sector, around their choices and chances in relation to creative subjects, qualifications, and employment?

4. How do institutional cultures and approaches shape individuals' experiences and choices around creative subjects?

Finally, the study highlights institutional perspectives which the arts-based qualitative data sources illuminate as shaping people's choices and experiences around creative subjects.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study deploys a mixed-methods design, combining two sources of secondary longitudinal data with two sources of qualitative data. The quantitative data emerges from linked administrative records for individuals in education in England; and one cohort study also linked to administrative records. The qualitative data emerges from arts-based participatory workshops with students and staff at creative educational institutions and creative workers; and a qualitative survey with open-ended questions for individuals working in the creative sector.

The quantitative component of the study provides national coverage, within the parameters of the available data as explained below. The qualitative component emphasises the place element of the study's aim and focuses on three key cities (and surrounding relevant areas): Manchester, Norwich, and London; and an in-depth set of experiences and perspectives by people with direct experience of either creative subjects or employment in these places.

Insights from both qualitative and quantitative components of the project are integrated to address each relevant research question. The administrative data relates to the full population of English students for which data exists (excluding special schools), and the cohort study allows for careful generalisation via its nationally representative sampling approach. The qualitative data adds depth and context and offers potential explanations from the research participants for the wider national trends identified in the quantitative component.

The study received ethical endorsement via the Faculty of Education University of Cambridge Research Ethics process, reference 002_2324.

DEFINING CREATIVE SUBJECTS, CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICE, AND CREATIVE OCCUPATIONS

Across all educational stages, this report adopts **the definition of creative subjects employed by the Sutton Trust 'A Class Act' report** (2024), which itself draws on definitions of creative degrees by Comunian et al. (2023) in an influential report for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Creative Diversity. In that report, a higher education subject was considered creative if it provided "specialised knowledge [...] that can be considered a pipeline for the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) and training grounds for the future creative and cultural workforce" (Comunian at al. 2023, p. 8).

The present report adopts the above definition. Importantly, it extends it into school and further education subjects too. This makes use of established subject mappings across different levels of education and relates to both academic and vocational qualifications at KS4, and in post-16 education, including further education.

Broad categories of creative subjects include Architecture, Art, Creative Writing, Dance, Design, Drama, Games, as well as Journalism, Media Production, Music, and Music Technology. Within each of these categories, more granular subjects are included: for instance, Fine art, Drawing and Painting within Art; Acting, Circus Arts, Contemporary Theatre, Performance and live arts within Drame (alongside several others). Music includes

20+ specific subjects, including for example Composition, Instrumental or vocal Performance, Jazz, Musical Theatre, or Sacred Music.

Appendix Tables 2a-b include the full set of subjects categorised as creative.

At GCSE (and equivalent) and in post-16 education, students take many subjects. Therefore, this report distinguishes between those taking a creative subject and those making a creative subject choice, with emphasis on the latter (Box 2 below). Specifically, the administrative records and survey data allow for the proportion of creative subjects (out of the total number of subjects taken) for each student at each respective stage to be calculated. Students who take a proportion of creative subjects above the 75th percentile for their respective cohort are labelled as **making a creative subject choice.**

Box 2 Definitions: making a creative subject choice

The analysis in this report distinguishes between:

Making a creative subject choice = any student whose subject mix (given many qualifications in many subjects being taken) is heavily skewed towards creative subjects – so that they are above the 75th percentile of their respective cohort at the respective educational stage by the proportion of creative subjects they take.

Taking a creative subject = any student who takes at least one qualification in a creative subject at each respective educational stage. Predominantly relevant to the qualitative analysis.

Employed in a creative occupation = any individual working in a creative occupation using the SOC2010 classification.

Employed in the creative sector = any individual self-reporting that they work in what they define as the creative sector.

For higher education, when the degree is in a single subject, the above definition is applied to categorise the subject as creative or not, and therefore to label the student as making a creative subject choice. Some higher education degrees are recorded by HESA as a combination of subjects, with a variable identifying the proportion of each subject in the degree. In this case, and to allow for some flexibility, where 2/3 or more of the subject mix is creative, then the whole degree is deemed to be in a creative subject. Therefore, students are deemed to have made a creative subject choice in higher education if their entire degree (in one subject) or at least 2/3 of their degree (if multiple subjects) are creative.

Also within scope of the project are individuals working or looking for work in the creative sector, regardless of the type of employment. Specifically, creative occupations are defined using the 3-digit SOC 2010 classification of occupations available in the Next Steps data, captured both at age 25 (wave 8) and at age 32 (wave 9). This approach does not use the more granular 4-digit SOC classification, due to this not being available. Therefore, creative employment is likely slightly underestimated in this analysis compared to other analyses that might have used a more granular definition. Further analytical details are provided in Appendix 2C. In the qualitative component of this study, individuals self-report whether they are employed in the creative sector and/or in a creative occupation.

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE DATA RECORDS

This analysis uses linked administrative records from the National Pupil Database (NPD), the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), which captures information from further education colleges, and the Higher Education Statistics Agency.[1]

SAMPLE

The analysis of these linked administrative records focuses on three cohorts of young people (not in special schools), sitting their Key Stage 4 (GCSE and equivalent) exams at age 16 in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Individuals in these cohorts are followed over their educational trajectory from Key Stage 4 (age 16) onwards. They are observed, if they have progressed, into any Key Stage 5 and equivalent Level 3 qualifications, as well as any subsequent Level 2 qualifications (Key Stage 4 equivalent), whether taken in schools, sixth-form colleges or any other form of further education college. Assuming a perfectly linear transition from KS4 into KS5 (and subsequently into higher education), which only some of the students in the sample undertake, students may be expected to sit A-level and equivalent (Level 3) exams in 2017, 2018, and 2019 respectively. These cohorts were chosen to allow for sufficient time for potential progression into higher education, and to avoid the lack of education records (due to the cancellation of exams) resulting due to the impact of the pandemic in 2020-2021. The above cohorts are then followed to observe if they progress into higher education (through Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA, data) even if not immediately (up to and including 2022) after the completion of their post-16 qualifications.

The sample of students sitting the majority of their Key Stage 4 exams in the 2015, 2016 and 2017 cohorts, and therefore the general basis for analysis in this study, comprise just over 1.7 million individuals.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Focusing on these three cohorts, the analysis describes the trajectories of students around the probability of students making a creative subject choice. Specifically, the analysis explores the probability of students making a creative subject choice at each respective high-stakes education point: at age 16, post-16 including in further education, and in higher education. At each of these stages, the analysis models the probability of students making a creative subject choice as a function of socio-demographic characteristics, school characteristics, and their individual prior attainment and, where relevant, their prior creative subject choices.

The analysis then proceeds in three steps. First, it maps raw patterns of the probability of students making a creative subject choice, in school, further education, and higher education. Second, the analysis compares the socio-demographic and educational characteristics of those making a creative subject choice, and those not, at each respective education stage.

[1] The data request to the Department for Education also included the Graduate Outcomes Survey, however that data could not be made available during the timeline of this study.

Third and finally, the analysis estimates socio-economic and gender gaps in the probability of making a creative subject choice using linear probability models. Specifically, models estimate this probability at each respective educational stage, by estimating raw gender (and respective, socio-economic) gaps, and attempting to explain any observed gaps by the addition of further variables, including other demographics, prior attainment, school type, cohort effects, region fixed effects and, and where relevant (in relation to higher education) institutional fixed effects. The interaction between gender and socio-economic background is also considered.

All results are presented using HESA rounding methodology. Because the data is administrative in nature, it refers to the full education population in England, as outlined above. Therefore, in reporting statistical results this report does not focus on levels of statistical significance, which are not required given this is population-level data. However, to allow for comparison with other studies that use these data sources and do provide statistical significance levels, the full results presented in the Appendix tables include the associated levels of statistical significance.

NATIONAL COHORT STUDY LINKED TO ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

THE NEXT STEPS SURVEY

The analysis in this study also uses complementary survey data sourced from Next Steps (formerly, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England Study) matched to the National Pupil Database (NPD) and the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) (UCL, 2024, 2025a, 2025b). Next Steps cohort members were first interviewed as teenagers (at ages 13-14), with a total of nine survey waves, therefore capturing individuals' personal circumstances, and family and school environments up to and including age 32 (in 2020).

SAMPLE

The Next Steps cohort was initially drawn to be a nationally representative sample of English young people. Like most cohort studies, though, it suffers from attrition. From the approximately 15,700 initial cohort members, about 7,200 individuals are still present in wave nine, where all initial participants were re-invited to respond, even if they had dropped out from the study for intervening rounds. However, Next Steps provides appropriate weights to account for survey attrition; these have been applied at each relevant analytical step. The survey weights help to correct for observable differences between young people who remained in the sample and the original cohort, which makes the analytical sample more comparable in terms of observable characteristics. However, the survey weights cannot fully account for the potentially self-selective nature of attrition, particularly where dropout is related to unobserved factors. Therefore, while the results broadly refer to the population of young people in England of a similar age to the Next Steps cohort, the sample should not be treated as strictly nationally representative. We are careful not to overstate the generalisability of the results beyond the population captured in the study.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The focus on educational choices in terms of subjects and later employment outcomes guides the choice of survey waves from which the relevant data was sourced. The same definition of "making a creative subject choice" (see Box 2 above) was applied to the Next Steps cohort data.

The Next Steps cohort took their GCSE (Key Stage 4) exams in 2006, when they were 16 years of age, though some cohort members have GCSE results from one year earlier or later (2005 and 2007 respectively), who we also consider in the analysis. Some cohort members continued their education in an academic route, and took A-level exams and other similar qualifications (Key Stage 5) predominantly in 2008, with some taking AS level and A level exams (and equivalent) a year earlier or later.

Some cohort members followed educational pathways that lead them to further education. Among these, many completed vocational qualifications at or around age 18 (predominantly in 2008), while others engaged with further education beyond age 18, so that for some, their further education records reflect more recent periods (up to 2014). Additionally, some cohort members went on to higher education. This was captured at either wave six or seven of the survey, allowing for some flexibility in the timing of higher education participation where relevant.

Finally, occupational outcomes were sourced from wave 8 (age 25) and wave 9 (age 32), to understand employment in occupations deemed creative, and how this may be different between these two different points in cohort members' professional lives.

Further analytical details are provided where relevant when results are presented.

QUALITATIVE AND ARTS-BASED APPROACHES

The research design included a qualitative, arts-based approach to address the project's aim and engage in an authentic way with students and staff in education institutions offering creative subjects, as well as with individuals working in and with the creative sector.

ARTS-BASED PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOPS

The geographical focus of the qualitative aspect of the project was meant to be three cities in England known for their creative education and creative sector: London, Norwich, and Manchester. The main qualitative data collection approach consisted of participatory workshops, in two of three of the initially intended cities: Norwich and London. Manchester, the third key city, did not secure sufficient participants for the workshops to go ahead.

The participatory workshops centred on the ecology of creative subject choices from an individual and an institutional perspective, foregrounding experiences in further and higher education, and exploring the onward transition into employment, as well as the roles institutions played within individual choices.

The workshops were organised along four key interrelated themes: challenges, changes, careers, and creatives. Each of these themes was addressed in conversations led by the workshop leader and facilitated by three participatory arts approaches, as follows.

DIXIT CARDS

The workshops commenced with a narrative part, using Dixit cards. This activity, adapted from a Dixit boardgame (using a selection of 32 cards from the Odyssey and Revelations sets), is a storytelling tool which invited participants to select a visual card that

would convey their personal (or professional) realities around creative subjects (Janiga and Haverlikova, 2024; López-Íñigue and Burnard, 2022). The cards prompted participants to narrate their personal trajectories into creative study and, where relevant, creative employment. Within that, their choice of card enabled them to articulate what they deemed to be defining features of these trajectories, in terms of enablers or support, and challenges.

ZINE-MAKING

The workshop then progressed to zine-making. Zines are DIY magazines that can be made quickly or developed over time, created by individuals or in teams. Participants were invited to generate a small DIY magazine, using a variety of provided materials, that prompted individual reflective construction. The prompt for the zine-making was to focus on institutional challenges and changes (French and Curd, 2022). Participants were asked to consider the difficult conversations, invisible barriers, constraints and other tough issues that they, or their institution, may face in the context of enabling creative subject study and progression into creative employment. Time was allowed in the workshop for participants to generate the zines, and those who wanted, then shared their thought process and results with the group.

CARTOGRAPHIES

In the third and last part of the workshop, a collective activity was introduced via a cartography. Cartographic arts-based research assemblages utilise the metaphor of mapping to foster discussion using participatory creative practices like drawing, sketching, writing, collage making, to encourage and empower participants to share their lived experiences and perspectives (Bragagnolo, 2024; Flutter, 2023; Ulmer and Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; Ribas, 2017).

In each workshop, participants were invited to co-author cartographic arts-based assemblages about issues they saw as essential in relation to the pathways into creative employment (careers) and, for those in creative employment (creatives), to consider both the challenges associated with being a creative and the ways in which their prior subject choices may have played a role. Participants were offered newspaper clippings, creative industry related images, quotes, written responses, and multi-sensory material objects, as well as large pieces of paper upon which to build a collective mapping. They worked together to create maps of the transitions into creative employment, illustrating their responses to the above prompt.

SAMPLE

A total of seven workshops were carried out: three in Norwich and four in London. Three of the workshops (one in Norwich, two in London) included students in further and higher education.

Two of the workshops (one in Norwich, one in London) included staff in further and higher education institutions, both generalist and arts specialist institutions. One single workshop (in Norwich) included creatives other than staff in educational institutions.

A total of 59 individuals, from six different further and higher institutions, participated in the workshops: 21 participants in Norwich (2 institutions, 11 students, 7 staff, 3 creatives) and 38 participants in London (4 institutions, 26 students, 12 staff).

DATA ANALYSIS

Members of the research team not leading the workshop took extensive notes during each workshop, and cross-checked understandings and conclusions after each workshop with the workshop lead. Pictures were taken of the chosen dixit cards, the zines participants produced, and the collective cartographies they engaged in. Visual data and notes were collated together and analysed following the four interrelated themes (challenges, changes, careers, creatives), as well by participant profile (student, staff, creative), with specific attention paid to issues of gender, socio-economic background, type of educational provision, institutional support and barriers and enablers to creative careers as topics essential to this study.

QUALITATIVE SURVEY

The lack of a workshops in the third key location (Manchester) and low number of creatives engaged in the workshops prompted an additional qualitative data collection approach: a qualitative survey of creatives (individuals employed in the creative sector) from each of the three locations (Norfolk/East of England for Norwich, London, and Greater Manchester/North-West England for Manchester).

SURVEY APPROACH

The survey was conducted via the Prolific Survey platform. Prospective participants were restricted to creatives (individuals currently working in the creative sector; or currently job seeking but having previously worked in the creative sector) geographically located in the three cities of interest for this study. Respondents consented to taking part in the survey and the overall study.

After one multiple choice question asking about educational trajectories, the questions were all open-ended and invited written responses. These questions asked about creatives' creative subject choices while at school, their creative subject choices, experiences, and factors that affected them in further and higher education (depending on which they had attended), and about the influence of their prior subject and qualification choice in relation to current (or previous) employment (in the creative sector).

SAMPLE

A total of 34 open-ended responses from creatives were collected. Respondents provided written answers that varied in length; but all offered insights into experiences around different creative subjects, different forms of employment. Data about participants' socio-demographic and economic background was available from the survey platform and was used in the analysis. A total of 20 women and 14 men responded and 29 of 34 respondents were White. Eight respondents were from Greater Manchester/North-West England; 19 from London; and eight from East of England/Norfolk. While the sample is not meant to be representative of any population, the gender, ethnicity and place split is as expected given usual survey response patterns and

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

A simple thematic approach was used to analyse the written responses, driven by the overall aims of the study as reflected in the questions asked in the survey and by the core insights from the secondary data analysis that had already been cleared for public use by the point of the survey.

RESULTS

PATHWAYS OF CREATIVE SUBJECT PREFERENCES AND CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICES

This section traces young people's engagement with creative subjects in education, from age 14 onwards, focusing on key transition points in education, at age 16 and in post-16 education, including into further and higher education where relevant.

This section draws all components of this study's research design. It first presents early creative subject preferences, then looks at each education transition stage; and finally describes the overall, over-time pathways around creative subject choices.

STRONG EARLY CREATIVE PREFERENCES

In the Next Steps survey, respondents were invited to identify the subjects they liked to study the most. Using the above categorisation of creative subjects, those who identified a creative subject in response to this question are deemed to have reported a preference for a creative subject.

At age 14, just over 42% of young people reported a preference for a creative subject. Full results, overall and for each sub-group are illustrated in Appendix Table 3.

At age 15, the overall rate at which young people reported a creative subject preference dropped to just 26% and the gaps between the different groups were slightly larger.

From age 16, the Next Steps survey asked cohort members what they intended to do post-16. Next Steps cohort members who intended to continue in full-time education (or were already doing so) were then asked if the purpose of continuing was to go in higher education (HE). Just under three-quarters of respondents (71.3%) indicated this was the case. This group of HE-intent cohort members were specifically asked what subject they would like to study in HE. At age 16, a total of 11.9% young people in this HE-intent group expressed an intention to study for a creative subject[2] in HE; at age 17, this was very similar (11.2%). At age 18, however, the prevalence of this intention had increased to 15.4%.

This slight increase in the overall rate of creative subject intentions in HE suggests that as students got closer to the age at which the consequential decisions about higher education need to be made (specifically at age 18/19), their creative preferences increased.

A GENDER GAP IN CREATIVE SUBJECT PREFERENCES

Creative preferences varied by gender. Girls were much more likely than boys to report a preference for a creative subject at ages 14 (22.8 percentage point gap) and 15 (13.1 percentage point gap).

For those intending to go to higher education, the pattern was reversed at age 16: boys were more likely to want to study a creative subject in higher education (if they intended to go).

[2] Using the same definition of creative subjects as above.

By ages 17 and 18, this pattern reverted back to earlier preferences, with girls again favouring creative subjects in higher education more than boys.

Table 1 Creative subject preferences, amongst girls and respectively boys, and overall, in Next Steps

(%)	Girls	Boys	Overall
Preference for creative subjects at age 14	53.8	31.0	42.1
Preference for creative subjects at age 15	32.7	19.6	25.9
If HE-intent, creative HE intention at age 16	10.2	13.2	11.9
If HE-intent, creative HE intention at age 17	12.0	9.3	11.2
If HE-intent, creative HE intention at age 18	16.1	14.5	15.4

A MIXED ECONOMIC GAP IN CREATIVE SUBJECT PREFERENCES

At age 14, students eligible for free school meals (FSM, the measure of economic disadvantage used throughout this report) reported a slightly lower preference for creative subjects than their more economically advantaged peers (2.3 percentage points gap, see Table 2 below). By age 15, this difference was larger, at 5.2 percentage points.

Compared to age 15, for young people intending to pursue higher education, the socio-economic gap in creative subject intentions was reversed at age 16, in favour of FSM-eligible students. This changed again to favouring non-FSM eligible students the closer the transition point became. Therefore, by age 18, FSM-eligible students in the Next Steps cohort were about 5.3 percentage points (33%) less likely to express an intention to study for a creative subject in HE than their more economically advantaged peers.

Table 2 Creative subject preferences, by FSM eligibility, and overall, in Next Steps

(%)	FSM-eligible students	Non-FSM eligible students	Overall
Preference for creative subjects at age 14	40.0	42.3	42.1
Preference for creative subjects at age 15	21.8	27.0	25.9
If HE-intent, creative HE intention at age 16	13.0	12.1	11.9
If HE-intent, creative HE intention at age 17	6.8	12.1	11.2
If HE-intent, creative HE intention at age 18	10.5	15.8	15.4

Insights from the qualitative workshops outline how creative preferences were driven by strong personal interest, but students also reported having to contend with levels of family support that varied from the strongly supportive to clear directions to move away from creative subjects altogether. The influence of staff in schools, colleges, and universities, was also identified, and will be discussed later, in relation to each respective educational stage. Students also illustrated a genuine desire to contribute to what they saw a growing field. However, the most important factor students identified as shaping the translation of preferences into actual subject take up were employment prospects.

The question then becomes whether young people reflect these intentions in their actual educational choices, at each key transition point in education, into higher education and employment. The following sections address each of these points in turn.

AGE 16: PERSONAL INTERESTS CLASH WITH INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS

Across the three analytical cohorts in the administrative data, 24.7% of students made a creative subject choice at age 16. Table 3 below shows the socio-demographic profile of students who made a creative subject choice, compared to those who had not, at 16.

Girls were considerably overrepresented, comprising 58% of students who made a creative subject choice, compared to 47% of students not making a creative subject choice. White students were also overrepresented amongst students who made a creative subject choice (83% vs. 77%), as were students facing economic deprivation (12.7% vs.11.7%). Furthermore, students who made a creative subject choice had lower average prior attainment in both mathematics and English at Key Stage 2.

Table 3 Personal characteristics of students making a creative subject choice compared to students not making a creative subject choice, at KS4, average across all three cohorts

	Students making a creative subject choice	Students not making a creative subject choice
Total N	**425,255**	**1,293,540**
Socio-demographics	**(%)**	
Girl	58.1	46.7
White	83.0	76.8
Eligible for FSM	12.7	11.7
IDACI most deprived decile	11.5	11.8
IDACI least deprived decile	8.7	9.1
Educational outcomes pre-KS4	**(standardised point score)**	
KS2 Maths	-0.124	0.041
KS2 English	-0.083	0.027
KS4 School type	**(%)**	
Academy	57.6	57.7
Independent	7.5	7.4
LA or Equivalent	34.0	33.4
FE or Other College	0.3	0.5
Free School	0.6	1.0

WHAT EXPLAINS STUDENTS MAKING A CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICE AT 16?

The probability of students making a creative subject choice is modelled with a series of linear probability models as a function of all personal and school characteristics presented in Table 3. Full results are reported in Appendix Table 4.

The models suggest that, all else being equal, girls and White students were more likely to make a creative subject choice. Free school meal eligibility was associated with a slightly higher probability of making a creative subject choice in the 2015 cohort, though the FSM gap was smaller than the gender and ethnicity gaps, and closer to zero for the other cohorts.

Results also suggest that students with higher Key Stage 2 (age 11) scores were less likely to make a creative subject choice at age 16. This mirrors the raw descriptive pattern observed above, whereby, students making a creative subject choice had, on average, lower attainment.

Conditional on the same socio-demographics variables and prior attainment as above, the type of school attended at Key Stage 4 was also associated with the probability of making a creative subject choice at age 16, again reflecting the raw patterns above. Compared to

students in Local Authority Maintained schools, students in academies (for the 2015 and 2016 cohorts), and also students in independent schools and in free schools (in all cohorts), were less likely to make a creative subject choice. Conversely, students studying for their Key Stage 4 qualifications in further education or in other Colleges were more likely to make a creative subject choice (again in all cohorts).

The qualitative evidence helps explain these patterns. Workshop participants and survey respondents consistently described experiencing significant structural and cultural barriers to pursuing creative subjects during their pre-16 education.

A dominant theme was the institutional pressure to prioritise "academic" or "practical" subjects over creative ones. Participants repeatedly described being actively discouraged from taking multiple art subjects or being steered toward traditional academic subjects like geography and history, with the explicit rationale that creative subjects would limit future A-Level choices and career prospects.

Further survey respondents confirmed this experience of institutional gatekeeping. One male survey respondent (Manchester) explained:

"At our school there was art or music classes, that was all. I might have liked to study music, but I felt like I was better at visual arts."

The framing of creative subjects as risky or illegitimate choices appeared embedded in institutional culture. One female survey respondent (East of England) recalled:

"I enjoyed things like art and media, but I did not choose them because I was advised to focus on subjects that were seen as more practical and better for future study and jobs."

This guidance does not reflect evidence-based career counselling or statutory requirements of state schools (DfE, 2025), but rather cultural hierarchies that seem to devalue creative work. There is a possibility that students would internalize such hierarchies even when their own interests pointed elsewhere. As staff participants in the workshop discussed, they saw institutions, including schools and colleges, responding to wider economic and structural pressures. Staff HE and FE workshop participants in Norwich specifically emphasised the nature of assessment in schools as highly influential:

“This can only be addressed through changing the way schools are measured & the focus being on non-arts subjects.”

The range of creative subjects offered was also often narrow. Respondents reported subjects were typically limited to art and music, with more specialized options like graphic design, computer art, or media studies either unavailable or poorly supported by teachers lacking expertise in those areas: several respondents reported having to teach themselves specific skills related to a personal interest. This structural limitation meant students couldn't explore the breadth of creative disciplines that might have aligned with their interests and talents.

“I studied graphic art and graphic products because I enjoyed art but wanted to specifically have skills that translated to real world jobs and income. I wanted to study fine art and just be a painter but I was scared of not having skills to earn money because that was more of

an artistic dream. There was no guidance around choosing subjects, I went to a rubbish school so I just did my own research online."

Equally significant was the limited availability of creative options and restrictive timetabling that forced students to choose between creative subjects or entirely removed the creative option.

One survey respondent described timetabling structures they felt were designed to prevent creative subject combinations:

"I would've liked to of [sic] pursued more creative subjects...but [...] the biggest barriers would have been that I came from quite a poor family... Also, it was highly deincentivised [sic] to pick more than one creative subject, and timetabled to try and make sure this didn't happen. My school did not prioritise creative subjects as legitimate subjects for study."

As a counterpoint to the above, students also reported many school experiences that were positive from the perspective of teacher support. Yet, this did not translate into higher chances of taking creative subjects, as one male creative (Manchester) illustrated:

"I did GCSE graphics at school, which I really enjoyed. It was my favourite subject and I spent a lot of time on the final project at home. I was told by one of the art teachers that I should have studied art too, but we were always told not to do too many art subjects as it would affect what we could do at A Level. I felt like we were pushed to do geography or history and we had to do RE so that didn't leave any spare options."

Some students in the Norwich workshop characterised their school careers guidance provided as basic and focused primarily on achieving good grades rather than exploring genuine interests or passions. Several survey respondents also offered this view, choosing graphic design over fine art due to fears about low employability, or avoiding creative subjects altogether because low prior attainment. This created a self-fulfilling cycle, where students who might have thrived creatively were channelled away from these subjects.

Despite the above barriers, participants in workshops and the survey showed persistent creative interests and abilities that extended beyond their formal education. Several went on to develop creative careers or hobbies, running craft businesses, teaching themselves skills, or realising creative passions.

Respondents further highlighted background, including economic and cultural, as shaping their choices at age 16, including because it had shaped their prior attainment, which in turn shaped their subject options. One male creative (London) stated in the survey:

"I hadn't performed well in the lower year groups so it didn't make sense to continue these in further years when GCSE options are important. Instead, I opted for subjects that are considered more academic traditionally."

This suggests that economic disadvantage may operate both directly and indirectly, through access to other opportunities and educational attainment.

POST-16: ECONOMIC BARRIERS INTENSIFY

Next, patterns of creative subject choices post-16 are explored, across schools, sixth-forms, further education colleges and other institutions, and encompassing all types of qualifications. This approach reflects the greater diversity of options available to students at this education stage.

Not all students in the three administrative data cohorts progressed into education post-16. Specifically, 87.6% of students were observed in the sample post-16. The remaining 12.4% did not appear, at any point up to 2022, in either school education, colleges or in further or higher education records. This represents a choice, whether free or constrained, out of education; and while it is extremely important to understand it and the destinations of this group of people, including those who do progress because of failing age 16 exams, this is not the focus of this piece of work.

Of the students who remained in any form of education post-16, and across all types of qualifications, 16.9% of students made a creative subject choice.

Table 4 illustrates the characteristics of individuals who made creative subject choices in post-16 education, and those who did not.

The most striking pattern at this stage is the reversal of the socio-economic pattern observed at age 16. While FSM-eligible students were slightly *more* likely to make creative subject choices at age 16, they became substantially *less* likely to have made a creative subject choice post-16. This socio-economic flip partly reflects the higher attrition rate from education for young people facing economic disadvantage, which has been well documented elsewhere (Lupton et al., 2021). Conversely, students from the least deprived areas increased their representation from 8.7% at age 16, to 13.2% in post-16 education.

Table 4 Personal characteristics of students making a creative subject choice (and not) in post-16 education, across cohorts

	Students making a creative subject choice	Students not making a creative subject choice
Total N	**253,880**	**1,252,360**
Socio-demographics	**(%)**	
Girl	64.3	47.4
White	82.6	76.1
Eligible for FSM	6.2	11.8
IDACI most deprived decile	7.0	11.7
IDACI least deprived decile	13.2	8.9
Educational outcomes at/pre-KS4	**(standardised point score)**	
KS4 total points score	0.421	0.035
KS2 Maths	0.001	-0.000
KS2 English	0.029	-0.011

WHAT EXPLAINS STUDENTS MAKING A CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICE POST-16?

Exploring the determinants of making a creative subject choice post-16 offers further insights. The full results from this analysis are presented in Appendix Table 5.

Across all three cohorts in the administrative data, all else equal, girls were more likely than boys to have made a creative subject choice. Students eligible for free school meals and those who resided in a high-deprivation neighbourhood were less likely than their counterparts to have made a creative subject choice. Young people studying for their post-16 qualifications in a further education college were also more likely to have made a creative subject choice than their non-FE peers, indicating the important role of further education, which is later explored in more depth.

The qualitative data illuminates the mechanisms behind the negative association between socio-economic background, at both individual and local level, and the probability of making a creative subject choice.

Several student respondents explicitly identified financial barriers as determining their post-16 choices. Others still described how financial pressures limited creative options entirely. Multiple respondents noted difficult experiences in further education, including financial challenges that led to drop-out. In the workshops, staff respondents identified the structure of post-16 funding, including the withdrawal of Education Maintenance Allowance in most regions and the varying costs of materials, travel, and equipment for creative courses, as barriers to students making creative subject post-16.

Despite these issues, students and staff valued further education as pathway for creative subjects. The FOCUS ON FURTHER EDUCATION section below discusses further.

Meanwhile, for students pursuing academic qualifications post-16, discouragement from creative subjects often intensified. One survey (female, London) respondent described being initially drawn to creative A-levels but then redirected:

"I initially chose subjects that had high career prospects like History, philosophy, government and politics and sociology. It was really just based on guidance that I had at the time around needing to plan your career around subjects like that. And at the time I thought this was right and what I was supposed to do."

Another (male, East of England) noted the strategic value of creative subjects as relief from essay-based study, but only as supplements to "serious" subjects:

"I studied psychology, photography, English Literature and English Language. I enjoyed photography as a hobby at the time so decided to take it as an A level to provide a contrast to my other more essay based subjects."

Respondents therefore saw creative subjects being positioned in their post-16 contexts as enrichment rather than as legitimate academic pursuits. A male responded (London) provided the most explicit account of institutional discouragement:

"I would have liked to of [sic] explored more creative subjects but the way the options were arranged i didnt [sic] have that opportunity however i was very academic at school and the more traditional subjects were strongly suggested to me although i didnt [sic] want that."

The construction of creative subjects as incompatible with academic success appears to continue to structure post-16 pathways, despite students' own preferences and interests.

HIGHER EDUCATION: ACCUMULATED EARLIER CHOICES MANIFEST

Using data from HESA, we track individuals into higher education if they enrolled at any point up to and including 2022. Overall, 46.4% of individuals across the three analytical cohorts entered higher education (studying for any type of qualification). Participation was consistent across cohorts: 47% for the 2015 GCSE cohort; 46.3% for the 2016 cohort; and 45.9% for the 2017 cohort. Of the total number of students in higher education, 12.2% made a creative subject choice.

Table 5 presents the personal characteristics of students who made a creative subject choice in HE, compared to those who did not. A small gender gap is present: 57.6% of students who made a creative subject choice in HE were women, compared to 56.3% in the group who had not made a creative subject choice. The background deprivation gap was of similar magnitude but reversed, with 7.1% eligibility for free school meal in the group making a creative subject choice (compared to 8% otherwise). The ethnicity gap was larger, so that students making a creative subject choice in HE were 80.9% White, compared to only 68.3% in the group not making a creative subject choice.

HE students who made a creative subject choice also showed lower prior attainment than their peers across all measures, consistent with previous results. The gap by previous creative choices was very large: 58.3% of HE students with a creative subject choice had also made creative subject choices post-16; in the group not making a creative subject choice in HE, only 17.1% had done so. This points to a relatively stable pathway for those who persist but also highlights the cumulative effect of earlier attrition.

Table 5 Personal characteristics of students making a creative subject choice (and not) in HE

	Students making a creative subject choice	Students not making a creative subject choice
Total N	**97,970**	**699,310**
Socio-demographics	**(%)**	
Girl	57.6	56.3
White	80.9	68.3
Eligible for FSM	7.1	8.0
IDACI most deprived decile	8.0	9.7
IDACI least deprived decile	11.8	11.7
Education outcomes at/pre-KS4	**(standardised point score)**	
KS4 total points score	0.355	0.464
KS2 Maths	0.124	0.265
KS2 English	0.194	0.280
Education post-16	**(%)**	
Attended further education at any point post-16	18.0	21.6
Post-16 creative subject choice	58.3	17.1

WHAT EXPLAINS STUDENTS MAKING A CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

The results of statistical models that take all the above socio-demographic and educational characteristics into account (Appendix Table 6) to estimate the probability of students making a creative subject choice in higher education point to a narrowing of the socio-economic gap in creative subject choice in higher education.

This narrowing of the gap is explained by the inclusion of prior attainment in the model. This suggests a potential mechanism of self-selection on attainment when making higher

education choices, so that individuals with lower attainment had previously self-selected into creative subjects, or away from HE altogether. This could be as much a function of the supply of students interested in creative higher education subjects, as of the demand for specific academic attainment levels by the higher education institutions to which people applied.

The Next Steps data that captured creative subject intentions for HE provides some explanation of these patterns. That data showed an increase in the overall rate of creative subject intentions in HE as students got older. This suggests that as students got closer to the age at which the consequential decisions about higher education needed to be made (specifically at age 18/19), their creative preferences peaked, from lower earlier levels. For some creative subjects, this might be unproblematic, as there are no 'facilitating' or required subjects young people must have previously studied in order to access them in higher education; for others, however, this requirement is present in the form of required training (e.g. around music and musical instrument playing) so that choices made at 16 might have a relatively larger influence on young people's opportunities to apply and then to enter creative higher education courses.

Against this backdrop, workshop and survey respondents described navigating complex tensions between passion and perceived practicality. Particularly, as one workshop participant (HE student, Norwich) expressed:

"It feels like everyone knows what they want to do. Everyone knows they want to be an architect. They want to be an entrepreneur. But I just don't know. I constantly try to move here, there, and I just constantly figure it out."

The survey data further revealed that creative preferences in HE were driven by multiple, sometimes conflicting factors: strong personal interest, familial support (or lack thereof), genuine desire to contribute to creative industries, and crucially, concerns about employment. One survey respondent (male, Manchester) captured this tension:

"I enjoyed creativity and that's why I set up my business. I have had other craft businesses that have led to this one...I have always been drawn to creativity."

Yet this same individual had initially pursued non-creative higher education, reflecting the push-pull between creative passion and external pressures toward "safer" career paths.

In the workshops, participants further outlined their circumstances and experiences around making a creative subject choice in higher education. Staff workshop participants highlighted the role of unspoken social capital in accessing and succeeding in creative higher education. They expressed concerns about the unspoken social capital prerequisites for some creative HE courses. They saw this as a perceived "social distinction" of those students who managed to navigate their way to access these courses, and recognized the large role played by sufficient financial resources.

One FE staff member (London) focused on the nature of creative higher education, suggesting how particular institutions valued certain tastes and ways of behaving that they felt were more naturally aligned with being middle class, rather than with any social background in society. They felt this reflected into how staff deliberately had to navigate practical employment concerns when this alignment was missing and how they saw it as a

collective staff responsibility to engender a particular perspective within their students, against the perceived mainstream. Other staff, in HE and FE, also emphasised the need for strategic choices, and the fact that such choices were not available to all. One London-based HE staff member noted:

"Some of our students don't have the [industry] contacts, [...] don't know how to open up a different social medium. Others have families who make deliberate choices so that people can look like others [deemed to be successful in the creative sector]"

The workshops also revealed staff anxiety about non-traditional routes into creative HE for staff, which shaped their ability to support students. A small group of HE staff described non-academic, vocational, routes as an uncommon route into creative HE. Box 3 below highlights results for a small group in the Next Steps cohort who undertook an HE qualification in FE, one of these so-called 'uncommon' routes.

Box 3 Next Steps: early preferences and later choice HE-in-FE students

In the Next Steps cohort, a small group (3.9% of the cohort) were categorised as HE-in-FE: that is, they took a higher education level qualification (e.g. foundation degree, full degree, etc.) in a further education institution. From a socio-demographic perspective, people who took an HE qualification in FE were 55.8% female; and 8.8% had been eligible for free school meals at school. A total of 51.3% of this small group indicated they preferred creative subjects at age; and 35.0% at age 15. At age 16, 11% of HE-intent cohort members had wanted to study for a creative subject, at age 17 the same figure stood at 5.0% and at 17.7% at age 18. In their HE qualification in Further Education, 31.9% of people made a creative subject choice.

The same staff members as above saw HE as a 'homogenising' space that erased the diverse pathways through which students arrived there. One staff member who had started their career in creative HE without an HE background described their experience:

"The word I've written down is 'imposter' because I don't have an HE background."

This suggests that even within institutions ostensibly committed to creativity and alternative thinking such as those in this study, individuals struggled with how their educational identities and their prior educational pathways were perceived.

Student and creatives pointed to even further challenges to their HE creative choices, including those of a financial nature. One creative (male, London) suggested:

"My path through higher education was shaped largely by financial considerations. I initially chose degrees in literature and later in international business because they were perceived as offering greater financial stability and employment opportunities. However, neither subject aligned well with my personal interests or long-term goals."

This person eventually completed a music production degree, but only after years of pursuing misaligned qualifications driven by economic anxiety.

While economic pressures affected all students, female respondents particularly articulated experiencing family resistance around creative HE choices, requiring them to "prove yourself" repeatedly before receiving support for creative pursuits. One female

participant described a "long journey with my parents to show them I'm capable, I'm good at this, again and again" before finally receiving "respect in a way, but also support."

In workshops, multiple female respondents presented complex interactions between their perceptions of their future employment chances and worries from their families around this. They placed these in tension with their personal creative aspirations, both around creative study and creative employment. This suggested that women may be particularly attentive to, or targeted by, messaging about the economic risks of creative careers.

THE NARROWING CREATIVE PATHWAY

As the evidence above shows, students became progressively less likely to make a creative subject choice. Table 6 presents this pattern across all three administrative data cohorts. In summary, 24.7% of students made a creative choice at 16. This reduced to 16.9% in post-16 education (of any type, and at any level of qualification), and to 12% in higher education.

Table 6 Distribution of creative and non-creative subject choices at the different education stages in the national data, across three core cohorts (2015, 2016, and 2017 Key Stage 4 cohorts), full population at each respective stage

At Key Stage 4	Count	Proportion
Made a creative subject choice	425,255	24.7%
Did not make a creative subject choice	1,29,3540	75.3%
Total	**1,718,795**	**100%**
Post-16	**Count**	**Proportion**
Made a creative subject choice	253,880	16.9%
Did not make a creative subject choice	1,252,360	83.1%
Total	**1,506,235**	**100%**
HE	**Count**	**Proportion**
Made a creative subject choice	97,970	12.2%
Did not make a creative subject choice	699,310	87.8%
Total	**797,280**	**100%**

The rates at which students made a creative subject choice are in stark contrast with the rates of early creative subject preferences described above. This may be a function of the number of creative subjects at each respective level[3] and stage of education, or might emerge from a worsening context for creative subjects across the education sector, whereby the Next Steps cohort were expressing those preferences against an earlier and different educational and labour market landscape, 6 to 8 years prior to students in the administrative data set.

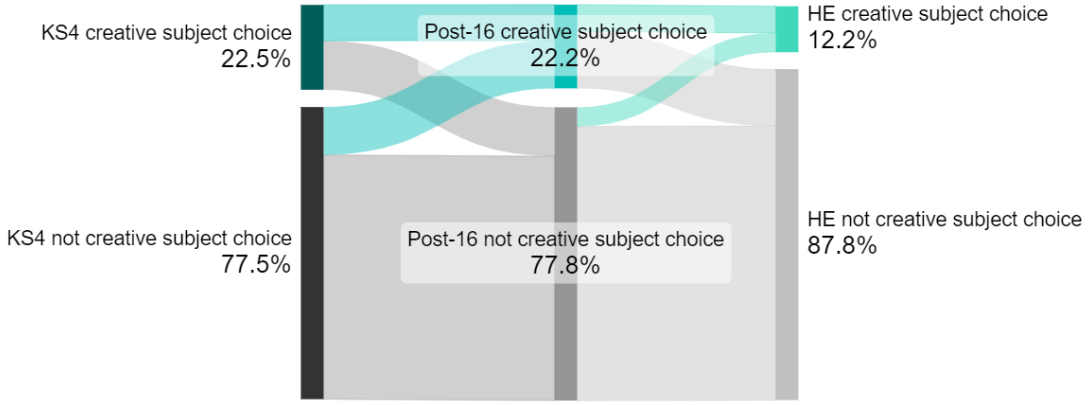
Using the longitudinal nature of the administrative records, it is also possible to trace individuals through the various stages of their education. The full set of pathways through making a creative subject choice (and not) for students who stopped their education before higher education, and for those who progressed to higher education is included in Appendix Tables 8-17.

[3] This impacts the distribution for the proportion of creative subjects being studied between 16/post-16 education and higher education respectively because most higher education degrees are single-subject, while students take many more qualification sage 16 and post-16.

Figure 1 below shows the flow of making a creative subject choice specifically for students who remained in education post-16 and into higher education.

For this group that remained in education and progressed to higher education, about half who made a creative subject choice at 16 (Key Stage 4) also made a creative choice post-16, but only 3.8% of the whole group made a creative subject choice at all levels of education.

Figure 1 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time



Both post-16 and in higher education, students made creative subject choices even when they have not done so previously. A small proportion of students (2.8%) made a creative subject choice in higher education despite not having done so previously. And 10.7% of students abandoned creative subjects completely, once they had completed Key Stage 4.

PERSISTENT BUT CHANGING GENDER GAPS BY EDUCATION STAGE

Within the above overall trend, gender gaps are present.

Figures 2 and 3 below illustrate educational pathways over time for girls and boys who remained in education through to HE. Among girls across the three cohorts, 4.6% made creative subject choices at all three education stages; the corresponding figure for men is very similar, at 4.3%. At the other end of the spectrum, 57.1% of girls did not make a creative subject choice at any stage. This pattern is more pronounced for boys, among whom 68.3% made no creative subject choices across the three stages.

Figure 2 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: girls only

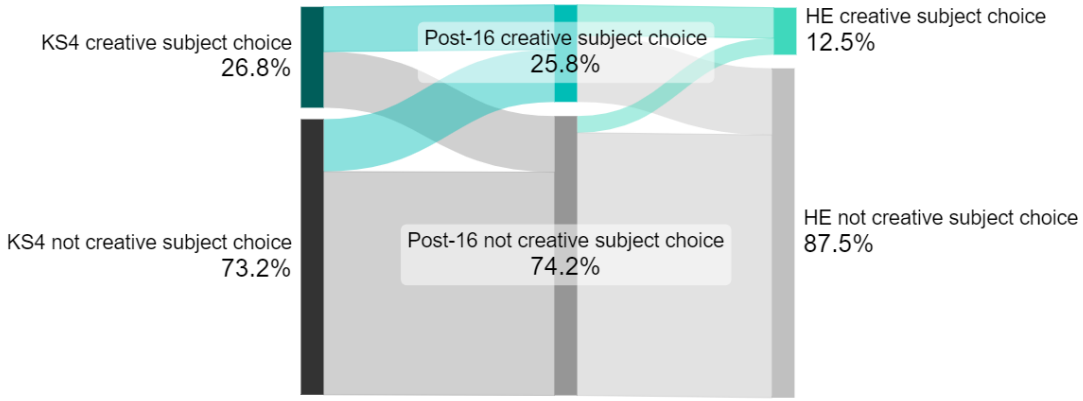


Figure 3 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: boys only

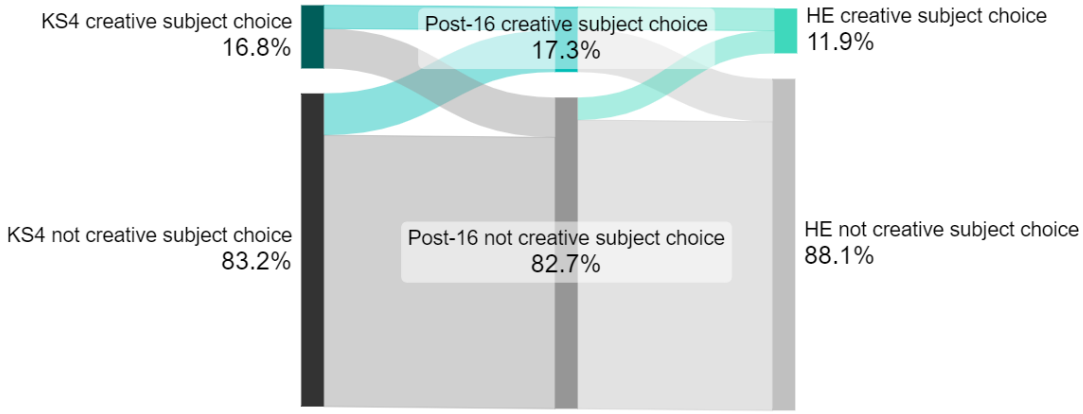
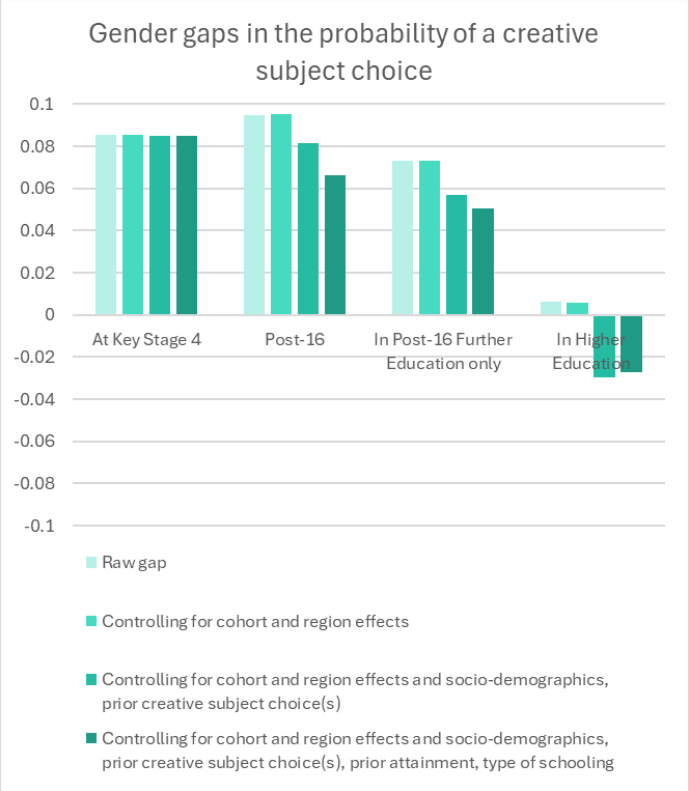


Figure 4 below illustrates the results of modelling the specific gender gap in the probability of making a creative subject choice at each respective stage. Each subsequent model adds further explanatory factors, to eliminate their potential confounding effect. Full results are presented in Appendix Tables 18-21. At age 16 and in post-16 education, including further education, the gender gap was positive, with girls more likely to have made a creative subject choice compared to boys, all else considered. In contrast, the gender gap was reversed in HE, with boys more likely to have made creative subject choices compared to girls. The gender gap in further education was relatively smaller than when post-16 education was considered as a whole, but still in favour of girls.

Figure 4 Administrative data: Gender gaps in the probability of making a creative subject choice at each education level, across all cohorts

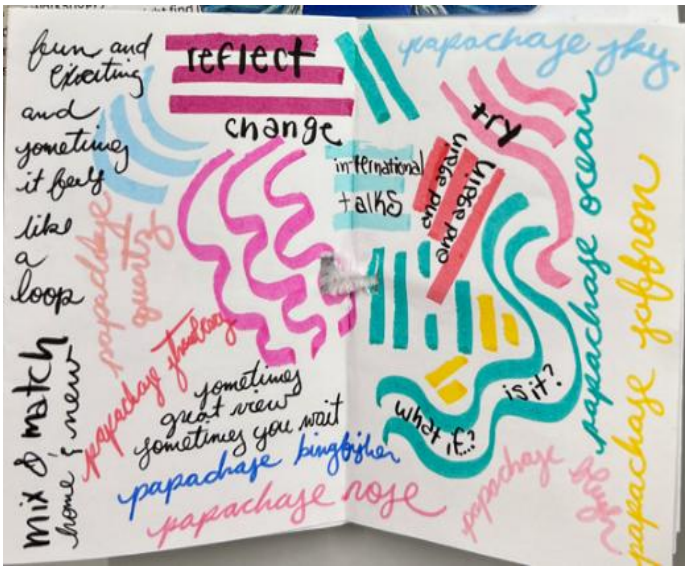


Note: gap is based on coefficients estimated in a series of models (Appendix Tables 18 to 21).

The gender gaps illustrated in Figure 5 were relatively small in magnitude, indicating that, all potentially confounding factors considered, girls' probability of making a creative subject choice diverged from boys' by 2 to 8 percentage points. Across three cohorts, that means a very large number of individuals whose opportunities for creative study, even at the same prior attainment, schooling and personal experiences, are reduced.

Insights from female workshop participants, including as detailed above in relation to specific stages of education and employment, offered a personal illustration of the experiences of the pathways described above. Figure 5 opposite illustrates the winding pathways one female participant had experienced in their own creative choices. Other female participants often questioned whether their choices offered a sense of certainty, and emphasized the resilience needed to sustain the creative choices they had made.

Figure 5 Zine, Female HE student, Norwich



COMPLEX AND OFTEN CONTRADICTORY ECONOMIC GAPS IN CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICES

Across the three administrative data cohorts, economic disadvantage (as captured through FSM eligibility) showed nuanced and sometimes counterintuitive associations with the students' probability of making a creative subject choice.

Figures 6 and 7 below illustrate the pathways through creative subject choice for students eligible for free school meals (and not), who continued their education into HE.

Figure 6 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: FSM eligible students only

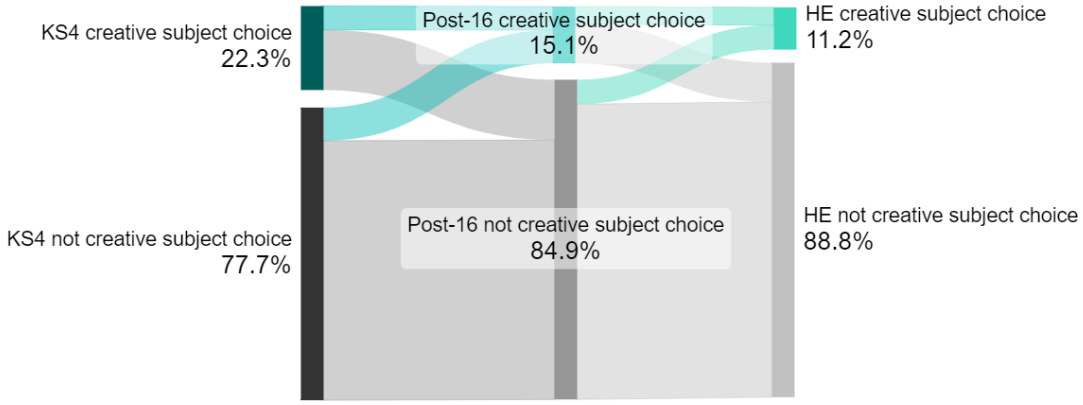
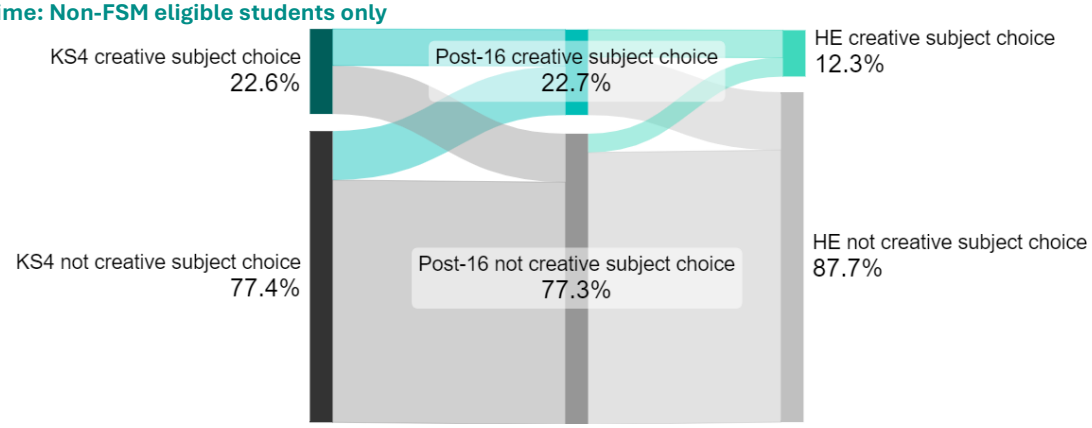


Figure 7 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: Non-FSM eligible students only



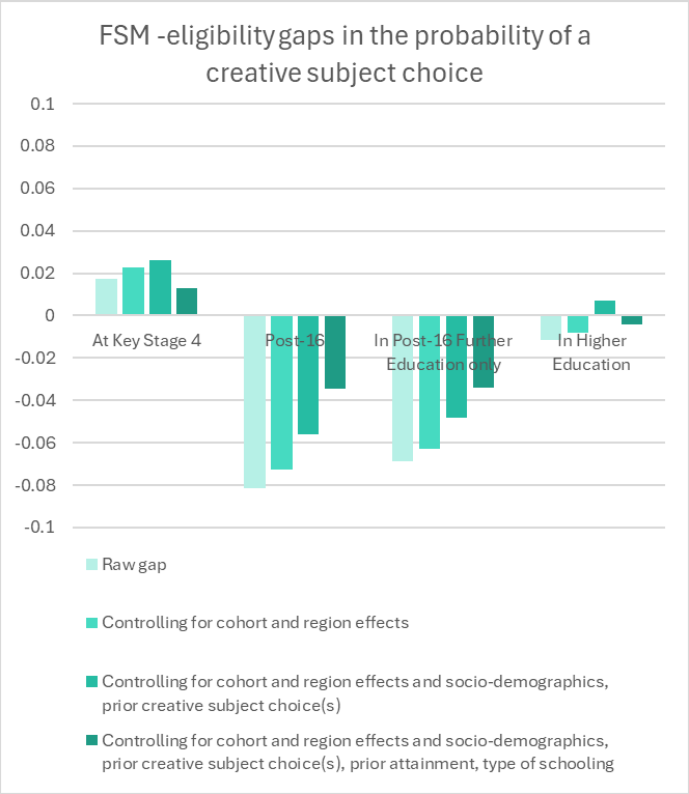
The above flows illustrate how the overall reduction in students making a creative subject choice over their educational lives was more pronounced amongst students eligible for FSM. Only 2.5% of FSM-eligible students who eventually progressed to HE made a creative subject choice at all stages of their education; this was 55% higher (at 3.9%) for non-FSM students, despite very similar rates of having made a creative subject choice at age 16. This places emphasis on how pathways for students facing economic disadvantage became narrower in post-compulsory education, and particularly post-16.

The administrative data also allows for a more granular estimation of what might drive the mixed economic gaps in the probability of students making a creative subject choice at each educational stage. Figure 8 below illustrates these gaps. Full results are reported in Appendix Tables 22 to 25.

Controlling for the full set of background factors, at age 16, students eligible for free school meals were more likely than those not eligible to have made a creative subject choice; but

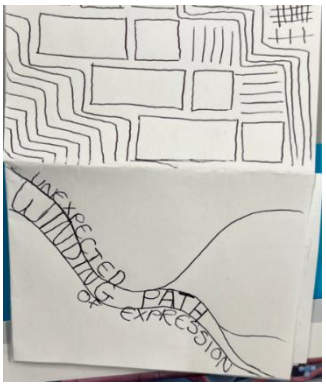
once they progressed into post-16 education, they were less likely to have done so, even when considering that comparatively more FSM-eligible people dropped out of education at age 16. In higher education, the economic gap shrunk substantially compared to post-16 education, with FSM-eligible students less likely to have made a creative subject choice, all else held equal.

Figure 8 Administrative data: FSM eligibility gap in the probability of making a creative subject choice at each education level, across all cohorts



Note: gap is based on coefficients estimated in a series of models (Appendix Tables 22 to 25)

Figure 9 Zine, FE student,



This is reflected in insights from students participating in the workshops. Figure 9 illustrates how one FE student who reported a complex family background experienced their pathway. Specifically, they characterised their creative education choices as an "unexpected winding path of expression". Students, creatives, and staff spoke of limited access to the cultural and social capital associated with creative subjects. They also recognized that individuals who did not have face economic disadvantage may be more willing to take the risks associated with complex creative careers, highlighting the importance of well-timed resource availability.

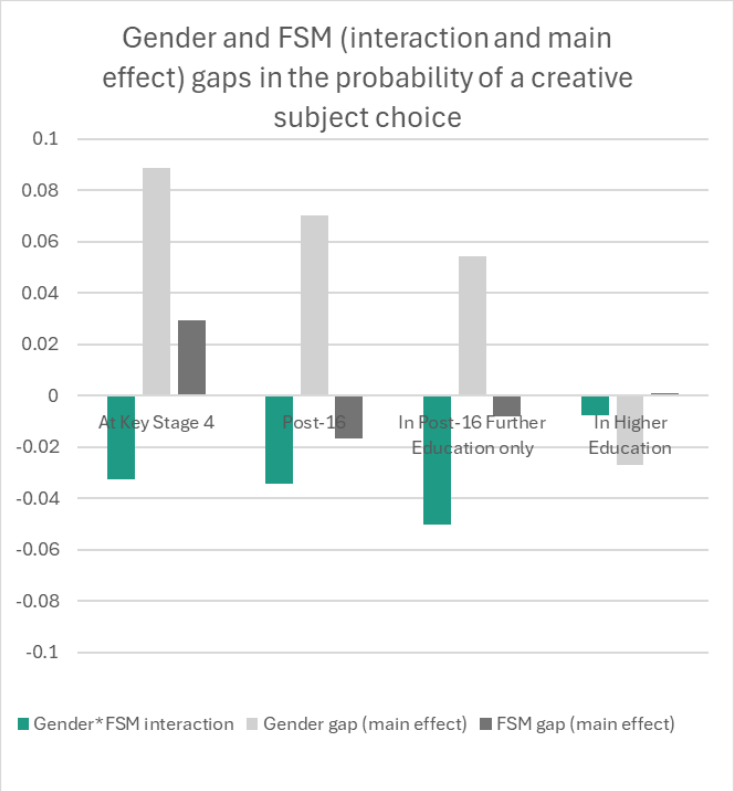
Together, these results therefore suggest that economic barriers become more influential as students navigate the transition to post-compulsory education. This may reflect the actual and perceived economic risks of specializing in creative fields when not supported by family financial security. Given that the evidence also pointed to complexities at the intersection of gender and economic background, this report turns to these now.

GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND INTERACT TO SHAPE CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The administrative data also allows for the exploration of how gender and socio-economic background interact to shape students' opportunities to make a creative subject choice. This exploration uses a series of linear regression models that control for cohort, ethnicity, IDACI deciles (bottom and top), prior attainment, school type, and region. The models for post-16, post-16 FE, and for HE additionally included controls for making a creative subject choice at all preceding educational stages. All results are reported in Appendix Table 26.

The main result is that girls who are eligible for free school meals had lower chances of making a creative subject choice at all stages of their education, over and above the gender and socio-economic gaps already documented. Figure 10 below illustrates this.

Figure 10 Gender and FSM (interaction and main effect) gaps in the probability of making a creative subject choice at each education level, across all cohorts



The models reported above included prior subject choices from post-16 onwards. Therefore, the gaps observed in post-16 education point to heightened attrition from creative pathways among girls eligible for free school meals during the transition to FE post-16. The relatively narrow SES gap and the enduring negative interaction between gender and SES in HE further suggested prior selection effects, rather than equalisation of opportunity. Earlier stages appear to play a decisive role in shaping who remains in the pool of potential entrants to creative higher education, with cumulative disadvantages disproportionately affecting students facing economic disadvantage and especially girls within that group.

CREATIVE OCCUPATIONS AND EMPLOYMENT: EDUCATION AND DEGREES SHAPE CHANCES

Having explored educational pathways, this section now looks beyond education, to employment opportunities, and specifically in creative occupations.

Accessing creative occupations was noted by many workshop and survey participants as a key reason for having made a creative subject choice, at any stage of their education.

The Next Steps data allows for the exploration of employment in creative occupations at ages 25 and 32. By age 25 (approximately in 2015), just 4.3% of the Next Steps cohort worked in creative occupations; by age 32 (approximately in 2022), this figure dropped slightly to 4.1%[4].

These figures represent the culmination of attrition in creative subject preferences and choices translated into creative employment over time (for the Next Steps cohort): from almost one in two young people expressing a creative subject preference at age 14, to approximately one in twenty-five working in the creative sector in their early thirties.

These low rates of engagement in creative occupations were not uniformly distributed by socio-economic and educational background. Table 7 below illustrates the rates of creative occupations at each respective age for each socio-demographic group and by region, in the Next Step cohort.

The gender pattern mirrored the trend observed earlier. Women expressed stronger creative preferences and were more likely to make a creative subject choice early on, but once at higher education, the gender gaps flipped in favour of men. This trend was retained in relation to employment, with men in the Next Steps cohort more likely to have a creative occupation than women (not considering any other factors).

Looking at differences by region of initial residence, two stood out: individuals from London and the South East had higher rates of participation in creative occupations than those in other regions at both ages 25 and 32. They were followed by cohort members from the South West, while by age 32, those from the North West were just as likely as their South West peers to be in a creative job.

Table 7 Next Steps: Overall and broken-down rate of employment in a creative occupation (for employed individuals) at ages 25 (wave 8) and 32 (wave 9) respectively

Personal characteristics at age 14		Creative occupation at 25	Creative occupation at 32
Overall	All	4.3%	4.1%
Gender	Female	3.5%	3.6%
	Male	5.0%	4.5%
FSM	Eligible	0.2%	0.3%
	Not eligible	3.9%	3.5%
Ethnicity	White	4.3%	4.0%
	Mixed	5.9%	6.6%

[4] In the national data, and using a more granular definition of creative occupations than used here (Appendix 1c), national statistics put the proportion of total creative employment at between 5.6% in Tees Vally and 16.7% in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough as at 2024 ONS Source: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/adhocs/3272estimatednumberofjobsbycreativeeconomycategoryandcreativeindustrygroupatcombinedauthoritylevel2021to2024

	Indian	4.4%	4.1%
	Pakistani	suppressed*	suppressed*
	Bangladeshi	suppressed*	suppressed*
	Black Caribbean	6.7%	suppressed*
	Black African	suppressed*	10.1%
	Other	suppressed*	suppressed*
Region	North East	3.5%	suppressed*
	North West	3.7%	4.0%
	Yorkshire and the Humber	3.8%	3.6%
	East Midlands	3.7%	3.2%
	West Midlands	2.4%	3.6%
	East of England	4.2%	2.7%
	London	5.4%	5.7%
	South East	6.2%	5.9%
	South West	4.4%	4.0%
Urban	Urban	4.0%	4.0%
	Rural	5.0%	4.3%
N		**6,298**	**4,758**

*suppressed because cell count smaller than 10 unweighted observations

WHAT EXPLAINS ENGAGEMENT IN A CREATIVE OCCUPATION?

A set of linear probability models (Appendix Table 7) attempt to explain the above creative occupation patterns from the totality of demographic characteristics and educational preferences and choices made previously.

First, when looking at age 25, and using only demographic characteristics to explain the probability of being in a creative occupation, women emerged as less likely than men to be in a creative occupation. This remained the case with the addition of preferences but became statistically non-significant with the addition of educational choices. This suggests that the age 25 gender gaps were explained by gender differences in the rate of making a creative subject choice. Neither ethnicity nor region, when all demographic aspects were taken together, were associated with chances of being in a creative occupation at age 25.

Both early preferences (at age 14/15) and later preferences (at age 16 and 18), as well as studying a creative subject in higher education, predicted creative employment at age 25, when actual subject choices were not considered. Once choices were considered, preferences no longer shaped the chance of being in a creative occupation. This suggests it is the translation of preference into an actual choice that influences later (employment) outcomes, and that the above-identified pathways through creative subject choice are highly consequential for creative employment.

Second, when looking at age 32 creative occupations, gender gaps reversed once again: when all economic, socio-demographic and educational factors and trajectories were considered, women were more likely to be in creative occupations (though this result is not very precise). Early preferences remained predictors of being in a creative occupation at age 32, even after actual creative subject choices were accounted for, possibly suggesting that creative preferences could be realised later in people's careers.

Finally, the analysis explored how creative occupations were sustained. Having a creative occupation at age 25 was the strongest explanatory factor for having a creative occupation at age 32, all economic, socio-demographic and educational factors considered. Within

this, the analysis indicated that women were more like than men to be in a creative occupation, all else held equal, but the gender gap was very small.

Having a higher education degree was, at both ages, and over and above all other economic and socio-demographic factors, strongly associated with being in a creative occupation. This is consistent with prior evidence emphasising the high proportion of graduates working in the creative sector (Holt-White et al., 2024).

At both ages, economic deprivation, captured as before by free school meal eligibility (ever in the last 6 six years, measured when the cohort member was 16), showed a complex relationship with creative occupations, just like it had done with creative subject choices. Specifically, all other socio-demographic and educational characteristics considered, people previously eligible for free school meals were as likely as those who were not to be in a creative occupation at ages 25 and 32.

This specific result does not contradict the wider evidence (Holt-White et al., 2024) around substantial under-representation of people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in creative occupations. Instead, it suggests that, when looking at people similar in every other way (demographically, educationally, geographically), free school meal eligibility was not a key factor shaping their chance to be in a creative occupation. This is because of the substantive gaps by economic disadvantage that emerged and manifested much earlier in the educational system, both in terms of attainment and creative subject choice.

Overall, the above evidence suggests that a complex set of preferences, actual educational choices, and socio-demographic factors interact to shape creative occupation chances for the Next Steps cohort. The qualitative data offers substantial insights into how creative choices shaped individuals' trajectories and experiences around creative employment.

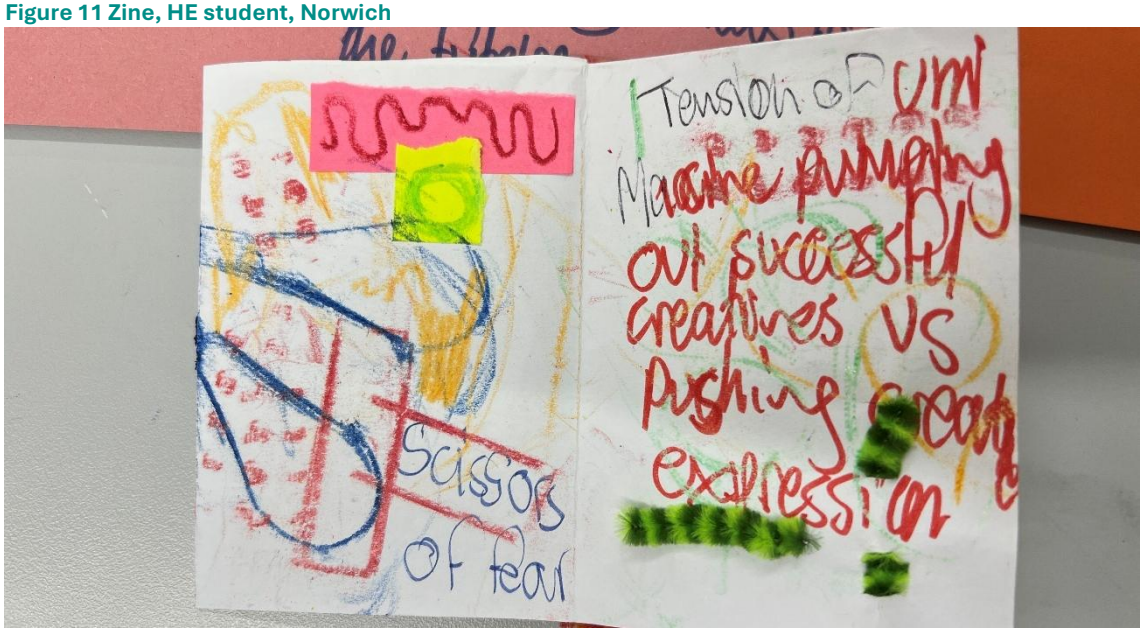
When students saw strong connections between their respective colleges or universities and the creative sector, this gave them confidence that they could have better opportunities to progress into creative employment. One HE student in Norwich indicated:

I see strong connections between industry and institutions. I feel excited, challenged and anxious about my future [...] It's a complex scene to navigate [...] The path forward is complex."

In workshops, students further articulated a tension between their creative expression and pressures they felt from within their HE institution to perform well and translate into 'success' the various employability and industry links their degree course was offering (Figure 11). Students in the Norwich workshop often returned to their fears around their later opportunities (as in Figure 11), and how they felt that their employment opportunities could be curtailed at any point, placing them under stress and pressure.

In contrast to higher education, further education was seen to sometimes offer a "bitty-er" (HE and HE staff, London) creative set of options: and while the complexity around types of qualification was not always desirable, it was much more aligned with what FE and HE staff both reported to be the nature of creative employment (of any type): an "assemblage of parts", much like the combination of qualifications and subjects taken in FE, rather than monolithic, like degree subjects in HE (HE and FE staff, London).

Figure 11 Zine, HE student, Norwich



This was reflected in the account of complex employment arrangements by one survey participant (Female, East of England):

"I work part time in a supermarket, and part time as a self employed artist. A lot of my work is using pastel and mostly portraiture [...]. My art degree helped me to have the confidence to study more visual art classes and helped me make a decision about the kind of art I wanted and enjoyed doing."

Choices to pursue creative higher education were also seen as highly influential for later employment, including in terms of long-term trajectories. These were sometimes bound up with substantial personal upheaval. In the workshops, one mature female HE student (Norwich) explained that she had had to wait for over two decades to pursue her creative interests. These were deprioritised compared to family caring duties and the need to earn a wage. She used the metaphor of the "winding road" to articulate the "dangers" and fears" associated with such career changes later in life.

Despite HE staff and students both reporting that many creative professionals they knew had non-linear pathways into creative employment, HE staff noted that "non-HE routes into creative employment are considered 'unusual'" (HE staff, Norwich). This reinforced a credentialism perspective that, together with awareness by workshop participants of the non-uniform opportunities to engage with HE for all people, suggested they did not see the creative sector as meritocratic. Instead, workshop participants emphasised the importance of personal background and social context including networks to enable choices that would then translate into creative sector access.

Choices *within* HE were similarly seen as important for later progression into creative employment – the "correct disciplines", as noted by one London HE student, not only in terms of the subjects being studied, but also in terms of understanding what was possible and available within HE. This reflects the earlier evidence about *specific* creative subjects being prioritized.

The workshop and survey insights suggested that the most successful transitions into creative employment involved combinations of formal education for credentialing and the development of essential cognitive skills (like critical thinking), informal skill development through personal projects and online communities, practical industry experience through internships or entry-level positions, and persistent navigation of precarious opportunities.

This complex assemblage of choices and influences resembled the nature of the creative careers themselves. And while this posed challenges to individuals, their commitment to the creative process that creative occupations would enable was a source of support:

"I have worked in several creative sectors, continued to learn and never stop. Art feeds ones' soul, there is never an ending, simply exploring different artistic journeys of expression." (Survey respondent, female, London)

A minority of HE student workshop participants emphasized that technical skills learned informally were more valuable than formal credentials. One survey respondent (male, Manchester) also illustrated this view:

"I am a graphic designer, I fell into a particular area of licensed design due my internship and that experience constantly popping up as useful where many other graphic designers do regular design. Getting my degree was useful but learning how to use photoshop and illustrator was the main skill I had that was useful which I didn't massively get taught at school, I taught myself from when I was a teenager [...]. My education was just a box ticker but taught me how to be critical, judge good design and be organised."

Across workshops and the survey, participants highlighted how economic barriers continued to shape their creative pathways, well beyond initial subject choices, fundamentally influencing degree completion, initial creative employment, and the ability to persist in creative employment. Multiple survey respondents described how financial considerations overrode creative interests in their educational choices. Creatives as well as FE and HE staff looking to support students identified in the workshops the precarity of creative careers and the tensions that this created in their roles as offering support.

In the workshops, students described another dimension of economic disadvantage: the location of where they would go on to study and work as a function of their economic resources. This is explored further in the section on **Place and geography.**

The above qualitative evidence reveals therefore how economic disadvantage operates not just as a barrier to entry to the creative sector, but as an ongoing constraint that makes creative careers less accessible to those facing economic disadvantage. Other studies have documented extensively the irregular income (Alacovska, 2022), precarious nature of (self) employment (Comunian, Faggian, & Jewell, 2011), and extensive networking requirements that creative careers demand of individuals (Comunian et al., 2023; Fillis, Lee & Fraser, 2002). The evidence here adds to this to reaffirm that economic challenges faced by individuals manifest in complex ways throughout their education in relation to creative subject choices and later employment, even when initially they may have personal interests in these subjects and careers.

Having explored the full education pathways and beyond into employment, the report now turns to three specific foci: further education, geography and place, and institutions.

FOCUS ON FURTHER EDUCATION

The evidence presented so far suggests further education is an essential and distinct route into creative subject study, and later creative employment.

The statistical analysis above showed that, at age 16, students completing their KS4 qualifications in FE colleges were more likely to have made a creative subject choice compared to students in most other school types, except local authority-maintained schools with KS4 provision. This association remained even after accounting for students' socio-demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds.

Similarly, the earlier analysis of post-16 education indicated that students in FE settings were more likely to make a creative subject choice than those in other types of post-16 provision. Again, this pattern persisted once socio-demographic factors and educational background were taken into account.

Workshop and survey participants also articulated the importance of FE as a route to gain highly relevant practical skills, including the vocational skills (like graphic design, using specific software, but also managing a creative business) they saw as valuable for their expected or realised employment.

Survey data revealed that seven of ten FE-attending respondents specifically chose the FE route to develop creative and technical skills rather than pursue theoretical study. One (male, Manchester) explained:

"I wanted to do an art and graphic design BTEC instead of A-Levels because I knew I just wanted to work in the visual arts and wanted a more vocational education. I learned more fine art along with graphic design [...]. It was useful to learn how to use various mediums."

The vocational emphasis of FE creative provision resonated with students seeking clear pathways to employment. One respondent (female, London) noted:

"I chose to study graphic design because I enjoyed being creative and liked solving problems visually... Design allowed me to combine creativity with practical thinking, which suited the way I learned and expressed myself better than more purely academic subjects."

However, creatives who had attended FE did not necessarily study for vocational qualifications, suggesting that it was the combination of qualifications and type of education that played a role in shaping their choices and later outcomes. One (male, London) survey respondent offered:

FE "[...] felt like a practical and accessible next step after school. I studied academic qualifications that helped me progress to university rather than creative subjects. My time there was relevant because it gave me a strong understanding of the system [...]. Being a student in that environment has directly shaped how I now work."

This positioning of FE as a creative route suggests a bifurcated system, where students seeking hands-on creative training gravitate toward FE, while those pursuing academic credentials remain in schools or sixth forms. This highlights the importance of credentials, following previous results around the importance of degrees for creative employment.

Despite FE's potential as a creative gateway, workshop and survey respondents also identified significant institutional barriers and quality inconsistencies that could undermine its effectiveness.

Survey respondents reported some challenging experiences in FE, including demotivating teachers, rigid structures around course combinations, and financial pressures which led to them not being able to complete their course. Workshop participants illustrated their FE experiences with imagery depicting complex balancing acts, usually between multiple commitments, multiple options and choices, different personal identities, and the mismatches between their intentions and what they say as possible. They expressed that "the complexity of the qualification system [post-16 in particular] often posed challenges for both staff and students" (FE staff, London).

The workshops further revealed that creative career guidance in FE settings was sometimes perceived as limited, as one FE student (London) illustrated:

"When I look off there into career, these is not so much we can get like this are the type of things are high there, unlike for academic purposes, it is knowledge on it [more established]. So especially for me I have to figure things out myself."

This perceived absence of established pathways and the "bitty-er and more complex" (FE staff, London) nature of FE creative provision mirrored the perceived nature of creative employment. But it left many student workshop respondents feeling like they were navigating their futures with limited support and across a range of processes.

One FE student (London) balanced an appreciation for freedom to make their own subject choices with the risk associated with this, specifically around the possible outcomes of their individual and independent choices. When asked to identify their career aspirations, this same student did not have a clear destination in mind; but focused instead on the process:

"I just hope I can figure out things little by little, and I don't have to [...] do everything at once, I just need to take step by step."

Alongside this student view, FE staff (London) spoke consistently in workshops about prioritising their role to support students and enable their creative pursuits over and above their role as academics in creative fields. This was especially the case in relation to situations where staff saw an absence of economic, social, or cultural capital to automatically enable this creative development.

Staff in workshops used the metaphor of "obstacles in the cogs of the machine" to define their role in supporting students who did make creative subject choices post-16. The reported obstacles were often reflections of socio-economic disadvantage (e.g. students having to work alongside their studies) or structural (e.g. figuring out complex combinations of qualifications and subjects). Staff however also spoke about their duty to "light a fire underneath our learners, but not to control what comes" (FE staff, London).

Further education therefore emerged as a complex but enabling space, where creative subject choices require balance between individual intentions and the realities of both their backgrounds and their intended creative destinations.

PLACE AND GEOGRAPHY

In the workshops, students and staff emphasised the importance of place and location in relation to shaping their creative choice and particularly opportunities for creative employment. The administrative data allows for patterns of students making a creative subject choice to be traced by their place of residence, specifically whether they resided in neighbourhoods that were more or less affected by income deprivation (captured through the IDACI index – the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, split into ten deciles).

In the earlier statistical analysis that estimated the probability of students making a creative subject choice at each respective stage of their education while accounting for socio-demographic and educational backgrounds, students from the most deprived neighbourhoods emerged as having lower probabilities of making a creative subject choice than their counterparts residing in more advantaged areas.

Figures 12 and 13 (Appendix Tables 13-14) below illustrate this lower probability for students from the most deprived neighbourhoods compared to their peers in the least deprived areas. For the former group, the decline at each transition point is steeper.

Figure 12 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: individuals residing in most deprived neighbourhoods (by IDACI) only

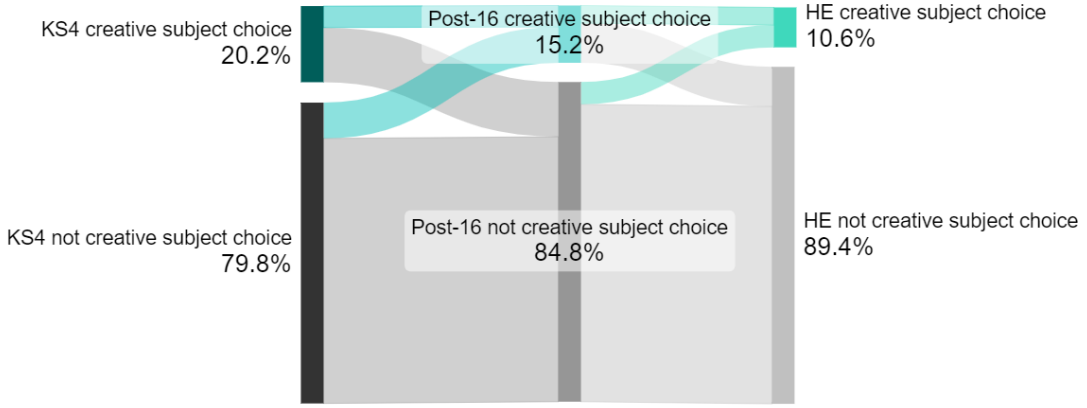
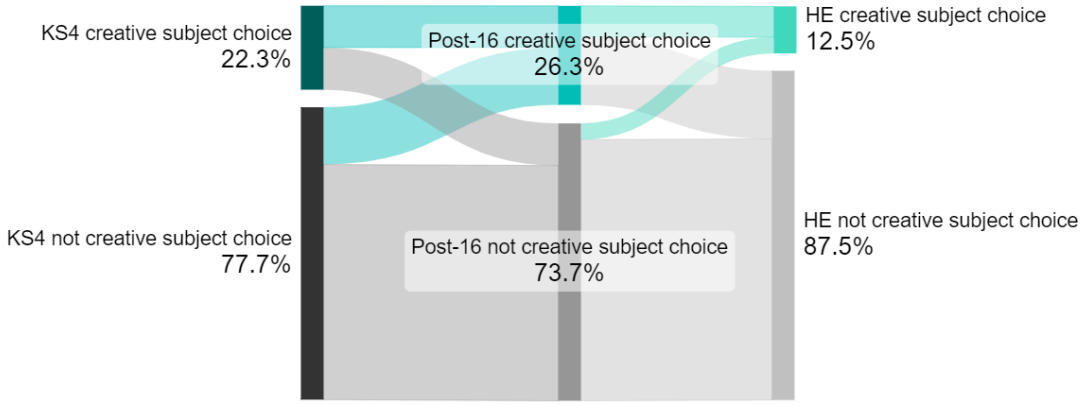


Figure 13 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: individuals residing in least deprived neighbourhoods (by IDACI) only



The pathways above suggest that socioeconomic barriers may become increasingly influential as students make their way through the education system. By higher education, the gap by deprivation of area was relatively small (2 percentage points). This suggests

students from economically disadvantaged areas may have faced compounding obstacles to sustained creative subject choices.

Other evidence (Colman & Colman, 2020; Comunian & Faggian, 2014) has illustrated that place shapes opportunities around creative subjects and creative employment. Given this study's qualitative focus on three key cities, the administrative data could be deployed to examine the creative subject choices in these regions. Figures 14 to 16 below (Appendix Tables 15-17) illustrate these trajectories for the regions of the three cities (London; East of England for Norwich; Greater Manchester/North West for Manchester).

Figure 14 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: individuals residing in London at age 16

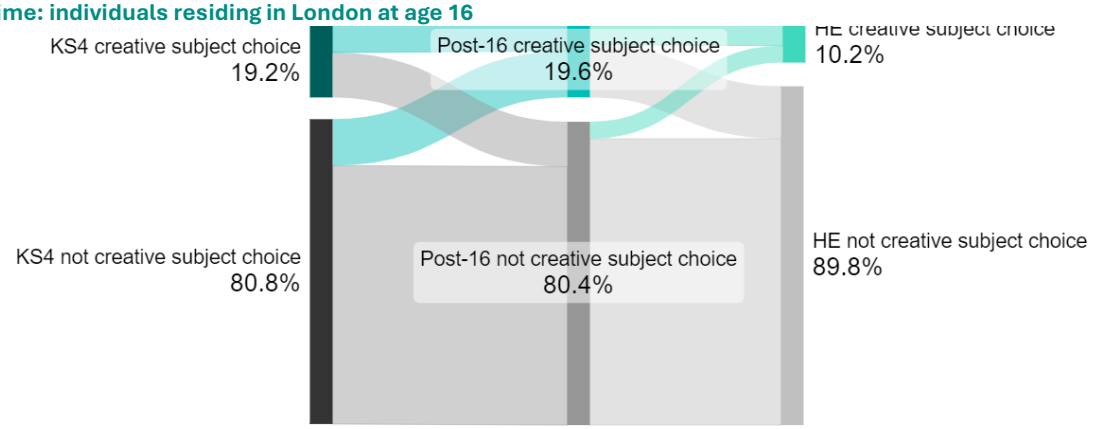


Figure 15 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: individuals residing in the North West at age 16

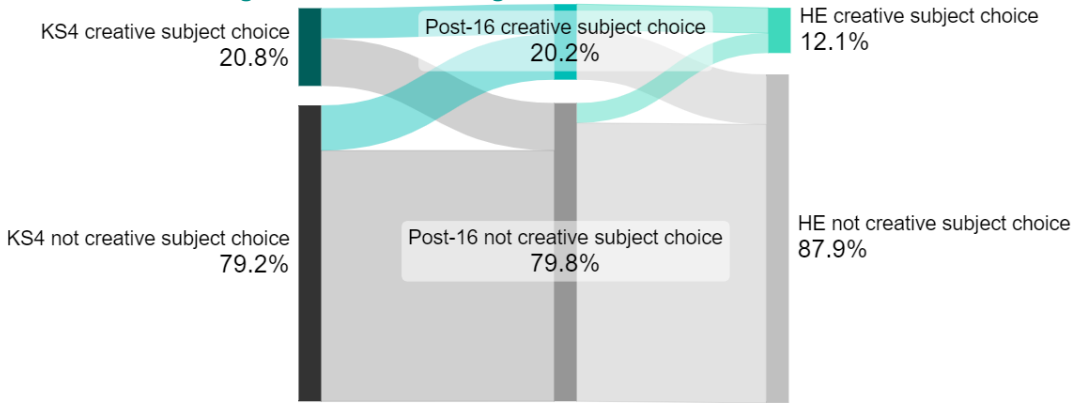
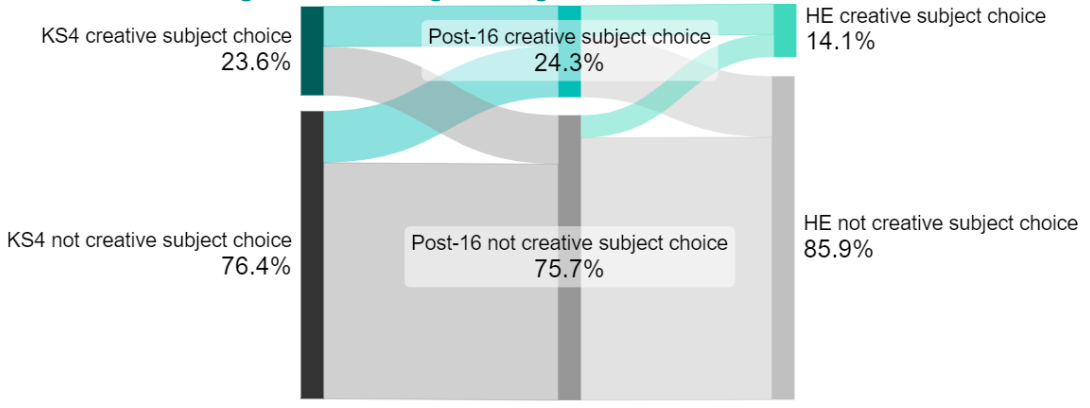


Figure 16 Administrative data: Patterns of making a creative subject choice for the three cohorts over time: individuals residing in the East of England at age 16



These regional breakdowns revealed geographical disparities in the trajectories of creative subject choice. 2.8% of students in London completed a creative subject choice pathway (from KS4 to post-16 and into higher education), compared to 3.4% in the North West (for Manchester) and 4.4% in the East of England (for Norwich). The same pattern reflects in the rate at which students never made a creative subject choice, at any stage of their education: this varied from 59.5% in the East of England to 64.2% in the North West, to 65.9% in London.

Therefore, the above data suggest that sustaining a creative subject choice was not uniform by region. This may be as a function of local contexts and opportunities in the creative sector, available educational opportunities, and of individual circumstances.

Insights from workshop participants illustrate this: one student participant (FE, London) used the imagery of "a snail with the self-propelling shell" to indicate the importance and influence of support from their home environment" (Figure 17). FE students further spoke about the importance of being able to feel they could find "a space within the college around other curriculums" and navigate this while protecting their own aims and goals. Other workshop attendees recognized the complexity of navigating these spaces and balancing push and pull factors from their multiple contexts.

Figure 17 Imagery chosen by FE student, London

A Norwich-based HE student further illustrated the intersection of their geographical and place orientations with familial contexts by choosing to emphasise how their families had supported their choices because they had "paved the road for us" and enabled them to consider "moving away from the past and going towards a bigger pond".

At the same time, they shared concerns about how they occasionally felt "lost" finding their way through what they saw as a "massive growing industry" (HE student, Norwich, referring to the creative sector). They appreciated the support their institution provided them in navigating this space, but their concerns were not fully addressed, particularly in terms of what they deemed was an ever-evolving technological space, with immediate implications for their career opportunities in their local creative sector.

Other HE students workshop participants also emphasized that "choices about being close to home" (HE student, Norwich) meaningfully influenced their creative pathways. They argued this may also be the case for others who could not rely on sufficient resources to make any choice around higher education, potentially limiting access to the most prestigious or specialized creative institutions that tend to cluster in what were seen as expensive urban areas.

Place therefore emerged as shaping individuals' opportunities to make creative subject choices, to sustain such choices, and to navigate creative educational and employment spaces.

THE VIEW FROM EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The arts-based workshops offered staff and students in further and higher education institutions, as well as one group of creatives, the opportunity to discuss how the institutional cultures they were familiar with shaped creative subject choices. Workshop participants were asked to consider the institutional practices they have observed and how these may generate barriers, challenges, or enabling factors for students to realise their creative choices and career intentions.

In the workshops, staff and students were offered similar materials to work with and encouraged to map out their thoughts about the above processes. They generated a series of cartographic representations (map-like illustrations) taking in personal, institutional, and place-based issues, as well as connections into the creative employment sector and society as a whole. These cartographies are included in Appendix 26 as raw visual data generated in the workshops, and findings from the analysis of that data are reported here.

Individual choices around creative subjects emerged as fundamentally relational and sequential processes rather than isolated decisions. Despite given substantial drawing space and no prompts to sketch a consecutive set of events, students drew linear and directional structures. HE students were more likely to choose this depiction of their creative educational pathways than FE students, but all students' work suggested that they experienced creative subject choices as journeys with distinct phases.

Prior qualitative evidence outlined above supports this view, with workshop and survey respondents identifying the importance of transition points in shaping their creative opportunities and noting the complexities experienced around these.

Staff cartographies showed less evidence of this linearity and directionality, including when staff depicted a disconnect between the creative education sector and the creative employment sector.

Complex connections and inter-relations emerged, however, in all participants' cartographies. This suggests that individuals may have perceived their choices as shaped by navigation through interconnected systems, where each stage they identified (institution, education, employment) may act as both a consequence of previous decisions and a gateway to future possibilities. Staff and student depictions differed slightly, as follows.

In students' cartographies, visual markers indicative of an experience of complex pathways around creative subjects were embedded in the linear depicts mentioned above. This suggests students may have construed their creative choices as cumulative, with earlier institutional and educational experiences possibly funnelling individuals into particular educational trajectories or even sectors of creative employment. While this may be the case of all educational choices, it mirrored evidence from the other components of the workshops. Specifically, many of the Dixit cards chosen by student workshop participants to illustrate pathways through education (and into employment, where this was relevant) focused on processes, pipelines, roads and tightropes. Students explained the various twists, turns, and obstacles they faced on each of their respective creative pathways in detail, emphasising how much external pressures they faced, alongside internal struggles.

In the Norwich HE student workshop, the cartography included many elements that suggested an orientation towards the future, specifically the transition into the creative sector. This emerged as an essential aspect of the creative choice pathways for the Norwich-based respondents. This future-orientation was less prominent in the London workshops. Both FE and HE cartographies in London included fewer elements suggesting (a linear) progression and focused much more on current experiences. This difference may reflect the institutional focus on transitions into employment by the institution in Norwich. But it also highlights students' different concerns in relation to their creative experiences and pathways.

In contrast to the depictions by students, imagery in the staff cartographies (and the one cartography by a group of creatives) included a higher rate of networked patterns, rather than linear, cumulative trajectories. This would suggest that staff understood the relationship between institutions, education, and employment operating as an even more complex ecosystem than students.

The grid-like matrices, branching networks, and deliberately zoned layouts that staff chose to include in their cartographies also suggest that participants saw the education, employment and wider societal domains functioned interdependently, with multiple simultaneous influences shaping individual choices at any given moment. The collaborative and expansive approaches used by staff in their cartographies may indicate recognition that staff saw institutional structures, educational offerings, and employment opportunities as mutually constituting each other in time and place.

This was reflected in other insights provided by staff respondents, who outlined how their institutions responded to education sector demands and policy developments, as well as to creative sector changes, shifts in employers' focus in terms of creative jobs, and an evolving local, regional, and national economic picture.

Across HE and FE, staff further acknowledged that their students' educational choices were constrained by institutional provision, as well as by institutional capitals, including how each respective institution was positioned in relation to the local and national creative sectors. Staff made reference to institutional prestige, and the affordance this provided, to themselves in their roles as creatives/academics and enablers of students' creative choices, and to students' too.

The clustering of elements visible across all cartographies suggest that certain combinations of institution-education-employment might be recognized as established routes into the creative sector. This might imply that individual choices, even in their above-outlined complexities, might be operating within pre-existing channels, generated by these inter-institutional relationships. This perspective also emerged from staff views in other workshop components: specifically, staff discussed the importance of degrees for progression into creative employment, both in terms of students' future pathways and as experienced by staff personally.

When creating their cartographies, both FE and HE staff spoke about how their students deliberately reflected the institutional emphases on industry/creative sector connections in their on-course choices. Students supported this view, articulating that when they perceived a focus on transitions into creative sectors from their higher education

institution, they took this seriously, predominantly because it aligned with their own transition to employment goals, and was a main reason they had chosen their specific institution.

In relation to the above, substantial differences emerged in how HE staff saw their institutions supporting students' transition into employment, in the creative sector but also outside of it, specifically via the deployment of institutional capital.

In the Norwich cartography, staff perspectives suggested this institutional capital resided in the explicit link to the creative sector and the deliberate engagement with creatives. They further focused on curriculum, and on the inclusion in it of opportunities for students studying creative subjects at university to very early understand what the creative sector could offer them.

In the specialist HE institution in London, staff focused in their cartography on the reputation and prestige of the institution, which was seen to be valuable for students wishing to enter the creative labour market, over and above their academic background and skills. Staff acknowledged the established reputation of their institution and argued strongly for the existence of a disjuncture between the institutional perspective and both the higher education and the creative sector, illustrated through a deliberate tear in the material of the cartography.

In addition to mapping out creative pathways, workshop participants were specifically asked to consider the barriers (and enablers) of creative choices. Student cartographies went further than staff in terms of identifying barriers to creative educational choices. In generating the cartographies, students in all workshops engaged in discussions around how those who had experienced economic hardship or had limited resources needed to navigate invisible barriers and make strategic choices that would not always be immediately available. Students reflected that their FE and HE experiences respectively shaped greatly what was available to them, including in terms of the possibility space for future employment.

Students expanded on the above-reported issues around place. They highlighted the importance of both economic and socio-cultural capital in navigating the process of moving away from home for creative study or creative employment. Their cartographies therefore amplified the sense that students were aware that the barriers some of them faced were higher, with no association to their creative ability, and highlighted that educational institutions played a role (to varying degrees) in removing some of these barriers.

Overall, therefore, the cartographies illuminated different institutional positionings in relation to the creative sector, different realities of supporting students with varied levels of economic and socio-cultural resources to navigate their choices of creative subjects and their potential transitions into creative employment, and the range of challenges that students in particular articulated they faced in realising these choices.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the interplay of socio-economic background, gender, type of educational provision, and geography in shaping students' creative subject choices across compulsory, further, and higher education in England. Using linked administrative data covering over 1.7 million students, longitudinal survey data from Next Steps, qualitative arts-based methodologies and a qualitative survey, the research reveals a complex landscape of creative subject preferences, choices, and pathways that point to persistent and complex inequalities and surprising reversals across educational stages and beyond.

THE CREATIVE SUBJECT PATHWAYS: FROM PREFERENCES TO EMPLOYMENT

The evidence revealed stark attrition between early creative preferences and eventual creative pathways. Creative subject preferences exhibited a U-shape pattern: high at ages 13-14, declining post-16, and partially re-emerging at key transition points such as entry into higher education. Yet, these preferences translated only weakly into actual subject choices, which decline steadily across educational stages. Overall, only 3.8% of students who progressed to higher education had made a creative subject choice at all three educational stages (Key Stage 4, post-16, and HE).

The data also suggested that some students entered creative pathways at later stages, with a small proportion (2.8%) making creative subject choices in higher education despite never having done so previously.

Employment in the creative sector reflected a further dramatic narrowing of the creative pathway. In the Next Steps cohort, approximately one in two young people expressed creative preferences at age 14, compared with only one in twenty-five working in creative occupations in their early thirties.

The different pathways of students making creative subject choices shows that the above narrowing was not uniform and was shaped by intersecting personal, economic and geographical factors.

GENDER: CHANGING PATTERNS OVER THE PATHWAY

Gender emerged as an interesting factor in shaping creative subject choices, operating differently at different educational stages. Girls consistently reported higher creative subject preferences than boys early on. This pattern largely translated into actual choices at age 16. Statistical modelling corroborated this and suggested that, when controlling for prior attainment and school characteristics, girls were more likely than boys to make creative subject choices at age 16, and in post-16 education, including in further education.

However, this gender gap reversed in higher education, where men became slightly more likely to have made a creative subject choice, all other factors considered. This reversal persisted into employment, even as the analytical sample is smaller (based on Next Steps). At age 25, men in the Next Step cohort were more likely to be employed in creative occupations than women. By age 32, this gap narrowed, but only slightly. This reflected other evidence (e.g. Ellis, 2021) that found a complex set of reasons why women are not retained within the creative sector.

The qualitative evidence suggested mechanisms behind these patterns. Female participants particularly articulated experiencing family resistance requiring them to prove themselves repeatedly before being supported in their creative pursuits. Survey respondents described choosing creative subjects that they perceived would enhance their employability, suggesting they may be particularly attentive to messaging about the economic risks of creative careers. Both men and women articulated the precarity and complexity of creative employment, but the combination of longitudinal survey and administrative records suggested a more restricted pathway for women rather than men.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES AT CRITICAL TRANSITION POINTS

While preferences for creative subjects and intentions to pursue higher education showed limited economic disparities at ages 14–15, economic disadvantage was associated with creative subject choices in complex and sometimes unexpected ways in the administrative data. At age 16, FSM-eligible students were slightly more likely than their non-FSM peers to make a creative subject choice. However, post-16, this pattern reversed and widened: FSM-eligible students became less likely to have made a creative subject choice, even after accounting for other personal characteristics and their educational trajectory, including prior outcomes.

This socio-economic flip suggests that while initial interest in creative subjects may be relatively evenly distributed or even higher among students facing economic disadvantage, the resources, cultural capital, and institutional support required to continue in creative pathways post-16 may be unequally available. These complex socio-economic disparities were experienced by students and staff, with both groups highlighting in workshops how economic disadvantage operated through accumulated barriers to cultural capital and early creative experiences. Multiple participants described lacking the foundational skills, portfolio materials, or perceived required resources in younger years that would make creative GCSEs viable options. Financial considerations also fundamentally influenced educational and career choices beyond initial subject selection, with several respondents describing how perceived economic stability drove degree choices away from creative subjects, even when these choices went against personal interests.

The economic gap narrowed again in higher education, though FSM-eligible students remained less likely to have made creative subject choices, even after accounting for the HE institutions they attend, as well as their prior attainment and earlier subject choices.

On the one hand, this evidence emphasises the complexity of how economic deprivation shapes creative choices. On the other, it highlights the post-16 transition as a key juncture where economic barriers become more visible.

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The interaction between gender and economic disadvantage revealed particularly pronounced constraints on creative pathways for low-SES girls. At age 16, girls and FSM-eligible students were, independently, more likely to have made a creative subject choice, other socio-demographic and educational factors considered. Over and above this, the negative interaction between gender and free school meal eligibility pointed to a differential functioning of economic deprivation by gender, placing women facing economic deprivation at a disadvantage in terms of their opportunities to make creative subject

choices. This pattern persisted and intensified post-16, with the largest interaction effect observed in further education, suggesting heightened drop-off from the creative subject pathway among disadvantaged female students during this transition. These findings suggest that socio-economic differences at the post-16 stage reflect differential continuation rather than differences in initial choices alone.

In higher education, and accounting for other socio-demographic and educational factors, economic disadvantage was no longer directly associated with the probability of making a creative subject choice; and the gender gap reversed to favour men. However, the interaction between gender and economic disadvantage remained negative, suggesting that women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were still less likely to have made a creative subject choice.

These intersecting differences occurred against diversified fields. FE and HE staff observed differences between these sectors and acknowledged the different positionings of FE and HE institutions in relation to the education sector, the employment sector as a whole, and to the creative sector specifically. They also discussed how students could acquire, via family, schools and others, a practical grasp of the structure of each of the relevant institutional fields (FE and/or HE); but that this grasp differed by the background resources of each individual, and therefore the support required from FE and HE institutions needed to be different and reflect students' needs to enable the realisation of individuals' creative intentions and preferences.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Further education emerged as an important and distinct pathway into creative subject study. In the administrative data, students studying Key Stage 4 qualifications in FE or other colleges were substantially more likely to make a creative subject choice compared to their peers in other school types. Even more strikingly, attending FE post-16 was associated with some of the largest positive effects on the probability of making a creative subject choice observed across the analysis. Possibly due to pre-occurring self-selection, including on attainment, the gender and socio-economic gaps in creative subject choices were slightly smaller in FE compared to post-16 education overall.

However, students who attended FE were less likely to be observed making a later creative subject choice in higher education, suggesting clear barriers to progression. Workshop participants highlighted the value of FE for practical and vocational skills development, and for the intrinsic value of creative subjects. Many FE students had chosen this route specifically to develop creative and technical skills rather than follow a purely theoretical curriculum. FE staff emphasised the importance of supporting students, often navigating insufficient resources and constraints to guide students' creative choices individually. Students appreciated the freedom to make their own choices, but also identified the risks and uncertainties involved in navigating what they perceived as complex combinations of qualifications, subjects, opportunities and risks largely on their own.

PLACE, GEOGRAPHY, AND LOCAL DEPRIVATION

Geographical location and neighbourhood deprivation also emerged as shaping the creative subject choices young people made. Students residing in the most deprived neighbourhoods (in terms of the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, IDACI) at age

16 showed lower rates of sustained creative subject choice across their educational trajectory. In contrast, students residing in the least deprived areas maintained stronger creative subject choices over time.

Qualitative evidence revealed that place shaped opportunities through multiple mechanisms. Workshop participants emphasised how their choices had been shaped by the resources available to them, and how they had to navigate invisible barriers (such as family disapproval, generational attitudes towards creative subjects, complex resource landscapes) and be strategic in their choices so that they could realise their creative aspirations. Participants' higher education choices were also shaped by the availability of resources, prior or perceived in terms of the expected offer by institutions, with workshop and survey respondents noting how they had chosen options closer to home, so that these would become financially viable.

INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The analysis revealed how institutional structures and cultures fundamentally shaped creative subject choices at all stages. Students in workshops and survey respondents reported sometimes having faced limited availability of creative options in school, as well as guidance away from creative subjects, and restrictive timetabling that forced their choices. For them, the framing of creative subjects as risky or illegitimate choices appeared embedded in some institutional cultures. These students saw careers and subject guidance focused primarily on achieving good grades rather than exploring genuine interests.

In higher education, workshop participants' insights revealed that institutional positionings varied significantly. These shaped both the reasons students chose these institutions, often for their perceived strong connections to the creative sector, and what institutions emphasised in their creative curricula. Skills and employability were important in both FE and HE, but they emerged as far less instrumentalised (that is, exclusively aimed at raising employability) in FE. This mirrors evidence elsewhere (Gilmore & Comunian, 2014) about how (higher) education institutions engage with the creative sector.

Both FE and HE staff recognised degrees, predominantly in creative subjects, but also not, as important for progression into creative employment. Staff also acknowledged the importance of non-academic routes, and expressed concerns about non-HE routes into creative employment not being available, especially in the context of them serving different student populations.

The cartography element of the qualitative workshops illustrated the complexity of the pathways students navigated, and how staff in both FE and HE education institutions perceived these as even more intertwined.

The evidence therefore shed light on the varied ways in which institutions position themselves within the creative sector, the challenges of supporting students with different levels of economic and socio-cultural capital as they navigate creative subject choices and their transitions into creative employment, and the obstacles students themselves report facing in pursuing these pathways. This builds on work by Fillis, Lee & Fraser (2022) whereby artists identified the network-making potential of institutions to support their creative careers.

PRIOR ATTAINMENT AND CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICE

While not a critical focus of the analysis above, the relationship between prior attainment and creative subject choice challenges deficit narratives. Students who made a creative subject choice had lower average prior attainment in both mathematics and English at Key Stage 2 compared to those not making creative choices. Further modelling suggested that, controlling for school and demographic characteristics, students with higher attainment at Key Stage 2 were less likely to make creative subject choices at age 16. This pattern shifted in higher education, whereby the prior attainment gaps between those making a creative subject choice and those not, reduced substantially. The influence of prior attainment became even more complex when accounting for prior creative subject choices and institutional selection.

These findings suggest that creative pathways may offer meaningful engagement for students whose initial attainment may not conventionally signal academic futures, but also that the resources and support required to develop creative skills and portfolios from earlier ages may not be uniformly available, potentially disadvantaging those from less privileged backgrounds, whose attainment is affected by these resources.

THE PATHWAY TO CREATIVE EMPLOYMENT

Finally, the analysis explored the last key transition point in the realisation of making a creative subject choice – employment. Having a creative higher education degree (conditional on engaging with higher education in the first place), emerges as strongly associated with being in a creative occupation at both ages 25 and 32 for the Next Steps cohort, over and above all other economic and socio-demographic factors. This is consistent with evidence of high graduate representation in the creative sector. However, the qualitative evidence suggests that the relationship between a prior creative subject choice and creative employment is not straightforward. Some graduates responding in workshops, as well as some survey respondents (all of whom were working in the creative sector), outlined that even when they did secure employment in the creative sector, this was not in artistically fulfilling roles. Survey respondents further described the precarious nature of their creative careers, involving multiple income streams and the need to balance creative work with non-creative income-generating employment.

For the Next Steps cohort, early creative preferences retained significance in predicting creative employment even after accounting for later actual educational choices. The qualitative evidence suggested that for participants, successful transitions into creative employment involved combinations of formal education for credentialing and informal skill development through personal projects and online communities, practical creative sector experience through internships or entry-level positions, and persistent navigation of precarious opportunities over time. This complex assemblage mirrored the nature of creative careers experienced by these individuals.

FINAL INSIGHTS

This research finds that students make a creative subject choice at increasingly lower rates through their educational careers. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds specifically experienced a steady decline in the probability of making a creative subject choice, from age 16 onwards, suggesting persistent constraints on their subject choices. This is despite their relative over-representation in further education. As

long as the further education sector, which emerges from this work as an important route for creative subject choices, is not comparably well resourced to other post-16 routes and to higher education, these disadvantages are unlikely to disappear.

In contrast, students from more advantaged backgrounds began with substantially higher participation, peaked at post-16, and then showed a sharp decline at higher education entry. This pattern likely reflects a strategic withdrawal from creative degrees, except in cases where such degrees were associated with HE institutions seen as prestigious, as highlighted in the qualitative insights. The relatively small gap observed in higher education, therefore, masks compounding inequalities that operate earlier in the educational trajectory. These cumulative inequalities, manifesting in lower educational attainment and different choices of subjects and routes, may be 'screening out' individuals so that they do not access creative higher education, or higher education at all.

These inequalities in creative subject choices were not static but shifted across educational stages, with critical transition points, particularly the move to post-16 education, representing moments where socio-economic barriers intensify and intersect with gender and other larger-scale factors. The reversal of gender gaps (initially showing women more likely to make a creative subject choice) from education into employment, the particular constraints faced by low-SES girls, and the differential pathways through further education versus academic routes, all point to the need for interventions that recognise these shifting dynamics rather than treating creative subject choices as a uniform challenge. These are addressed in the Policy Recommendations below.

The evidence reveals a system where early creative preferences are relatively widespread, yet societal structures, resource constraints, and cultural messaging systematically constrain opportunities. The strong association between creative higher education and subsequent creative employment, combined with the barriers faced by economically disadvantaged students in sustaining creative pathways, suggests that current patterns are more likely to perpetuate, rather than disrupt, existing inequalities in the creative sector. The role of place and geography adds further complexity, with local deprivation and regional creative sector strength shaping both opportunities and constraints in ways that interact with individual and institutional factors.

NEXT STEPS IN TERMS OF RESEARCH

This study has explored multiple aspects of creative subject choices, contributing to a broader literature that highlights class differentials (Holt-White et al, 2024), gendered experiences (Frances, 2000), and geographic disparities (Communian & Faggian, 2014). Despite these insights, several important questions remain unanswered, in Box 4 below:

Box 4 Future directions for research

Research questions for future research

What are the pathways arounds the choice of specific creative subjects (for instance: music, drama, games design, graphic design, architecture, etc.) and how do personal, educational, and place factors interact to shape these?

How might structural reforms reposition further education as an institutionally prestigious pathway, equivalent to higher education? If such repositioning were to occur, how would FE institutions need to adapt, and what impact might this have on supporting students currently pursuing creative subjects in FE?

Given that HE institutions are differentiated - both in reality and perception - by prestige and specialisation, how do institutional cultures and fields facilitate or constrain students' ability to realise their creative subject choices, regardless of their backgrounds?

How can education providers across different stages work together to systematically address the complex and persistent effects of economic disadvantage on creative pathways?

What can schools, and particularly schools' careers guidance provision, do to challenge enduring perceptions of creative subjects as "less-than", support creative choices at all levels of academic attainment, and enable students to sustain and successfully navigate their creative futures of choice?

What are the employment destinations and economic returns for students studying creative subjects in FE; and are there subject/region/industry sector differences?

For creative sector employees, how do their prior educational backgrounds influence career trajectories, occupational category, and earnings; and are there subject/region / industry sector differences?

Answering these and other questions could provide important insights for policy and practise, helping to create more equitable and supportive pathways for creative education, and into creative employment. Until then, this research underscores the need for system-level approaches that align institutional culture and provision to nurture and retain creative talent across diverse backgrounds.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A series of policy recommendations emerge from the above evidence, outlined in Box 5 below. The recommendations include the shifting of system-wide priorities, perspectives, and approaches, as well as recommendations for educational institutions and careers advice. These policy recommendations recognize that individual creative subject choices, institutional mechanisms, and systemic issues are inter-related and also respond to factors from outside the educational system, including socio-economic circumstances.

Box 5 Policy recommendations

System recommendations

Actively promote the value of creative subjects for all, by communicating both individual benefits and the contribution of the creative sector to society and the economy, while acknowledging challenges and providing support for transitions into employment.

Challenge the institutional hierarchy between FE and HE institutions, by recognizing best practice across the educational sector regardless of type of institution.

Challenge the hierarchy between creative and non-creative subjects, in FE and in HE, by addressing deficit narratives that may position creative subjects as less rigorous or less intrinsically valuable.

Support the post-16 transition for all individuals, and specifically around creative subjects, by creative supporting systems and communicating existing and ideally simplified subject and qualifications, in FE and non-FE provisions.

Support the transition into creative HE, by acknowledging the quality of creative FE routes, the possibility of later entry and non-linear pathways.

Offer sustained, easily accessible, and contextualised support for all, but especially for groups substantially underrepresented in creative education and the creative sector, including individuals who have faced economic disadvantage, live in disadvantaged areas, and women.

Increase the workforce of specialist creative subject teachers and lecturers, in schools and FE, to improve the availability and quality of creative subjects for all students.

Careers-focused recommendations

Provide careers support and advice that acknowledges the complexities of creative careers and prepares students for navigating these complexities by enabling the development of employability skills.

Build on existing best practice around partnership and collaboration between education institutions and the creative sector to enable awareness of, and progression into a variety of creative careers.

Level-specific institutions-aimed recommendations

Support students who wish to study creative subjects for GCSEs or equivalent qualifications by challenging deficit narratives about creative subjects, and by addressing practical limitations to creative subjects, including advice and guidance, and timetabling.

Support FE students who wish to study creative subjects to navigate the intersection of the particularly complex qualification space in FE and the enduring challenges of progression into employment, by providing means for all students to access the relevant skills, knowledge, and creative and financial resources.

Support HE students who wish to study creative subjects, including specifically those with limited prior opportunities, by addressing hidden prerequisites, making explicit expectations about cultural, creative and creative sector experiences, and by providing means for all students to access these.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 Conceptual positioning

Conceptually, this study positions educational opportunities, choices, and outcomes as fundamentally shaped by structural and economic factors. While individuals may rationally seek to maximize the economic utility of their subject choices, especially at later stages in their education trajectories, decisions concerning creative subjects and careers may also reflect non-economic aspirations and values. This mirrors recent evidence (Thomson et al., 2020) that suggests that, beyond the long-term career and other opportunities, students who make creative subject choices also value the present affordances of creative engagement that these subjects, and the pedagogies associated with them, offer.

This study therefore positions the decision-making space surrounding creative subjects as constrained and mediated by intersecting structural, economic, and personal characteristics. The conceptual tools supporting the exploration of these phenomena emerge primarily from a Bourdeusian understanding of the interplay between structures and individuals.

At its most basic, Bourdieu's theory of practice (1998) illustrates how relations of privilege and domination are (re)produced through the interaction of 'habitus', a matrix of dispositions that shape how the individual operates in the social world; 'capital' that is economic cultural, social and symbolic resources; and 'field' that is, social conditions and conditions. Given that this study features creative subject preferences and educational pathways from compulsory education, through higher and further education through to employment, there is a need for a concerted drive to understand the values, assumptions and taken-for-granted creative chances and choices.

For Bourdieu (1989), 'fields' are inherently unequal which means that a field is a network that is "composed of institutions or individuals who are competing for the same stake" (Eagleton, 2007, p. 157). A field is, therefore, a social space such as a higher or further institution in which agents "struggle to maximise their position" (Maton, 2005, p. 689).

Recognising this, 'habitus 'can be thought of as an action (practice) that reflects, and is oriented, by a position in any particular field (Bourdieu, 1996). Creative subjects within educational institutions, institutions that offer creative subjects, and the creative employment sector as a whole can each act as such a field.

Fundamentally, habitus encompasses the aspects and influences on individuals' chances, emerging from where they were born, how they were raised, and what they were surrounded by throughout their life.

Finally, 'capital' can be thought of as the resources and rewards available in a field, resources that are accrued by people and operationalised as they navigate the field(s) in which they participate. Capitals are, thus, "types of assets that bring social and cultural advantage or disadvantage'" (Moore, 2008, p. 104) within particular fields.

Conceptualised thus, making a creative subject choice is not simply what people 'do', but is a complex interaction of a field and its positions with the dispositions (habitus) and resources (capitals) of those acting in educational spaces. This conceptualisation informs the analysis of data and the reporting of results in this report.

Appendix Table 2A: List of creative subjects and subject codes (JACS) (following Holt-White et al., 2024)

Category	JACS code	JACS label	Category	JACS code	JACS label
Architecture	K100	Architecture	Art	W130	Sculpture
Architecture	K110	Architectural design theory	Art	W140	Printmaking
Architecture	K120	Interior architecture	Art	W160	Fine art conservation
Architecture	K130	Architectural technology	Art	W190	Fine art not elsewhere classified
Architecture	K190	Architecture not elsewhere classified	Creative writing	W800	Imaginative writing
Architecture	K300	Landscape & garden design	Creative writing	W810	Scriptwriting
Architecture	K310	Landscape architecture	Creative writing	W820	Poetry writing
Architecture	K320	Landscape studies	Creative writing	W830	Prose writing
Architecture	K340	Garden design	Creative writing	W890	Imaginative writing not elsewhere classified
Art	W100	Fine art	Dance	W500	Dance
Art	W110	Drawing	Dance	W510	Choreography
Art	W120	Painting	Dance	W540	Types of dance
Dance	W543	Contemporary dance	Design	W220	Illustration
Dance	W550	Dance performance	Design	W230	Clothing/fashion design
Dance	W590	Dance not elsewhere classified	Design	W231	Textile design
Design	J400	Polymers & textiles	Design	W240	Industrial/product design
Design	J410	Polymers technology	Design	W250	Interior design
Design	J420	Textiles technology	Design	W260	Furniture design
Design	J430	Leather technology	Design	W270	Ceramics design
Design	J440	Clothing production	Design	W280	Interactive & electronic design
Design	J443	Pattern cutting	Design	W290	Design studies not elsewhere classified
Design	J445	Footwear production	Design	W700	Crafts
Design	W200	Design studies	Design	W720	Metal crafts
Design	W210	Graphic design	Design	W721	Silversmithing/goldsmithing
Design	W211	Typography	Design	W723	Clock/watchmaking
Design	W212	Multimedia design	Design	W730	Wood crafts
Design	W213	Visual communication	Design	W740	Surface decoration
Design	W762	Thatching	Drama	W461	Stage design
Design	W770	Glass crafts	Drama	W470	Performance & live arts
Drama	W400	Drama	Drama	W472	Circus arts
Drama	W410	Acting	Drama	W473	Community theatre
Drama	W420	Directing for theatre	Drama	W490	Drama not elsewhere classified
Drama	W430	Producing for theatre	Games	I600	Games
Drama	W440	Theatre studies	Games	I610	Computer games programming
Drama	W441	Theatre & professional practice	Games	I620	Computer games design
Drama	W442	Contemporary theatre	Games	I630	Computer games graphics
Drama	W443	Technical arts & special effects for theatre	Journalism	P500	Journalism
Drama	W450	Stage management	Journalism	P510	Factual reporting
Drama	W451	Theatrical wardrobe design	Journalism	P590	Journalism not elsewhere classified
Drama	W452	Theatrical make-up	Media production	I700	Computer generated visual & audio effects
Drama	W453	Technical stage management	Media production	I710	Computer generated imagery
Drama	W460	Theatre design	Media production	P310	Media production

Media production	P311	Television production	Music	W300	Music
Media production	P312	Radio production	Music	W310	Musicianship/performance studies
Media production	P313	Film production	Music	W311	Instrumental or vocal performance
Media production	W600	Cinematics & photography	Music	W312	Musical theatre
Media production	W610	Moving image techniques	Music	W314	Jazz performance
Media production	W611	Directing motion pictures	Music	W315	Popular music performance
Media production	W612	Producing motion pictures	Music	W317	Historical performance practice
Media production	W613	Film & sound recording	Music	W320	Music education/teaching
Media production	W614	Visual & audio effects	Music	W330	History of music
Media production	W615	Animation techniques	Music	W340	Types of music
Media production	W620	Cinematography	Music	W341	Popular music
Media production	W630	History of cinematics & photography	Music	W342	Film music/screen music
Media production	W631	History of cinematics	Music	W343	Jazz
Media production	W640	Photography	Music	W344	Folk music
Media production	W690	Cinematics & photography not elsewhere classified	Music	W346	Sacred music
Music	W350	Musicology	Music	W388	Popular music composition
Music	W351	Ethnomusicology/world music	Music	W390	Music not elsewhere classified
Music	W355	Music psychology	Music technology	J930	Audio technology
Music	W380	Composition	Music technology	J931	Music recording
Music	W381	Electracoustic composition/acousmatic composition	Music technology	W370	Music technology & industry
Music	W382	Sonic arts	Music technology	W371	Sound design/commercial music recording
Music	W383	Electronic music	Music technology	W372	Creative music technology
Music	W384	Applied music/musicianship	Music technology	W374	Music production
Music	W385	Commercial music composition	Music technology	W375	Music management/music industry management/arts management
Music	W386	Multimedia music composition	Music technology	W376	Music marketing

Appendix Table 2B: List of creative subjects and subject codes (HECOS) (following Holt-White et al., 2024)

Category	HECoS code	HECoS label	Category	HECoS code	HECoS label
Architecture	100583	Architectural design	Dance	100711	Choreography
Architecture	100122	Architecture	Dance	100885	Ballet
Architecture	100121	Architectural technology	Design	100061	Graphic design
Art	100059	Fine art	Design	100062	Illustration
Art	100587	Drawing	Design	100632	Visual communication
Art	100592	Sculpture	Design	100055	Fashion design
Art	100595	Printmaking	Design	100054	Fashion
Art	100589	Painting	Design	100050	Product design
Dance	100068	Dance	Design	100051	Textile design
Dance	100712	Dance performance	Design	101316	Interior design and architecture
Dance	101454	Community dance	Design	100048	Design
Dance	100886	Contemporary dance	Design	100375	Web and multimedia design
Design	100636	Interactive and electronic design	Drama	100700	Theatre production
Design	100060	Graphic arts	Drama	100702	Technical theatre studies
Design	100633	Furniture design and making	Drama	100697	Directing for theatre
Design	100630	Typography	Games	101268	Computer games design
Design	100003	Ceramics	Games	101020	Computer games programming
Design	100052	Ergonomics	Games	101267	Computer games
Drama	100703	Stage management	Games	101019	Computer games graphics
Drama	100698	Theatre studies	Journalism	100442	Journalism
Drama	100067	Acting	Journalism	100445	Multimedia journalism
Drama	100069	Drama	Journalism	100439	Broadcast journalism
Drama	100710	Community theatre	Media production	100441	Film production
Drama	100704	Technical stage management	Media production	100057	Animation
Drama	100705	Theatrical wardrobe design	Media production	100716	Cinematography
Drama	100708	Stage design	Media production	100924	Radio production
Drama	100707	Circus arts	Media production	100890	Film and sound recording
Media production	100887	Moving image techniques	Music	100643	Music and arts management
Media production	100363	Computer animation and visual effects	Music	100657	Popular music performance
Media production	101214	Cinematics	Music	101449	Music theory and analysis
Media production	100923	Television production	Music	100862	Sonic arts
Media production	100443	Media production	Music	100656	Jazz performance
Media production	100063	Photography	Music	100854	Community music
Media production	100888	Film directing	Music	100639	Instrumental or vocal performance
Media production	100717	Visual and audio effects	Music	100667	Musicology

Music	100070	Music	Music	100842	Film music and screen music
Music	100867	Electronic music	Music	101451	Popular music composition
Music	100035	Musical theatre	Music	101450	Applied music and musicianship
Music	100843	Jazz	Music	100642	Music education and teaching
Music	100841	Popular music	Music	100674	Ethnomusicology and world music
Music	100637	Musicianship and performance studies	Music	101448	Opera
Music	100695	Music composition	Music	101447	Folk music
Music	100661	Historical performance practice	Music technology	100222	Audio technology
Music technology	100223	Music production	Music technology	100221	Music technology

Appendix 2C The definition of creative occupations

In a divergence from the Holt-White et al (2024) approach and due to data availability, creative occupations were defined using the 3-digit SOC 2010 classification of occupations available in the Next Steps data, captured both at age 25 (wave 8) and at age 32 (wave 9). This analysis must be caveated by several points. First, the 3-digit classification over-counts some occupation groups where only some more granular occupations are creative and others are not, but are counted as such; and under-counts some occupation groups where the overall occupation group is not creative per se but specific granular occupations within may be (but are not counted as such). It must also be noted that an occupation being counted as creative does not amount to the individual being employed in the creative sector – that is a different determination, and therefore this analysis relates to the nature of the occupation, not the overall industry sector in which it occurs. Second, this is based on self-reported data; occupation and income data in Next Steps may suffer from some self-report bias as all survey data; Third, SOC 2010 has now been superseded by SOC 2020, which coincides with wave 9 of the survey; however, to ensure consistency with wave 8, occurring 7 years prior, the earlier classification is used. Overall, the likely effect of these caveats is to downwardly bias the estimates of rates of employment in creative occupations.

Appendix Table 3 Next Steps cohort: overall and broken-down for different socio-demographic groups: preferences and making a creative subject choice at different ages

Personal characteristics		Prefer creative subjects age 14	Prefer creative subjects age 15	Intend creative HE age16 (if HE intent)	Intend creative HE age 17 (if HE intent)	Intend creative HE age 18 (if HE intent)	Age 16 creative subject choice	Post-16 creative subject choice	FE creative subject choice	HE (by age 19)	Creative HE (if in HE by age 19)
Overall	All	42.1%	25.9%	11.9%	11.2%	15.4%	33.6%	24.9%	23.4%	41.4%	19.9%
Gender	Female	53.8%	32.7%	10.2%	12.0%	16.1%	37.7%	26.9%	26.4%	45.2%	19.7%
	Male	31.0%	19.6%	13.2%	9.3%	14.5%	29.8%	22.7%	20.1%	37.5%	20.2%
FSM Eligibility	Eligible	40.0%	21.8%	13.0%	6.8%	10.5%	30.7%	18.7%	16.5%	20.4%	14.5%
	Not eligible	42.3%	27.0%	12.1%	12.1%	15.8%	34.8%	25.2%	24.5%	41.7%	21.2%
Ethnicity	White	42.8%	26.3%	12.6%	12.9%	16.7%	34.2%	26.2%	23.3%	39.2%	21.0%
	Mixed	42.1%	33.2%	13.3%	5.9%	16.6%	37.5%	27.5%	32.9%	43.1%	22.2%
	Indian	34.9%	18.6%	6.5%	suppressed*	5.4%	23.7%	11.2%	18.1%	73.1%	11.0%
	Pakistani	30.3%	17.3%	3.3%	suppressed*	2.5%	22.7%	8.7%	8.9%	50.3%	6.3%
	Bangladeshi	39.9%	23.2%	6.7%	suppressed*	4.1%	37.2%	16.8%	21.2%	51.8%	8.2%
	Black Caribbean	44.1%	26.3%	18.6%	18.7%	22.7%	34.1%	29.0%	35.9%	38.3%	33.5%
	Black African	36.2%	22.2%	9.2%	suppressed*	11.4%	30.2%	22.4%	33.9%	61.2%	17.6%
	Other	36.3%	20.3%	9.4%	suppressed*	12.5%	28.2%	16.1%	32.4%	63.1%	16.3%
Region	North East	40.1%	24.9%	13.6%	9.7%	12.0%	28.5%	18.6%	19.5%	36.4%	16.2%
	North West	39.0%	22.3%	9.8%	9.6%	12.1%	29.1%	20.6%	22.3%	42.5%	18.2%
	Yorkshire and Hu	42.2%	23.4%	1.0%	8.9%	15.2%	32.3%	22.6%	22.0%	36.0%	19.2%
	East Midlands	41.6%	22.7%	12.0%	11.7%	14.7%	39.4%	25.5%	16.6%	38.3%	19.7%
	West Midlands	39.2%	23.4%	11.9%	9.3%	14.9%	27.8%	23.6%	22.3%	41.2%	18.9%
	East of England	44.0%	28.0%	13.2%	17.0%	20.5%	35.5%	27.1%	27.8%	39.2%	23.5%
	London	42.6%	28.3%	11.1%	15.5%	13.1%	32.9%	23.0%	31.7%	54.9%	18.4%
	South East	44.8%	28.1%	14.1%	15.6%	19.7%	35.2%	28.8%	26.3%	41.6%	22.9%
	South West	44.7%	31.3%	12.3%	11.9%	15.2%	41.5%	28.1%	23.4%	36.6%	20.1%
Urban	Urban	41.90%	25.00%	11.8%	11%	15.3%	32.4%	24.2%	23.7%	40.3%	20.1%
	Rural	43.20%	29.30%	12.4%	11.4%	15.7%	37.7%	26.0%	24.1%	45.40%	19.2%
N		15,391	13,530	6,948	3,571	5,720	15,075	8,583	3,612	9,386	4,645

Appendix Table 4: Administrative Data: Regression coefficients (unstandardized): linear probability model predicting a creative subject choice at Key Stage 4 (age 16), per Key Stage 4 cohort

	2015 cohort	2016 cohort	2017 cohort
Predictors:	Unstandardized coefficient (standard error)		
Socio-demographics			
Girl	0.0746*** (0.0012)	0.0915*** (0.0012)	0.0920*** (0.0013)
White	0.0709*** (0.0015)	0.0725*** (0.0015)	0.0759*** (0.0015)
Eligible for FSM	0.0322*** (0.0018)	0.0014 (0.0019)	0.0014 (0.0019)
IDACI most deprived decile	0.0092*** (0.0019)	-0.0222*** (0.0019)	-0.0225*** (0.0020)
IDACI least deprived decile	-0.0279*** (0.0021)	0.0037 (0.0022)	0.0033 (0.0022)
Educational outcomes before KS4			
KS2 Maths	-0.0283*** (0.0019)	-0.0275*** (0.0008)	-0.0300*** (0.0008)
KS2 English	0.0125*** (0.0019)	-0.0173*** (0.0008)	-0.0122*** (0.0008)
KS4 School type (reference category: LA or Equivalent school)			
Academy	-0.0079*** (0.0012)	-0.0032** (0.0013)	0.0000 (0.0013)
Independent	-0.1310* (0.0542)	-0.1540** (0.0584)	-0.1050*** (0.0235)
FE or Other College	0.0700*** (0.0185)	0.1070*** (0.0184)	0.1770*** (0.0174)
Free School	-0.0464*** (0.0081)	-0.1000*** (0.0067)	-0.0744*** (0.0054)
N for regression model	512,670	500,445	488,435

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix Table 5: Administrative Data: Regression coefficients (unstandardized): linear probability model predicting a creative subject choice post-16, per Key Stage 4 (KS4) cohort

	2015 cohort	2016 cohort	2017 cohort
Predictors:	Unstandardized coefficient (standard error)		
Socio-demographics			
Girl	0.0834*** (0.0011)	0.0761*** (0.0010)	0.0675*** (0.0011)
White	0.0633*** (0.0014)	0.0643*** (0.0013)	0.0632*** (0.0013)
Eligible for FSM	-0.0194*** (0.0017)	-0.0184*** (0.0017)	-0.0191*** (0.0017)
IDACI most deprived decile	-0.0158*** (0.0018)	-0.0207*** (0.0018)	-0.0175*** (0.0017)
IDACI least deprived decile	0.0090*** (0.0019)	0.0150*** (0.0018)	0.0176*** (0.0020)
Educational outcomes before KS4			
KS4 Point Score	0.0006 (0.0008)	0.0082*** (0.0008)	0.0044*** (0.0007)
KS2 Maths	-0.0264*** (0.0018)	-0.0129*** (0.0008)	-0.0143*** (0.0007)

KS2 English	0.0277*** (0.0018)	0.0074*** (0.0008)	0.0101*** (0.0007)
KS5 School and Qualification type			
FE College	0.0884*** (0.0014)	0.106*** (0.0015)	0.183*** (0.0017)
Only academic Level 3 qualifications	0.208*** (0.0014)	0.181*** (0.0015)	0.180*** (0.0015)
Only vocational Level 3 qualifications	-0.0137*** (0.0016)	-0.0181*** (0.0016)	-0.0025 (0.0015)
N for regression model	449,915	438,265	424,175

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 6: Administrative Data: Regression coefficients (unstandardized): linear probability model predicting a creative subject choice in higher education, per Key Stage 4 (KS4) cohort

	2015 cohort	**2016 cohort**	**2017 cohort**
Predictors:	Unstandardized coefficient (standard error)		
Socio-demographics			
Girl	-0.0310*** (0.0014)	-0.0333*** (0.0012)	-0.0383*** (0.0014)
White	0.0361*** (0.0016)	0.0463*** (0.0016)	0.0427*** (0.0015)
Eligible for FSM	-0.0038 (0.0024)	-0.0008 (0.0025)	-0.0005 (0.0024)
IDACI most deprived decile	-0.0084*** (0.0024)	0.0014 (0.0024)	0.0034 (0.0023)
IDACI least deprived decile	-0.0135*** (0.0021)	-0.0132*** (0.0021)	-0.0133*** (0.0021)
Educational outcomes at/pre-KS4			
KS4 Score	-0.0265*** (0.0010)	-0.0165*** (0.0012)	-0.0186*** (0.0011)
KS2 Maths	-0.0116*** (0.0023)	-0.0170*** (0.0012)	-0.0221*** (0.0010)
KS2 English	0.0122*** (0.0023)	-0.0103*** (0.0010)	-0.0071*** (0.0010)
Other educational characteristics			
Creative subject choice at KS4	0.151*** (0.0017)	0.140*** (0.0017)	0.126*** (0.0016)
Creative subject choice post-16	0.236*** (0.0016)	0.228*** (0.0017)	0.221*** (0.0017)
Ever in further education	-0.0414*** (0.0015)	-0.0375*** (0.0016)	-0.0455*** (0.0017)
KS4 School type (reference category: LA or Equivalent school)			
Academy	0.0013 (0.0016)	0.0006 (0.0014)	-0.0009 (0.0014)
Independent	0.0058 (0.119)	-0.0177 (0.109)	0.0363 (0.0571)
FE or Other College	0.0914*** (0.0182)	0.0589** (0.0181)	0.0816*** (0.0174)
Free School	0.0159 (0.0108)	0.0074 (0.0082)	0.0190** (0.0062)
N for regression model	223,720	215,520	208,300

Appendix Table 7: Next Steps: Creative occupation at age 25 and respective 32. Linear probability models. Results are coefficients and (standard errors)

	SET ONE: outcome: creative occupation age 25			**SET TWO:** outcome: creative occupation age 32			**SET THREE**: TWO + prior job
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 1**
	Coefficient (Standard error)	Coefficient (Standard error)	Coefficient (Standard error)	Coefficient (Standard error)	Coefficient (Standard error)	Coefficient (Standard error)	Coefficient (Standard error)
Female	-0.0155653 (0.0057144)***	-0.0269122 (0.0064299)***	-0.0213888 (0.0137472)*	-0.0097815 (0.0054759)*	-0.016984 (0.005999)***	0.0045066 (0.0106807)*	0.0142819 (0.0099516)*
FSM eligible	-0.021729 (0.0077756)***	-0.0170857 (0.0086721)**	-0.0175342 (0.0193446)	-0.0174011 (0.009229)*	-0.0123708 (0.0108435)	-0.0061405 (0.0124912)	0.0080033 (0.0127286)
Ethnicity							
Mixed	0.0270731 (0.0222591)	0.0210229 (0.0254214)	-0.006082 (0.0405275)	0.0155489 (0.0216857)	0.0138363 (0.0235014)	-0.0236651 (0.0190142)	-0.0212744 (0.0276423)
Indian	-0.0103756 (0.0096562)	-0.0040694 (0.0108302)	-0.0281634 (0.0249061)	0.0001481 (0.0141798)	0.0055756 (0.0150499)	-0.0145111 (0.0156216)	-0.0013549 (0.0203188)
Pakistani	-0.0059567 (0.0117063)	0.0025963 (0.0128648)	-0.033726 (0.0203427)*	-0.0106612 (0.0111886)	-0.001182 (0.0122742)	-0.0253439 (0.0103016)**	-0.0109275 (0.0093276)
Bangladeshi	-0.0235844 (0.0105173)**	-0.0209202 (0.0118529)	-0.0316897 (0.0316242)	0.0083772 (0.0172183)	0.0200081 (0.0198649)	0.004484 (0.0330774)	0.0112473 (0.0302365)
Black Caribbean	0.0198732 (0.0273462)	0.0047039 (0.0282104)	-0.0637559 (0.0395147)	-0.008403 (0.0197027)	-0.0171995 (0.0201818)	-0.0713291 (0.0202652)***	-0.0669451 (0.031737)**
Black African	-0.0050457 (0.0184906)	-0.0053125 (0.0214288)	-0.0330445 (0.0576829)	0.0692667 (0.0455906)	0.0873636 (0.0529643)*	0.0018523 (0.0480555)	0.0208674 (0.0381107)
Other	-0.013121 (0.0196316)	-0.0114898 (0.022542)	-0.0731539 (0.0282823)**	0.0182964 (0.0269085)	0.0206915 (0.0287613)	0.0443217 (0.0642465)	0.0798422 (0.0682521)
Missing	-0.0387138 (0.0112461)***	-0.0916711 (0.0357378)**	-0.0196973 (0.0442279)	-0.0264274 (0.0090538)***	-0.0323803 (0.0232992)	0.0537755 (0.0413103)	0.0661596 (0.0510257)
Region							
North West	-0.0060979 (0.0143817)	0.0042336 (0.0147948)	0.0106424 (0.0287017)	0.0019514 (0.0116359)	0.0157194 (0.0122416)	0.0274834 (0.0166601)*	0.0147185 (0.012838)
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.0035285 (0.0153915)	0.0080527 (0.0158537)	0.002553 (0.0296744)	0.0065032 (0.0119587)	0.0132505 (0.0125551)	0.0251583 (0.017279)	0.0163427 (0.0135609)
East Midlands	-0.0016687 (0.0151062)	0.0028178 (0.01559)	0.0225376 (0.0334842)	0.0045588 (0.0134341)	0.0101694 (0.0144454)	0.0252143 (0.0160425)	0.0140614 (0.0164304)
West Midlands	-0.0188919 (0.0137887)	-0.0175265 (0.0141994)	-0.0150161 (0.0244859)	-0.0036929 (0.0111359)	0.0028491 (0.0116882)	0.0197535 (0.0126938)	0.0252434 (0.0139276)*
East of England	0.0028213 (0.0149737)	-0.0006553 (0.015222)	-0.0074232 (0.0283815)	0.000707 (0.0114204)	0.0052327 (0.0119876)	0.0076023 (0.0109122)	0.0013532 (0.0132613)
London	0.0136005 (0.0172615)	0.021238 (0.0186933)	0.0735502 (0.0488895)	0.0252972 (0.0153357)*	0.0312847 (0.0158029)**	0.0351365 (0.0203739)*	-0.0037734 (0.0276266)
South East	0.025523 (0.0155596)	0.0276357 (0.0158599)*	0.0162277 (0.0294257)	0.034091 (0.0129116)***	0.0359459 (0.013268)***	0.0457521 (0.0166582)***	0.0316657 (0.0166959)*
South West	0.0051774 (0.016229)	0.004774 (0.0163338)	0.0233188 (0.0311596)	0.021517 (0.0136787)	0.0269055 (0.0141593)*	0.061187 (0.020572)***	0.0438023 (0.0167905)***
Urban	-0.0068893 (0.0075912)	-0.0051696 (0.007941)	0.0079887 (0.014399)	0.0027592 (0.0063834)	0.0019215 (0.0065694)	0.0001082 (0.0136714)	-0.0015828 (0.0117948)
Prefer creative subject age 14		0.0100649 (0.0066009)	0.0065176 (0.0131637)		0.0174674 (0.0059838)***	0.0186221 (0.0113151)	0.0228491 (0.0112073)**
Prefer creative subject age 15		0.0249026 (0.0094625)***	0.0096073 (0.0172107)		0.0264762 (0.0083053)***	0.0018974 (0.0154813)	-0.0136297 (0.0139107)
Intend creative HE age 16		0.0617374 (0.0238243)**	0.0584049 (0.0403173)		0.0400101 (0.0229849)*	-0.0133973 (0.0324165)	-0.0560184 (0.0311476)*
Intend creative HE age 17		0.0069559 (0.0301994)	-0.0245771 (0.0567415)		-0.0065292 (0.0275286)	-0.0075894 (0.0435848)	0.0373587 (0.0518775)
Intend creative HE age 18		0.1014965 (0.0216973)***	-0.0142992 (0.0402366)		0.0810007 (0.0195044)***	-0.0522165 (0.0420241)	-0.0573669 (0.0390152)
Creative subject choice at 16			-0.0115377 (0.0146957)			-0.0010223 (0.0141857)	0.0037382 (0.0120873)
Creative subject choice post-16			0.0147888 (0.0202392)			0.0135521 (0.0181856)	0.0190054 (0.0169578)
Creative subject choice in FE			0.019181 (0.0170141)			0.0111289 (0.012813)	0.0104073 (0.0120158)
Attended HE			0.0062691 (0.0121457)			0.0045934 (0.0100283)	0.0017453 (0.0095666)
HE creative subject (if attended HE)			0.15066 (0.0428741)***			0.1467112 (0.0410028)***	0.1071046 (0.0376803)***
Creative occupation age 25							0.443207 (0.0756332)***
N	**5,296**	**4,786**	**1,426**	**5,280**	**4,753**	**1,250**	**1,114**

***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1

Appendix Table 8 Administrative Data: Trajectories of students making a creative subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts

Overall				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		107,895	7.2%
Creative	Not creative		264,590	17.6%
Not creative	Creative		145,980	9.7%
Not creative	Not creative		987,770	65.6%
Total (rounded)			**1,506,235**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	29,775	3.8%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	43,730	5.6%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	18,015	2.3%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	83,800	10.7%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	25,960	3.3%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	73,060	9.4%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	21,885	2.8%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	483,500	62.0%
Total (rounded)			**779,725**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 9 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making a creative subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: Girls only

Girls				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		75,475	10.0%
Creative	Not creative		144,150	19.1%
Not creative	Creative		87,675	11.6%
Not creative	Not creative		448,965	59.4%
Total (rounded)			**756,260**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	20,260	4.6%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	32,100	7.3%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	10,305	2.3%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	55,455	12.6%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	15,375	3.5%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	45,900	10.4%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	9,185	2.1%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	251,090	57.1%
Total (rounded)			**439,670**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 10 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: Boys only

Boys				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		32,420	4.3%
Creative	Not creative		120,440	16.1%
Not creative	Creative		58,310	7.8%
Not creative	Not creative		538,805	71.8%
Total (rounded)			**749,975**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	9,515	2.8%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	11,630	3.4%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	7,710	2.3%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	28,345	8.3%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	10,590	3.1%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	27,160	8.0%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	12,700	3.7%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	232,410	68.3%
Total (rounded)			**340,060**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 11 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals eligible for free school meals only

FSM eligible				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		6,640	4.1%
Creative	Not creative		36,930	22.6%
Not creative	Creative		9,035	5.5%
Not creative	Not creative		110,860	67.8%
Total (rounded)			163,465	100.0%
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	1,485	2.5%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	2,280	3.8%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	1,805	3.0%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	7,845	13.0%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	1,350	2.2%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	4,010	6.6%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	2,135	3.5%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	39,525	65.4%
Total (rounded)			**60,435**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 12 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals not eligible for free school meals only

Non-FSM eligible				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		101,255	7.5%
Creative	Not creative		227,660	17.0%
Not creative	Creative		136,950	10.2%
Not creative	Not creative		876,910	65.3%
Total (rounded)			1,342,770	100.0%
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	28,290	3.9%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	41,445	5.8%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	16,210	2.3%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	75,960	10.6%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	24,610	3.4%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	69,050	9.6%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	19,750	2.7%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	443,980	61.7%
Total (rounded)			**719,290**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 13 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals in the most deprived IDACI decile only

Most deprived IDACI decile				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		6,040	4.0%
Creative	Not creative		30,650	20.3%
Not creative	Creative		9,700	6.4%
Not creative	Not creative		104,795	69.3%
Total (rounded)			**151,180**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	1,490	2.3%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	2,185	3.4%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	1,630	2.5%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	7,680	12.0%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	1,550	2.4%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	4,570	7.1%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	2,210	3.4%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	42,925	66.8%
Total (rounded)			**64,245**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 14 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals in the least deprived IDACI decile only

Least deprived IDACI decile				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		12,460	9.4%
Creative	Not creative		19,025	14.4%
Not creative	Creative		17,210	13.0%
Not creative	Not creative		83,265	63.1%
Total (rounded)			**131,955**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	Proportion
Creative	Creative	Creative	3,595	4.4%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	5,450	6.7%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	1,575	1.9%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	7,510	9.3%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	3,090	3.8%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	9,275	11.4%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	1,970	2.4%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	48,700	60.0%
Total (rounded)			**81,160**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 15 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals in London at age 16 only

Region=London				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		13,120	6.4%
Creative	Not creative		31,090	15.2%
Not creative	Creative		21,275	10.4%
Not creative	Not creative		139,390	68.0%
Total (rounded)			**204,875**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	3,665	2.8%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	5,810	4.5%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	2,435	1.9%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	12,920	10.0%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	3,780	2.9%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	11,975	9.3%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	3,420	2.6%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	85,085	65.9%
Total (rounded)			**129,085**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 16 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals in the East of England at age 16 only

Region - East of England				
All				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		11,685	7.8%
Creative	Not creative		27,665	18.4%
Not creative	Creative		15,140	10.1%
Not creative	Not creative		95,985	63.8%
Total (rounded)			**150,480**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	3,045	4.4%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	4,330	6.2%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	1,945	2.8%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	7,110	10.2%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	2,575	3.7%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	6,920	10.0%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	2,220	3.2%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	41,350	59.5%
Total (rounded)			**69,495**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 17 Administrative Data: Trajectories of making creative a subject choice and not, through the different education stages, for individuals observed up to post-16 education, and separately for those observed through to higher education, across the three cohorts: individuals in the North West at age 16 only

Region = North West				
For all people (HE or not)				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**		**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative		10,905	5.8%
Creative	Not creative		32,935	17.6%
Not creative	Creative		16,350	8.7%
Not creative	Not creative		126,725	67.8%
Total (rounded)			**186,915**	**100.0%**
For people who went on to HE				
Key Stage 4	**Post-16**	**HE**	**Count**	**Proportion**
Creative	Creative	Creative	3,075	3.4%
Creative	Creative	Not creative	4,270	4.7%
Creative	Not creative	Creative	2,225	2.4%
Creative	Not creative	Not creative	9,405	10.3%
Not creative	Creative	Creative	3,065	3.4%
Not creative	Creative	Not creative	7,940	8.7%
Not creative	Not creative	Creative	2,695	2.9%
Not creative	Not creative	Not creative	58,690	64.2%
Total (rounded)			**91,365**	**100.0%**

Appendix Table 18 Administrative Data: Gender gaps: Making a creative subject choice at Key Stage 4. Results based on linear probability model. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)
Girl	0.0852*** (0.0007)	0.0854*** (0.0007)	0.0850*** (0.0007)	0.0849*** (0.0007)
2016 GCSE cohort		0.0006 (0.0008)	0.0012 (0.0008)	0.0244*** (0.0010)
2017 GCSE cohort		0.0024*** (0.0008)	0.0038*** (0.0008)	0.0260*** (0.0008)
White			0.0676*** (0.0009)	0.0687*** (0.0009)
Eligible for FSM			0.0263*** (0.0010)	0.0131*** (0.0010)
IDACI most deprived decile			0.0011 (0.0011)	-0.0064*** (0.0011)
IDACI least deprived decile			-0.0176*** (0.0012)	-0.0058*** (0.0012)
Prior (KS2) attainment				included
School type				included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included
N for Model	1,718,795	1,718,795	1,718,795	1,718,795

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 19: Administrative Data: Gender gaps: Making a creative subject choice in post-16 education (regardless of route or type of qualification). Results based on linear probability model. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)
Girl	0.0948*** (0.0006)	0.0951*** (0.0006)	0.0820*** (0.0006)	0.0817*** (0.0006)	0.0664*** (0.0006)
2016 GCSE cohort		-0.0178*** (0.0007)	-0.0182*** (0.0007)	-0.0175*** (0.0007)	-0.0198*** (0.0009)
2017 GCSE cohort		-0.0362*** (0.0007)	-0.0370*** (0.0007)	-0.0281*** (0.0007)	-0.0348*** (0.0010)
Creative subject choice at Key Stage 4			0.1506*** (0.0007)	0.1536*** (0.0007)	0.1614*** (0.0007)
White				0.0403*** (0.0008)	0.0406*** (0.0008)
Eligible for FSM				-0.0559*** (0.0010)	-0.0343*** (0.0010)
IDACI most deprived decile				-0.0348*** (0.0010)	-0.0258*** (0.0010)
IDACI least deprived decile				0.0470*** (0.0011)	0.0332*** (0.0011)
Attended further education at any point post-16				0.1215*** (0.0008)	0.1006*** (0.0008)
Prior (KS2 and KS4) attainment					included
School type					included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included	included
N for Model	1,506,235	1,506,235	1,506,235	1,506,235	1,506,235

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 20: Administrative Data: Gender gaps: Making a creative subject choice in post-16 further education. Linear probability models. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)
Girl	0.0731*** (0.0014)	0.0729*** (0.0014)	0.0558*** (0.0014)	0.0570*** (0.0014)	0.0503*** (0.0014)
2016 GCSE cohort		-0.0007*** (0.0017)	-0.0054*** (0.0016)	-0.0037*** (0.0016)	0.0122*** (0.0009)
2017 GCSE cohort		0.0100*** (0.0019)	0.0000 (0.0018)	0.0036** (0.0018)	-0.0269*** (0.0026)
Creative subject choice at Key Stage 4			0.1743*** (0.0017)	0.1713*** (0.0017)	0.1744*** (0.0017)
White				0.0590*** (0.0018)	0.0546*** (0.0018)
Eligible for FSM				-0.0484*** (0.0026)	-0.0339*** (0.0026)
IDACI most deprived decile				-0.0357*** (0.0026)	-0.0261*** (0.0026)
IDACI least deprived decile				0.0389*** (0.0022)	0.0302*** (0.0022)
Prior (KS2 and KS4) attainment					included
School type					included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included	included
N for Model	250,385	250,385	250,385	250,385	250,385

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 21: Administrative Data: Gender gaps: Making a creative subject choice in higher education. Linear probability models. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)	Model (6)
Girl	0.0062*** (0.0007)	0.0057*** (0.0007)	-0.0278*** (0.0007)	-0.0294*** (0.0007)	-0.0282*** (0.0007)	-0.0274*** (0.0007)
2016 GCSE cohort		-0.0071*** (0.0009)	-0.0036*** (0.0008)	-0.0040*** (0.0008)	-0.0040*** (0.0010)	-0.0007 (0.0009)
2017 GCSE cohort		-0.0200*** (0.0009)	-0.0130*** (0.0008)	-0.0170*** (0.0008)	-0.0011 (0.0012)	-0.0069*** (0.0011)
Creative subject choice post-16			0.2238*** (0.0009)	0.2262*** (0.0009)	0.2281*** (0.0009)	0.1802*** (0.0008)
Creative subject choice at Key Stage 4			0.1402*** (0.0009)	0.1364*** (0.0009)	0.1310*** (0.0009)	0.0990*** (0.0008)
White				0.0341*** (0.0009)	0.0403*** (0.0009)	0.0338*** (0.0009)
Eligible for FSM				0.0073*** (0.0013)	-0.004 (0.0013)	-0.0036** (0.0012)
Attended further education at any point post-16				-0.0464*** (0.0009)	-0.0397*** (0.0009)	-0.0232*** (0.0008)
IDACI most deprived decile				0.0046** (0.0013)	0.0003 (0.0013)	-0.0027** (0.0012)
IDACI least deprived decile				-0.0175*** (0.0012)	-0.0126*** (0.0012)	-0.0031*** (0.0011)
Prior (KS4) attainment					included	included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included	included	included
HE institution fixed effects						included
N for Model	779,725	779,725	779,725	779,725	779,725	779,725

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 22: Administrative Data: Free School Meal eligibility gaps: Making a creative subject choice at Key Stage 4. Linear probability models. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)
Eligible for FSM	0.0174*** (0.0010)	0.0228*** (0.0010)	0.0263*** (0.0010)	0.0131*** (0.0010)
2016 GCSE cohort		0.0007 (0.0008)	0.0012 (0.0008)	0.0244*** (0.0010)
2017 GCSE cohort		0.0026*** (0.0008)	0.0038*** (0.0008)	0.0260*** (0.0008)
White			0.0676*** (0.0009)	0.0687*** (0.0009)
Girl			0.0850*** (0.0007)	0.0849*** (0.0007)
IDACI most deprived decile			0.0011 (0.0011)	-0.0064*** (0.0011)
IDACI least deprived decile			-0.0176*** (0.0012)	-0.0058*** (0.0012)
Prior (KS2) attainment				included
School type				included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included
N for Model	1,718,795	1,718,795	1,718,795	1,718,795

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 23: Administrative Data: Free School Meal eligibility gaps: Making a creative subject choice in post-16 education (regardless of route or type of qualification). Linear probability models. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)
Eligible for FSM	-0.0815*** (0.0010)	-0.0728*** (0.0010)	-0.0774*** (0.0010)	-0.0559*** (0.0010)	-0.0343*** (0.0010)
2016 GCSE cohort		-0.0180*** (0.0007)	-0.0184*** (0.0007)	-0.0175*** (0.0007)	-0.0198*** (0.0009)
2017 GCSE cohort		-0.0362*** (0.0007)	-0.0371*** (0.0007)	-0.0281*** (0.0007)	-0.0348*** (0.0010)
Creative subject choice at Key Stage 4			0.1613*** (0.0007)	0.1536*** (0.0007)	0.1614*** (0.0007)
White				0.0403*** (0.0008)	0.0406*** (0.0008)
Girl				0.0817*** (0.0006)	0.0664*** (0.0006)
IDACI most deprived decile				-0.0348*** (0.0010)	-0.0258*** (0.0010)
IDACI least deprived decile				0.0470*** (0.0011)	0.0332*** (0.0011)
Attended further education at any point post-16				0.1215*** (0.0008)	0.1006*** (0.0008)
Prior (KS2 and KS4) attainment					included
School type					included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included	included
N for Model	1,506,235	1,506,235	1,506,235	1,506,235	1,506,235

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 24: Administrative Data: Free School Meal eligibility gaps: Making a creative subject choice in post-16 further education. Linear probability models. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)
Eligible for FSM	-0.0686*** (0.0026)	-0.0628*** (0.0026)	-0.0676*** (0.0026)	-0.0484*** (0.0026)	-0.0339*** (0.0026)
2016 GCSE cohort		-0.0015 (0.0017)	-0.0062*** (0.0016)	-0.0037*** (0.0016)	0.0122*** (0.0009)
2017 GCSE cohort		0.0134*** (0.0019)	0.0023 (0.0018)	0.0036** (0.0018)	-0.0269*** (0.0026)
Creative subject choice at Key Stage 4			0.1743*** (0.0017)	0.1713*** (0.0017)	0.1744*** (0.0017)
White				0.0590*** (0.0018)	0.0546*** (0.0018)
Girl				0.0570*** (0.0014)	0.0503*** (0.0014)
IDACI most deprived decile				-0.0357*** (0.0026)	-0.0261*** (0.0026)
IDACI least deprived decile				0.0389*** (0.0022)	0.0302*** (0.0022)
Prior (KS2 and KS4) attainment					included
School type					included
Region fixed effects		included	included	included	included
N for Model	250,385	250,385	250,385	250,385	250,385

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 25: Administrative Data: Free School Meal eligibility gaps: Making a creative subject choice in higher education. Linear probability models. Results in table are coefficients and (standard errors).

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)	Model (6)
Eligible for FSM	-0.0114*** (0.0014)	-0.0079*** (0.0014)	0.0046*** (0.0013)	0.0073*** (0.0013)	-0.0040* (0.0013)	-0.0036** (0.0012)
2016 GCSE cohort		-0.0071*** (0.0009)	-0.0037*** (0.0008)	-0.0040*** (0.0008)	-0.0040*** (0.0010)	-0.0007 (0.0009)
2017 GCSE cohort		-0.0200*** (0.0009)	-0.0132*** (0.0008)	-0.0170*** (0.0008)	-0.0011 (0.0012)	-0.0069*** (0.0011)
Creative subject choice post-16			0.2214*** (0.0009)	0.2262*** (0.0009)	0.2281*** (0.0009)	0.1802*** (0.0008)
Creative subject choice at GCSE			0.1369*** (0.0009)	0.1364*** (0.0009)	0.1310*** (0.0009)	0.0990*** (0.0008)
White				0.0341*** (0.0009)	0.0403*** (0.0009)	0.0338*** (0.0009)
Girl				-0.0294*** (0.0007)	-0.0282*** (0.0007)	-0.0274** (0.0007)
Attended further education at any point post-16				-0.0464*** (0.0009)	-0.0397*** (0.0009)	-0.0232*** (0.0008)
IDACI most deprived decile				0.0046** (0.0013)	0.0003 (0.0013)	-0.0027** (0.0012)
IDACI least deprived decile				-0.0175*** (0.0012)	-0.0126*** (0.0012)	-0.0031*** (0.0011)
Prior (KS4) attainment					Included	included

Region fixed effects		included	included	included	included	included
HE institution fixed effects						included
N for Model	779,725	779,725	779,725	779,725	779,725	779,725

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Appendix Table 26: Administrative data: Gender and FSM main and interaction effects: Making a creative subject choice, at each respective educational stage.

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)
	Key Stage 4	Post-16	Further Education	Higher Education
Girl*FSM eligibility	-0.0326***	-0.0344***	-0.0502***	-0.0078***
	(0.0020)	(0.0019)	(0.0050)	(0.0024)
Girl	0.0888***	0.0702***	0.0545***	-0.0268***
	(0.0007)	(0.0006)	(0.0015)	(0.0007)
FSM eligibility	0.0294***	-0.0168***	-0.0079**	0.0010
	(0.0015)	(0.0014)	(0.0037)	(0.0019)
N	1,718,795	1,506,235	250,385	779,725

Notes: * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

In addition to the main and interaction effects of gender and FSM eligibility, models include:

Model (1): cohort, ethnicity, IDACI deciles (bottom and top), prior attainment, school type, region fixed effects.

Model (2): cohort, ethnicity, IDACI deciles (bottom and top), prior attainment, school type, region fixed effects, creative subject choice at Key Stage 4, Further Education at any point post-16

Model (3): cohort, ethnicity, IDACI deciles (bottom and top), prior attainment, school type, region fixed effects, creative subject choice at Key Stage 4

Model (4): cohort, ethnicity, IDACI deciles (bottom and top), prior attainment, school type, region fixed effects, creative subject choice at Key Stage 4, Further Education at any point post-16, HE institution fixed effects

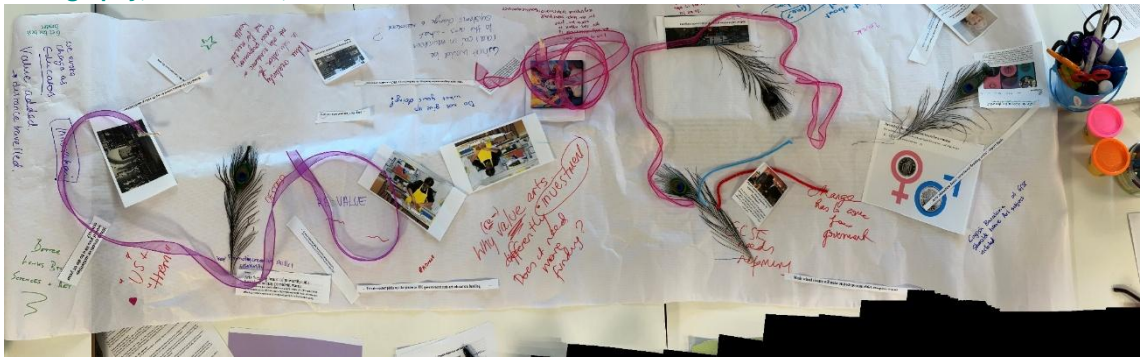
Appendix 27: Cartographies

Cartography, HE students, Norwich

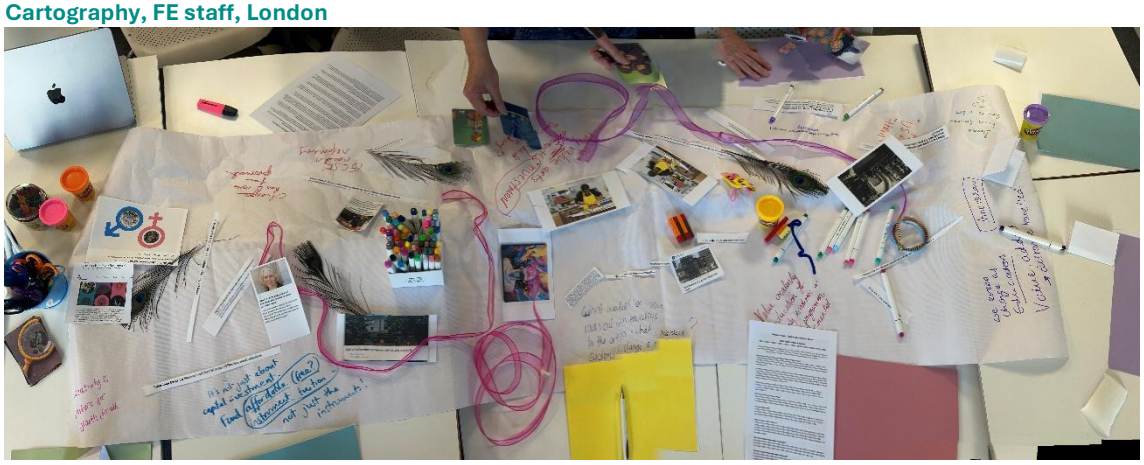
Cartography, HE staff, Norwich

Cartography, Creatives, Norwich

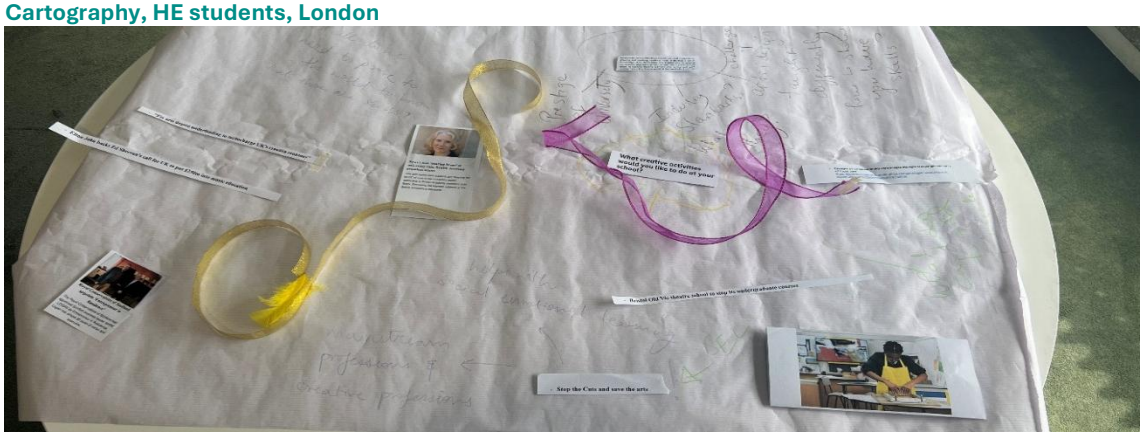
Cartography, FE students, London



Cartography, FE staff, London



Cartography, HE students, London



Cartography, HE and FE staff, London

The University of Cambridge is committed to high standards of research integrity, including ethical approval for research and transparency.

This research underwent ethical review via the Faculty of Education University of Cambridge.

The views expressed here do not constitute endorsement by the University of Cambridge of any organisation, programme, or initiative.

The views expressed here may be attributed to the research team carrying out the research.