'I'd like to find out more about what we can actually do after this degree because I'm not 100% sure': exploring emergent and divergent aspirations of Early Childhood undergraduates

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Published online: 14 Sep 2025.

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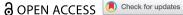
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ABSTRACT

The Early Childhood (EC) sector in the UK is facing a recruitment and retention crisis and fewer people are opting to study this subject at university. Exploring the aspirations of EC university students and the factors shaping them is therefore important for understanding what attracts people to careers in this sector, enabling course tutors to cultivate these aspirations. Sixty-four EC students at an English university participated in this qualitative research. Data were generated using a pedagogical task to elicit participants' aspirations followed by focus group discussions to explore them further. The analysis revealed that participants have academic, professional, and personal aspirations. Many of these aspirations were found to be either emergent or divergent. The former theme suggests that EC students' aspirations are still developing and may lack specificity while the latter suggests they may be in conflict with the aspirations that family, society and the government ascribe to them.

Introduction

In the UK, only 11% of EC workers are qualified to degree level, roughly 15% quit their employment within a year, and the overwhelming majority consists of women, a significant number of whom are nearing retirement (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021; Education Policy Institute 2019; Silberfeld and Mitchell 2021). This, together with a range of interlocking factors, including the low esteem in which the sector is held; an increase in staff to child ratios; the government's framing of EC work as preparation for schooling, which positions the former as subservient to the latter; fragmented, privatised provision; poor working conditions and salaries; a lack of continuing professional development (CPD) and training; and prolonged government underinvestment, has contributed to a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021; Education Policy Institute 2019; Hardy et al. 2023). At the same time, hiring and retaining high-calibre EC professionals from diverse backgrounds is critical to ensuring quality provision, which is particularly important for addressing growing inequalities among children in the wake of the

COVID-19 pandemic (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021). This highlights a pressing need for universities and colleges to supply the sector with suitably qualified EC graduates (Hardy et al. 2023; Lumsden and Musgrave 2023). However, the capacity of higher education (HE) to respond to this need is complicated by high attrition rates and a drop in the number of individuals opting for a career in EC (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021; Kirk 2020). With this in mind, the current study sought to explore the aspirations of EC students in HE and the factors shaping them in order to a) improve course offer and delivery; b) foster greater empathy and understanding of students so as to better support them and their aspirations; and c) help teaching faculty manage learners' expectations and better prepare them for a career in EC. Through doing so this research aimed to inform the recruitment, academic performance and graduation of EC students which would positively impact the supply of EC graduates to the sector. Building on the work of Lumsden and Musgrave (2023) and Richardson and Lumsden (2023), this study also addresses the need for more research into this neglected area.

Defining aspirations

Aspirations are a combination of hope and agency often focused on the achievement of specific goals or outcomes (Graham and Pozuelo 2023). This distinguishes them from expectations in at least two ways. First, while expectations can be good or bad, hope requires us to take an optimistic view of the future (Graham and Pozuelo 2023). Second, whereas expectations may be realised regardless of our own efforts, aspirations cannot be fulfilled without the exercise of agency (Graham and Pozuelo 2023). While this distinction is helpful, limiting our definition to the attainment of specific goals or outcomes disregards the fact that aspirations are dynamic and can shift as a result of experiences, an individual's level of agency, and their circumstances (Mkwananzi 2019). The fact that young people's aspirations may be poorly defined or emergent stands to reason since they are often still in the process of being formed (Hart 2016).

A body of literature labels youth aspirations as either 'high' or 'low' (e.g. Gao and Eccles 2020; Graham and Pozuelo 2023). As highlighted by Spohrer (2016), using this terminology reflects UK government policy discourse which aims to improve education and employment outcomes for disadvantaged youth. This is particularly problematic given that, despite the emotional and physical demands of working with young children, as shown above, EC professionals in the UK are undervalued and underpaid. As such, those aspiring to a career in EC might be viewed as lacking in ambition for choosing to follow their passion rather than pursuing a higher status profession (Spohrer 2016). Indeed, given the gendered nature of aspirations whereby men are often found to aspire more to the accumulation of wealth, while women tend to harbour more altruistic aspirations, this low/high distinction may also position women's aspirations as inferior to men's (Kirk 2020; Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark 2020). This implies a hierarchy whereby instrumental aspirations such as social mobility and academic success are assigned greater value than intrinsic aspirations such as personal growth and working with children (Spohrer, Stahl and Bowers-

Brown 2017). The current study therefore refrains from describing aspirations in this way as it implies a 'value judgement', which may result in a deficit view of an individual's aspirations (Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark 2020, 8).

Theoretical framework

In line with Alam (2019), this study is grounded in a social justice framing which acknowledges that quality EC provision can help tackle entrenched inequalities by, inter alia, enhancing children's school readiness and social participation, and supporting working parents (Alam, Ahsan, and Ogawa 2023). A social justice lens also acknowledges how the aspirations of young people are impacted by intersecting inequalities, particularly those related to class, ethnicity and gender, which have historically shaped access to HE and employment (Bolton and Lewis 2024; Gao and Eccles 2020; Linos, Mobasseri, and Roussille 2024). In addition to these intersecting personal characteristics, young people's aspirations are influenced by internal factors such as the aspirant's experiences and their perception of their own abilities, as well as by external factors such as family (Francis et al. 2017; Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark 2020). To account for the influence of external factors, Ray (2003, 2) has outlined the notion of an aspirations window, explaining that 'an individual draws her aspirations from the lives, achievements, or ideals of those who exist in her aspirations window'. Thus, people existing within an aspirant's 'cognitive neighbourhood' (Ray 2003, 1), may motivate them either to pursue their own aspirations, or to prioritise the collective aspirations of the household or social group over their own (Mkwananzi 2019). The idea of an aspirations window also foregrounds the role that culture and cultural artefacts such as TV, film, radio, and increasingly social media can play in fuelling aspirations (Appadurai 2004). This is highlighted by a Brazilian study which found that watching soap operas with strong female role models helped to lower birth rates, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged women (La Ferrara, Chong, and Duryea 2012). Finally, the aspirations window also suggests that institutions such as universities and the educators working within them may also be able to cultivate students' aspirations (Mkwananzi 2019).

Why aspirations matter

Young people's aspirations yield insights into their motivations and ambitions (Hart 2016). They matter because many young people are at a critical turning point in their lives which requires them to make life-altering decisions about their future (Graham and Pozuelo 2023). They also matter because they influence the amount of effort students put into different subjects; their choice of subject; and the jobs to which they aspire (Chambers et al. 2018; Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark 2020). Indeed, a mismatch between a young person's aspirations and the jobs available to them can result in labour shortages, which, as we have seen, is a pressing issue in the EC sector (Chambers et al. 2018; Mann et al. 2013). Exploring the aspirations of EC students can therefore help us better understand what attracts them to a career in EC and may boost the recruitment, academic performance and graduation of students in this field.

Aspirations of EC students

In the UK context only two studies could be found which focus on the aspirations of EC students, and they both report similar findings. Both studies use mixed methods; both identify teaching, play therapy/work, and social work as the most common professional aspirations of EC students; and both report working with children as a key motivation for EC students' choice of degree, with adverse childhood experiences, work experience, and family emerging as the most important influencing factors (Lumsden and Musgrave 2023; Richardson and Lumsden 2023). Notably, both studies also report that a significant number of participants had only vague or ill-defined notions of what exactly they were aspiring to, which highlights their evolving or emergent nature.

Additional research, while not specifically investigating EC students' aspirations, furthers our understanding of this under researched field. For example, several studies show how EC students' career choices are primarily unselfish or other-oriented (Fenech et al. 2022; Kirk 2020; Vincent and Braun 2010). This is highlighted in a review of the literature on the recruitment, retention and wellbeing of EC teachers in Australia by Fenech et al. (2022, 5) which reports that individuals are drawn to careers in EC for moral and altruistic reasons such as 'making a difference and supporting children's rights'.

Although few studies look at the aspirations of EC students and graduates, a body of research investigates the aspirations of young people and those around them. For example, Mata Zúñiga's (2023) study of fresher students at six universities in Mexico revealed that men are more likely to aspire to earn a lot of money while women aspire to achieve equal status with men and to engage in employment which has a positive social impact. These findings are similar to those of Sjøberg and Schreiner (2010, 24) who found that in the 40 countries surveyed 15-year-old girls would rather work with and help others while 15-year-old boys prefer 'working with their hands, with things, machines and tools'. Interestingly, this study also revealed that boys are more likely to prioritise management positions and high salaries. Finally, in the Bangladeshi context, Alam (2019) found that parental aspirations for their children differed depending on their gender with girls in rural areas expected to start schooling early so that they can also be married off earlier. This raises the possibility that parents' aspirations may diverge significantly from their children's.

The gendered nature of young people's aspirations helps account for the difference in professional status, remuneration and promotion opportunities that women and men have in the workplace since the former may choose career pathways where they earn less but feel fulfilled whereas the latter may opt for professions for the financial benefits they offer regardless of how personally rewarding they are. The research seems to bear this out. For instance, a study by Kirk (2020) in Australia which investigated the experiences and motivations of preservice EC teachers reports that, due to factors such as low salaries, lack of other male peers, and poor working conditions, men tend to avoid pursuing careers in EC. This can perpetuate a vicious circle since men will continue to avoid pursuing a career working with young children as they see few people like them in this sector (Kirk 2020). This, in turn, may compound skills shortages as it restricts the talent pool which employers can draw on (Chambers et al. 2018). Gaining a better understanding of the gender imbalance in the sector by exploring EC university students' aspirations can therefore play a role in addressing staff shortages and promoting gender equity (Francis et al. 2017).

Table 1. Participants' year of study.

Participants	Number
Foundation year	9
Year one	14
Year two	8
Year three	33
Total	**64**

Study setting and participants

The context was a widening participation university in the North-West of England offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses to around 5000 students. Over half these students are from groups underrepresented in HE and around half followed non-traditional entry routes into university. In line with this, the majority of this study's 64 participants belonged to one or more of the following categories: first-generation university students; mature students; students with a special educational need or disability; and students from socio-economically disadvantaged or minority backgrounds. Consistent with the gender imbalance in the sector reported elsewhere, only two of the 64 participants were male. The participants were drawn from all four years of the degree (see Table 1).

The research took place in the first week of the first semester so that course tutors could use the findings to inform course provision. As such, the majority of participants did not know the researcher, though some second year students had been taught by the researcher during the previous academic year. To mitigate any ethical issues with this, all EC students were informed of the nature and purpose of the research by their regular course tutors, and written assurances were given that participation was voluntary; that non-participation would have no bearing on their grades; and that they could withdraw at any time without explanation. Amazon vouchers were provided in acknowledgement of the time commitment made by participants. All participants were 18 or over. Approval for this study was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Real names have been replaced by pseudonyms and any other identifying information has been excised from the data.

EC degrees in England

EC degrees in England were introduced in 1992 to help establish EC as an academic discipline (QAA 2022). According to the subject benchmark statement for EC degrees in England, undergraduate students, who are expected to become social justice advocates for their discipline, will learn about the holistic development of children from birth to the age of eight (QAA 2022). Courses draw on research and practice from multiple disciplines and prepare graduates for a broad range of careers, most commonly in the fields of education, health, and social work (QAA 2022). An EC degree, however, does not accord graduates qualified teacher status (QTS), which devalues this award and the work of EC practitioners, limiting their earning potential (House of Commons 2023). The lack of priority given to EC provision is not unique to the UK and seems to reflect a global trend (Alam and Ogawa 2023). Writing about the Bangladeshi

context, Alam and Ogawa (2023) suggest that this may be related to the fact that EC provision is not compulsory, and therefore is considered inferior to formal education, which is also the case in the UK.

It is relevant to mention the four main classifications for degrees in England: 3rd (Threshold Standard); 2:2 and 2:1 (Typical Standard); and 1st (Excellent Standard) (QAA 2022). Receiving a lower classification can impact employment opportunities and graduates wishing to progress to postgraduate study or obtain their QTS require at least a Typical Standard classification.

Methods and procedure

This small-scale study sought to explore the aspirations of EC undergraduates using a pedagogical task to elicit participants' aspirations, which was immediately followed by a researcher-led group discussion to explore these further. Hence, there were two stages to data collection: 1) participants individually writing down their aspirations on sticky notes and attaching these to a display area visible to all, and 2) a group discussion of the reasons behind these aspirations. The task and the discussion provided an opportunity to develop 'critical awareness and the ability to reflect upon self and others' (QAA 2022, 4), which is one of the goals of an EC degree. The educational tasks lasted around 10 minutes with the subsequent focus group discussions typically lasting another 15–20 minutes. In line with Conradie and Robeyns (2013, 565), it was felt that allowing participants to individually reflect on their aspirations before discussing them publicly would support the voicing of these aspirations and motivate them to 'use their latent agency to make changes in their lives [and] expand their capabilities'. The second stage was also useful for contextualising participants' written aspirations and for providing insights into the motivations behind them. With participants' consent, the audio of these discussions was captured.

The approach taken to data collection and analysis was qualitative since: a) the small sample size will not lead to generalisations; b) such an approach is more contextually sensitive; and c) qualitative studies are useful for exploring participants' worldviews, including their aspirations (Alam 2024).

Analysis

The aspirations recorded on sticky notes typically consisted of a word or short phrase. Due to the limited context they offered and the minimal interpretation required, content analysis was preferred over more in-depth approaches. In particular, manifest content analysis was used as this approach indicates the salience of each code or category by providing information regarding the frequency of its occurrence (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). While it does not follow that frequency indicates significance, it does suggest the relative importance of different aspirations for participants (Saldaña 2016).

By contrast, the additional contextual information resulting from the interaction of multiple participants in the follow-up focus group discussions meant bringing to bear an approach which would aid in the interpretation of underlying meanings within the data (Alam 2024). To this end, thematic analysis, which is 'more involved and nuanced' (Namey

et al. 2008, 138) than content analysis, was chosen to analyse the audio transcripts. Both the initial codes emerging from the sticky notes analysis and the themes emerging from the focus group data were checked and discussed with a critical peer.

Findings

Similar to the findings of Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark (2020), the categories which emerged from an analysis of the sticky notes reflect three overarching types of aspirations: academic, professional and personal (see Table 2). These are presented below. Reference is also made to quotations from the lively and in-depth interactions in the focus groups to provide more context and nuance.

Academic

The majority of participants' aspirations related to their studies. While a small number of these focused on learning (e.g. 'learn a new skill') and becoming more confident (e.g. 'gain more confidence in writing and reading'), a larger number related to excelling at university, as expressed in notes such as 'passing with a 2:1' or 'get a 1st'. The focus group interviews shed light on the reasons for this:

> I don't want to just do average. I want to do well. If I don't get a first, I'll be heartbroken. I'm so passionate about everything that this course is about that there's no reason why I can't.

Due to her enthusiasm for the subject, this student naturally wants to get the highest grades possible, and several other participants who aspired to be academically successful expressed similar sentiments. Another reason for wanting to do well at university was linked to the professional aspiration to become a primary school teacher. Three participants were under the impression that this required them to obtain a 2:1 even though many initial teacher education courses only require a 2:2. This reflects how not all EC students were fully informed about what they would need to pursue their aspirations.

Though a significant number of academic aspirations mentioned excelling academically, a greater number related to successful completion of university, as expressed in such notes as 'graduating' or 'completing all my assignments on time'. The view that graduating was more important than excelling was corroborated across the focus groups by participants who had concerns regarding their capacity to finish their course:

> We both have the fear of failing and having to retake things as well as not getting stuff done in time because we're struggling to keep up.

Table 2. Content analysis of participants' aspirations from sticky notes.

Level	Academic	Professional	Personal	Total
Foundation	4	2	8	14
First year	19	3	5	27
Second year	10	5	2	17
Final year	36	11	11	58
Total	69	21	26	116
% of total	59.5%	18.1%	22.4%	100%

This participant, speaking on behalf of herself and a classmate, was struggling with the workload, a feeling echoed by a substantial number of participants. Further probing revealed that key reasons for this included insufficient academic preparation prior to commencing university; negative learning experiences in high school; having additional learning needs; being the first in the family to go to university; having to juggle work, family and university commitments; being addicted to social media; and a lack of clarity regarding grading and assessment procedures.

Professional

While some sticky notes mentioned specific careers like speech therapist or child psychologist, becoming a primary teacher was the most frequently expressed professional aspiration. The following comment from the focus groups is indicative of the motivations behind this aspiration:

> Being a [primary] teacher is good pay and holidays, but I would only work with primary. Older students are more cocky.

The paid time off, higher salaries and pupil profile (young children) were all cited as factors in attracting participants to primary teaching. However, as stated earlier, an EC degree does not accord graduates with QTS, so those seeking to fulfil this aspiration would have to obtain a 2:2 in their degree and then undertake an additional year of study. Strikingly, however, only two notes expressed the aspiration to become primary school headteachers, which the focus groups revealed were both written by men. When asked, both men offered financial reasons for this aspiration.

Personal

The final category refers to personal aspirations, some of which are altruistic or other-oriented (e.g. 'making a difference' and 'making my parents proud'), and some of which are self-oriented (e.g. 'becoming a better person', and 'experiencing new things'). One personal aspiration expressed in about a quarter of sticky notes in this category was related to working abroad or emigrating. Strikingly, all but two participants with this aspiration said they had no intention of returning to the UK. Reasons for this aspiration varied, but several participants had friends in foreign countries such as Australia and Canada who had told them that life was better there. The following quote, which also illustrates how friends can shape aspirations, is representative of this sentiment:

> It's just their way of life. Everyone's just happy, and my friend's over there and she's just happier, and the cost of living is lower, but the pay's higher, so it's easier to save, so if we came back we'd have money.

Emergent and divergent aspirations

As stated earlier, while the sticky notes were analysed using content analysis, thematic analysis was used to analyse the focus group recordings. This more interpretive analysis indicates two types of aspirations of particular relevance. These are discussed below.

While around a third of all professional aspirations mentioned a specific career or role, the majority did not, as expressed in notes such as 'figuring out what career I want to do', 'going into a career I actually enjoy' and 'I'd like to find out more about what we can actually do after this degree because I'm not 100% sure'. This lack of specificity points to the emergent or evolving nature of their aspirations, which may initially be ill-defined and gradually take clearer shape in response to different influences and experiences. This is reflected in the following focus group quotation, which also highlights the influence of family on this person's aspirations:

> I did primary education in my first year, and I soon realised that wasn't what I was passionate about. So I chose to come on this course because I'm more passionate about working with children in different settings, not in the school setting. So there's one part of me I'm here to make my mom proud and stuff but that's not my main motivation

This excerpt also illustrates how money is not the priority for this participant since she is not interested in becoming a primary school teacher. Indeed, around half of the participants made it clear that they would not want to work as primary teachers in spite of the higher salary and more generous leave entitlements. Reasons for this included a desire to meet children's 'emotional and social needs, not their academic ones' and supporting children with special needs 'because we've seen how they're not getting support'.

Following UK government policy discourse, choosing a less lucrative profession might suggest a lack of ambition, or even a failure of aspiration. However, taking such a deficit view of young people's aspirations implies a value judgement which suggests that instrumental aspirations such as wealth and status should be held in higher regard than intrinsic aspirations (Spohrer, Stahl and Bowers-Brown 2017). Interestingly, though, the examples above, which highlight how participants prioritise following their passions and their future wellbeing, suggest their valued aspirations diverge from those which the UK government and society at large hope for them. The following examples from the focus groups add further weight to this interpretation:

> (1) I'm not bothered about the money. I'm more bothered about helping the children learn, and actually learning myself by being in that type of environment

> (2) At the end of the day, you've got to be there for the rest of our life. So you don't want to be doing something that makes you miserable just so you can have a bit more money

In addition to diverging from societal and governmental views of what young people should aspire to, there was also evidence that participants' aspirations diverged from those of their parents:

> I got a bit sad writing it down [aspirations] because I was like, wait, I'm not here for me. I'm here for them . . . I came to uni purely because my mum forced me to, and that's hitting quite hard right now because I've realised I don't do anything for myself. I just do what makes everyone else happy

It seems that, in her efforts to please her mother, this participant has lost sight of her own aspirations. This highlights how providing the opportunity for individuals to voice their aspirations can lead to important, often painful realisations.

Discussion and implications

This small-scale pedagogical research project set out to explore EC undergraduates' aspirations. In terms of academic aspirations, given that the minimum requirement for entry onto the EC degree at this university is quite low, together with the working class profile of most of the university's EC cohorts, it seems understandable that fewer such aspirations were related to doing well at university and rather more were related to passing or graduating. Indeed, academic aspirations such as 'staying on track', 'coping with the workload', and 'not getting snowed under', indicate that some participants doubted their ability to excel academically. These findings are consistent with prior research which suggests that aspirations are influenced by aspirants' perceptions of their abilities (Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark 2020). Nonetheless, it is worth repeating that excelling academically was an aspiration expressed by a number of participants.

In terms of professional aspirations, one reason that the majority of these did not mention a particular career could be related to their emergent or evolving nature. This aligns with the findings of Gao and Eccles (2020), who suggest that young people's aspirations develop and become more realistic and specific over time as they obtain more information and gain a clearer sense of their abilities. Indeed, the data suggest that some EC students had no clear career trajectory in mind when they started university, and it could be that some young people are choosing to study EC at university for this very reason. As a result, while the EC curriculum's holistic and multidisciplinary nature may be viewed as a barrier to progression to graduate employment, it also might be one of the factors attracting people to the subject (Silberfeld and Mitchell 2021). This suggests that the identification of emergent or vague aspirations is important as these can be cultivated by supportive and knowledgeable course tutors into more concrete aspirations. At the same time, the evidence suggests that in some cases EC students' aspirations lack specificity because they were not fully informed about what they would need to pursue them. This highlights the importance of course providers giving EC students accurate, up-to-date information about their courses and the opportunities available to them. This could be done by exposing students to a range of pathways and providing them with adequate support to pursue them through short-term work placements, or work shadowing in different areas of the EC sector. It could also be done by inviting guest speakers from different EC-related professions to share their experiences and advice. This recommendation is supported by prior research (e.g. Lumsden and Musgrave 2023; Silberfeld and Mitchell 2021) but also by comments made by one of this study's participants:

> In college, we did this program on aspirations, and it was so beneficial . . . We worked with people from the careers team . . . they'd host events . . . and do taster days in different career pathways. There was nursing and all sorts . . . it tells you what the options are but also giving you a taster for it.

Another interesting finding regarding professional aspirations is that more of these were concerned with finding an enjoyable or rewarding job than finding a well paid job. This corroborates Mann et al. (2013, 9) claim that 'it cannot be simply assumed that young people are responding to salary drivers'. Indeed, many participants appear to be seeking out a career in EC even though they know this may not enhance their social status or bank balance. This is in line with prior literature which has found that

people tend not to be drawn to the profession for financial reasons (Fenech et al. 2022; Vincent and Braun 2010). On the one hand, this may leave them open to exploitation from unscrupulous employers who can justify paying low salaries on the grounds that the job is rewarding. On the other, given that workplace satisfaction was a commonly expressed aspiration, it is questionable whether these young people would continue working in contexts where unfavourable working conditions and poor treatment of staff prevail. This would suggest that improving working conditions and providing more CPD and support for EC graduates entering the sector would attract and retain staff more than a mere increase in pay (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021; Hardy et al. 2023). Indeed, given the gendered nature of young people's aspirations reported here, which suggests men's aspirations are more likely to be underpinned by financial motives, simply improving pay may end up attracting (male) students whose primary motivation is money. This, however, should not be read as a justification for not paying EC workers more, but rather implies that a salary uplift may not boost retention and recruitment unless there is also a concomitant improvement in employment conditions. Universities and colleges can play a role in this by encouraging students to question the gendered nature of the profession and by advocating for higher professional standards in the sector, including better pay and working conditions, and promoting the value of accessible CPD (Chambers et al. 2018; Hardy et al. 2023). Indeed, since collective aspirations may bring about change more effectively than individual aspirations (Hart 2016), fostering criticality across EC cohorts and developing students' advocacy skills could help to empower students and raise awareness of issues within the sector.

The fact that many EC students are prioritising their own wellbeing over a high salary also challenges UK government policy discourse which suggests those without 'high' aspirations are simply lacking in ambition. Indeed, labelling aspirations as 'high' or 'low' implies a 'value judgement' which, as we have seen, can diverge from how young people view their own aspirations. It could be argued, for example, that caring for and educating the next generation, a task which requires 'emotional dedication' (Vincent and Braun 2010, 204), constitutes a loftier or more noble aspiration than earning a high salary or attaining a high professional status. Empirical evidence for divergent youth aspirations also supports Spohrer's (2016) contention that tensions can arise between what young people imagine for themselves and what society at large might imagine for them. Such divergence requires the exercise of agency and challenges deficit views of young people as lacking in aspirations (Spohrer 2016). One striking example of such a divergence is the experience of one participant feeling 'forced' by her mother to go to university, which echoes those of an EC degree student in Kirk's (2020) study who felt obliged to enrol in a university course to satisfy her mother's wishes. This example also substantiates the influence of external factors, particularly family, on an individual's aspirations (Ray 2003).

Another striking finding in this study is that both men's aspirations appeared to be motivated by financial reasons. Although the sample is too small to draw any firm conclusions from this, it is consistent with prior literature which finds that men are more likely to aspire to making a lot of money while women are more likely to aspire to making the world a better place (e.g. Mata Zúñiga 2023; Teravainen-Goff, Hackett, and Clark 2020). Returning to Ray's (2003) notion of the aspirations window, one possible explanation for this could be that as men tend to see people 'like them' pursuing

predominantly financial aspirations, having altruistic aspirations might be viewed as 'unmanly'.

In order to counteract the lack of men in EC, it is important that, where possible, guest speakers come from a diverse range of backgrounds and genders since, as Chambers et al. (2018, x) point out, 'how can you reach what you cannot see?' However, since we know that aspirations are often already gendered at a very young age, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on careers education from the early years onwards (Chambers et al. 2018).

Finally, in terms of personal aspirations, this category highlights a) how not all young people's aspirations are related to employment and education, and b) that EC students' aspirations can be motivated by both instrumental and intrinsic reasons. As such, the participants in this study appear to imagine their futures in holistic terms along the lines of Appadurai's (2004, 68) capacity to aspire and are capable of envisioning for themselves what 'the good life' looks like. This is encouraging since it challenges the reductive view of youth aspirations, as reflected in UK policy rhetoric, as only limited to the domains of employment and education (Hart 2016). In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that the purpose of universities in society extends beyond upskilling students for the world of work and that they can therefore play an important role in cultivating people's aspirations more holistically.

As such, the educational activity described in this research, which provided a space for students to give voice to and reflect on their aspirations, leading, in some cases, to painful realisations, could prove useful for developing greater student self-awareness, unlocking learners' agency, and fostering the holistic development of aspirations (Conradie and Robeyns 2013).

Limitations

It is important to bear in mind this study's limitations, including a small sample size which limits the generalizability of the findings. As such, further research is needed to firm up the findings and conclusions presented here. This study also cannot say anything about the fulfilment of participants' aspirations as none had completed university at the time of the research. Additional studies would therefore be needed to better understand the extent to which EC graduates' professional aspirations are feasible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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