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**Finding Purpose in an Exam Culture:
Challenges and Possibilities for Good Work**

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Abstract

“He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how”

– Friedrich Nietzsche (cited in Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 796)

In this study I explore the relationship between the capacity of young people to discover purpose, and the ‘exam culture’ that many face as they transition between high school and college. In particular, I investigate two hypotheses. First, that exam culture leaves young people little time or psychological capacity to discover their purpose. Second, that young people with a sense of purpose are more able to cope with the pressures presented by the exam culture. My sample consisted of a group of 17-year-old boys at a private school in London, England (n = 24). I collected data through an online survey, supplemented by a whole group discussion. My findings provide a measure of support for both hypotheses. I found that students set themselves challenging academic goals and engage in many extra-curricular activities. Their principal motivation for doing so is a desire to get into the best university possible. But they are left with little time to explore their purpose in life. I also found a negative correlation between the level of pressure experienced by the students, and the extent to which they have a sense of purpose. But the strength of this relationship, and its causal direction, remain unclear.

The relationship between Good Work and purpose has only recently been made explicit. Good Work – defined as work that is excellent, ethical and personally meaningful or engaging (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2011) – is “always mindful of its mission” (Damon, Colby, Bronk, & Ehrlich, 2005, p. 28). As Damon et al. (2005) explained, to accomplish good work over the long-term, individuals, “must acquire a special orientation, a commitment to use their mastery to fulfill a mission that goes beyond the self” (p. 28). These references to ‘mission’, and to a ‘beyond the self’ orientation, introduce the concept of purpose.

In an interview in 2009, Damon elaborated on the connection between Good Work and purpose. Referring to studies carried out as part of the Good Work project, he observed that people responsible for exceptionally Good Work tended to have, “an elevated purpose, always on their minds, that drove their daily efforts” (cited in Tully, 2009, p. 5). Following Damon’s lead, a number of researchers have begun to identify the contours of the relationship between purpose and Good Work (for example, Peterson, 2012; Rathman, 2010). My aim in this study is to extend this emerging body of research by investigating a phenomenon that seems likely to have a significant impact on the capacity of young people to discover purpose: namely, the ‘exam culture’ that many face as they transition between high school and college.

I begin with two hypotheses. The first is that exam culture has become so all-consuming that many young people now lack the capacity to inquire into deep questions such as purpose. The second hypothesis approaches the issue from the other direction. I propose that those young people who have developed a sense of purpose are, as a result, more able to cope with the pressures presented by the exam culture.

To test these hypotheses I examine the experience of a group of 17 and 18 year old boys at a high-performing private school in England. This is a country in which exam culture is arguably at its peak (Sharp, 2013). I explore the pressures experienced by these young people as they navigate the demands of high-stakes testing and college-entry requirements, and investigate the relationship between these pressures and their capacity to find purpose.

Literature Review

Defining purpose

Although the topic of purpose was popularized by the work of Victor Frankl (1959) more than 50 years ago, psychologists have only recently begun to agree on a working definition of the term (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). In 2003, Damon, Menon, and Bronk proposed the following: “Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). This definition is now largely accepted among psychologists as a working base for further study and research (see, for example, Malin, Reilly, Quinn & Moran, 2013).

The three dimensions of this definition are important: first, a clear intention as to what the individual aims to accomplish; second, the individual taking steps in order to realize this intention; and third, a connection between this activity and the wellbeing of others (Malin et al., 2013). A convenient shorthand for this is to define purpose as existing, “at the intersection of intention, engagement and contribution” (Bronk et al., 2010, p.134).

In this study I adopt the definition of purpose described above. One of the advantages of this definition is the distinction it draws between goals that provide personal satisfaction only, and goals that comprise a desire to make difference in the world (Damon, 2008; Malin et al., 2013). This is the key distinguishing factor between ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’. Although the terms are closely related, the former lacks the ‘beyond-the-self’ focus of the latter (Bronk et al., 2009).

The importance of finding purpose

An earlier generation of psychologists would have considered the notion that purpose could have any real impact on a person’s life as “impossibly soft-headed and sentimental” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). This view finds an echo in Brooks’ (2011) contemporary criticism of the “baby-boomer theology” that tells young people to “follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*” (para. 6). However, there is now a substantial body of research that demonstrates the importance of finding purpose in life. For example, after reviewing the relevant literature, Bronk et al. (2009) concluded that purpose is a significant aspect of human flourishing, is related to greater levels of happiness and resilience, and correlates with psychological health. Summarizing the research, Damon (2008) reported that, “study after study has found a person’s sense of life purpose to be closely connected to virtually all dimensions of well-being” (p. 26).

Studies also show that the search for purpose should not be confined to adults alone. Bronk et al. (2009) concluded that the optimal time to work with individuals on exploring purpose may be during late childhood or early adolescence. Further, recent empirical research has shown that purpose is a critical factor for promoting positive development in adolescence (Bundick and Tirri, 2014).

That this should be the case is perhaps not surprising. Erikson famously concluded that the search for identity is the main task of adolescence (Bronk et al., 2009). Building on this research, contemporary psychological studies have shown that purpose and identity form in young people at roughly the same time (Bronk, 2011). The two constructs are related and mutually supportive (Bronk, 2011). According to Fitzgerald (2005), we do a considerable disservice to adolescents by avoiding the topic of purpose out of a misplaced concern about their capacity to engage meaningfully in this inquiry. Damon (2008) echoed this theme, noting that adolescence is a formative period that is ripe for self-reflection. To delay inquiring into purpose beyond adolescence carries a serious risk that the topic may never arise again in a meaningful way (Damon, 2008).

Exam culture

In light of the critical importance of adolescents taking advantage of this phase of life to explore purpose, it is clearly problematic that many young people are reported to have “no time, and no tools, to figure out what they want out of life” (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 11). Deresiewicz (2014) noted that many students are so caught up in, “the clubs, bands, projects, teams, APs, SATs, evenings, weekends, summers, coaches, tutors, ‘leadership’, ‘service’” required to gain access to elite colleges that the topic of purpose remains unexplored (p. 11). It is a rare school, he lamented, that provides any space in its curriculum for students to consider questions of purpose.

The phrase ‘exam culture’ is convenient shorthand for these issues. It is particularly useful for the focus it places on the role of high-stakes exam testing in this system. Deresiewicz is not alone in his trenchant criticism of exam culture. Other commentators have described the damaging effects of achievement pressures imposed on

young people by over-zealous parents (Weissbourd, 2011), and the dangers of a school system that values test scores above all else (Damon, 2008). These critiques have a measure of empirical support as well. For example, Sharp (2013) has described the large and growing numbers of students in England and Hong Kong now engaging in self-harming behaviors and at risk of suicide. Sharp concludes that, although the causes of these behaviors are complex, there are clear indications that these phenomena are connected to the exam culture in these countries.

According to Sharp (2013), England is a leading example of a country where the educational process is now so closely connected with testing and examination preparation that the two are for all purposes indistinguishable. This view finds support from Gillian Low, the principal of one of England's leading private schools, who recently lamented a system where pupils are put under such pressure that a bad day in the exam room can damage their entire future (cited in Loveys, 2010).

In defense of exam culture

Yet, while it is clear that exam culture can be problematic for young people, it is important not to exaggerate its negative effects. In a detailed empirical study, Luthar and Barkin (2012) found that the number of hours spent by High School students in extra-curricular activities was not related to maladjustment. This was the case even for teenagers "in the thick of 'resume building' for college activities" (Luthar & Barkin, 2012, p. 445).

Moreover, the exam system is not without its defenders. For example, Brooks (2013) has argued that tests provide the "kick in the ass" we sometimes need (para. 2). Taking a more measured approach, Ravitch (2000) argued that exams play a constructive

role in the school system, encouraging students to work harder and allowing assessment of teaching standards as well as student performance. (It should be noted, however, that Ravitch has subsequently become considerably more critical of the impact of current testing policies on school improvement in the US (Ravitch, 2010)). Other commentators have pointed to the value of the ‘testing effect’, arguing that the “right kinds of assessments – frequent, short, tests – can actually yield big educational benefits” (Emanuel, 2013, para. 2).

As indicated by Emanuel (2013), the issue is less the principle of testing than the nature and intensity of the tests that are imposed. Damon (2008) made the point that he is not a critic of exams, and is supportive of “explicit standards of achievement” (p. 110). His concern is that the tests currently imposed on high school students in the US are not in fact designed to enhance student learning and performance (Damon, 2008). Furthermore, he noted, the testing culture leaves no time in the school day for exploration of the fundamental question of purpose.

Relationship of exam culture and purpose

For young people who find themselves in the midst of all this, what, then, is the relationship between exam culture and purpose? It seems self-evident that students who are under pressure to perform in forthcoming exams will have less time and psychological capacity to explore deep questions of purpose. But it could be argued that this is a necessary trade-off. Perhaps many students simply take a pragmatic decision to delay inquiring into purpose for a short period, while they complete their exams. If so, it could be argued that the risks of drift and delay pointed to by Damon (2008) have been overstated. After all, especially in the United States, the college years have traditionally

been seen as the time in life to figure out questions of identity and direction in life (Deresiewicz, 2014).

However, there is another frame by which the relationship between exam culture and purpose can be examined. Damon (2008) argued that the deep unhappiness felt by many High School students is not, in fact, a product of exam-induced stress. Rather, it stems from their lack of a sense of purpose in life. Weissbourd (2011) made a similar point: when students afflicted by achievement pressures discover what is meaningful for them, their unhappiness often disappears. Indeed, a substantial body of research has shown that purpose and stress are inversely related (Bronk, 2014). In seeking to explain this phenomenon, scholars have theorized that purpose “orients individuals to the long-term rather than the short-term, and potentially short-term stressors are not deemed to be as stressful when viewed through a long range lens” (Bronk, 2014, p. 51). Further, purpose has been shown to provide students with, “a heightened sense of motivation, relevance, and direction” (Koshy & Mariano, p. 13). By promoting qualities of resilience and perseverance, purpose allows students to persist towards, “valued goals, even in the midst of adversity” (Burrow & Hill, 2013, p. 1611; Sullivan, 2014).

Methods

In this study I address the relationship between exam culture and purpose by investigating the two hypotheses identified at the outset of this paper. I begin by exploring the extent to which students feel pressurized by the exam culture in the English educational system. Based on these findings, I consider what impact, if any, this pressure has on these students’ capacity to explore the topic of purpose. Finally, I investigate how

far those students with a sense of purpose are able to rely on this sense as a source of support as they navigate the pressures of exam culture.

My sample for the study consisted of a group of 17-year-old boys at a high performing private school in London, England. There were 24 students in the sample, all of whom were in Year 12, i.e. their penultimate year of secondary school. This group comprised all the boys in this age group at the school; there are no girls. In terms of backgrounds, the sample was racially diverse, but, from a socio-economic perspective, largely homogenous. The school is fee-paying and few bursaries are awarded. Most students were academic high-performers, although this was not the case for a significant minority. The sample was a sample of convenience, in that I had an existing relationship with the school and was able to gain access to the students with relative ease.

The students have to take a series of public exams at the end of Year 12, and again at the end of Year 13. If they want to gain admission to the best universities in the UK, they will need to perform to a very high standard in these exams. Based on previous work I had carried out at the school, my initial prediction was that many students in the sample would feel under a significant amount of pressure at this stage of their lives.

I took a mixed-methods approach to data collection. My principal method was an online survey, designed using the Qualtrics tool. The survey, which comprised a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions, is set out in full at Appendix 1. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the students were at liberty to decline to take part. To encourage participation, I wrote a letter to the students explaining the nature of the study and stressing that the results of the study would be confidential. I enlisted the support of the school's Head of Year 12 to facilitate the process. He agreed to make class time

available during school hours for the students to complete the survey. Students were instructed not to discuss the survey or their answers to the survey questions until the survey process had concluded.

The second part of the study consisted of a whole group discussion based on topics raised by the survey answers. I facilitated this discussion in the course of a training program on purpose that took place at the school at the end of November 2014. The discussion was recorded and relevant parts transcribed.

Findings

Levels and sources of pressure

I began the survey by asking students to set out their academic goal for the public exams they are due to take at the end of Year 13 (i.e. some 18 months after they took the survey). I then posed the question, “When you think about the grades you are targeting, how challenging does this goal feel to you?” Figure 1 shows student responses to this question.¹ Of the 24 respondents, all but two indicated that they felt their goal to be ‘Somewhat Difficult’, ‘Difficult’, or ‘Very Difficult’. Five students described the challenge they face as ‘Very Difficult’. These results indicate that, in general, those in the survey group expect the next eighteen months to be a challenging period.

Students were then asked about their reasons for targeting these grades. I provided five potential sources of motivation, and asked students to rank these in order of personal importance (with 1 being the most important, and 5 the least important). Figure 2 shows the mean rankings of each of the five options. On average, the most important source of motivation was ‘If I want to get into a good university, I need to get these grades’ (mean

¹ Figures and Tables are set out in Appendix 2.

rank = 1.83). This was followed by 'It's important to me (for my own sense of achievement) to get these grades' (mean rank = 2.29). These findings suggest that, in general, students have the need to get into a good university at the forefront of their thoughts. But a number of other motivations exist as well. Of these, the importance placed on a personal sense of achievement indicates to me that the students are, in general, fairly intrinsically motivated.

Next I asked students about the extra-curricular activities they are engaged in. The mean number of extra-curricular activities per student was 2.83 (see Figure 3). However, there were some outliers. One student was engaged in six extra-curricular activities, and another in seven. Table 1 shows the different extra-curricular activities engaged in by students. The most popular extra-curricular activity was 'Individual or team sports outside school' (14 students), closely followed by 'Prefect/Student Council' (13 students). Students were then asked to rank six potential sources of motivation for engaging in these activities (with 1 being the most important, and 6 the least important). Figure 4 shows the mean rankings of each of the six options. The three most important reasons were: 'I get a real sense of personal satisfaction from them' (mean rank = 1.95), 'It will help me with what I want to do later in life' (mean rank = 2.91), and 'It will look good on my university application' (mean rank = 2.95). The importance placed on 'personal satisfaction' is again, in my view, indicative of intrinsic motivation. But it is also clear that, in choosing to engage in these extra-curricular activities, the students are thinking about their future, including their university applications.

The next set of questions focused on the impact on the students of the educational system in the UK. In order to introduce this topic, I asked students to watch an embedded

video trailer for the documentary film, 'Race to Nowhere'. The trailer describes the exam culture in the US and explores the impact of this culture on young people's capacity to lead productive and fulfilling lives. Students were then asked to state their level of agreement with a series of statements exploring the extent to which they related to topics mentioned in the trailer. In each case, students' level of agreement was assessed by way of a seven point Likert scale (0 = 'Strongly disagree', 6 = 'Strongly agree').

The responses to these questions paint a concerning picture. Of the 24 respondents, half 'Agreed' or 'Strongly agreed' with the statement, "I feel very pressurized by the system in the UK" (see Figure 5). Only two students expressed any level of disagreement with this statement. As to the statement, "I've found myself feeling down, depressed or emotionally disturbed as a result of the pressures in this system", a third of the students 'Agreed' or 'Strongly agreed' (see Figure 6). The mean score on this question was 3.42, indicating that students agreed with this statement more than they disagreed. Students' responses to two further questions on this topic are shown in Figures 7 and 8. Students overwhelmingly agreed with the statement, "There are things I'd love to be doing, but can't because of the demands the system places on me" (see Figure 7). On balance they disagreed with the statement, "The system in the UK provides me with the skills I need to lead a productive and fulfilling life" (see Figure 8).

However, the depth of student feeling on this topic was most clearly revealed in responses to an open-box question in the survey inviting student comment, and in the subsequent group discussion. Addressing the open-box responses first, of the nine students who made relevant comments, just two defended the educational system in the UK (one arguing that "the claims of mental disturbance as a result of the pressure is [sic]

rather hyperbolic”). The remaining seven students were critical of the educational system in the UK. One student commented: “I feel the depression I have experienced has no firm root in the pressure from schools, but I strongly feel that it has been a contributory factor.” Worryingly, another student stated:

The depression doesn't necessarily come from the exams but more from knowing that I can never really learn what I would like to learn as everything must be streamlined towards an exam. This has led to me no longer enjoying education as I don't have time to learn new and interesting things. [...] Although I would not say that I want to kill myself I am finding myself worrying that I do not. This is because I cannot see any possible future, governed by this form of 'education' in which I want to live.

Students were less candid in the whole group discussion, but still made plain that they feel under a significant amount of pressure at this stage of their lives. One student told me: “Especially in today’s society everything’s a competition, so if you’re trying to apply for a job you’ve got to have the better school, better grades, [...] more extra curricular activities to get the job over someone else.” Another said: “The exams you take [...] define you. People don’t know the qualities you have, but they see that piece of paper, they see what’s on there, and they think, ok, this person’s good or this person’s bad.”

No time to consider purpose

In the last part of the survey, students were asked whether they felt they had a sense of purpose. This was followed by a series of questions on this topic. In order to introduce the topic of purpose, students were provided with a definition of purpose (a

simplified version of the definition offered by Damon et al., 2003), and then given two examples of what leading a life of purpose might look like. Figure 9 shows student responses to the question, “Do you feel you have a purpose in life?” Of the 24 respondents, four said ‘No’, 13 answered ‘Maybe, but I’m not sure’, while seven students replied ‘Yes’. Those who answered ‘Maybe’ or ‘Yes’ were then asked to state what they felt their purpose might be. Of those who answered ‘Yes’, sample purposes included: becoming an actor; making a difference to others by helping them as much as possible; making corporate life more moral; and becoming an actuary so as to make sufficient money to start an NGO.

Students were then asked to state their level of agreement with a series of statements exploring the extent to which their capacity to explore purpose is limited by the exam culture in the UK. In each case, students’ level of agreement was assessed by way of a seven point Likert scale (0 = ‘Strongly disagree’, 6 = ‘Strongly agree’). Figure 10 shows students’ responses to the statement, “My main task while in Years 12 and 13 is to study hard and get the best grades possible, so as to get into the best university. I can leave questions of purpose to a later date”. 15 of the 24 respondents, ‘Somewhat agreed’, ‘Agreed’ or ‘Strongly agreed’ with this statement. Only four students expressed any level of disagreement with this statement.

Figure 11 shows students’ responses to the statement, “I’m interested in exploring what my purpose might be, but I just don’t have the time, or frankly the head space, to look into this right now”. While six students, ‘Somewhat disagreed’ or ‘Strongly disagreed’ with this statement, a clear majority (15 students) expressed some level of agreement with the statement. The findings outlined in Figures 10 and 11 provide a

measure of support for my first hypothesis, namely that exam culture is so all consuming for the students that they have no time or capacity to inquire into their purpose – despite their clear interest in doing so.

Purpose as an aid for managing pressure

My second hypothesis was that students with a sense of purpose would be more able to cope with the pressures of the exam culture. To test this hypothesis, I first gave the students an open-box opportunity to comment on the suggestion that having a sense of purpose would help them to manage the pressures they are facing. The response here was mixed. Of the fourteen students who commented, four felt that purpose would not assist with this. One of these students commented, “I do not think it would. I have a passion and goal, and the pressures are only more irritating because of that.” But the remaining ten students took the opposite view. One of these students remarked that having a sense of purpose would allow students “to focus on a final goal, and know that what they're doing is worthwhile, not futile. I feel as if university and grades are a stepping stone to fulfilling my purpose, so it seems worthwhile.”

These responses, and those raised in the whole group discussion, tended to the hypothetical and, as a result, were of limited value in assessing the validity of the hypothesis. Accordingly, my second strategy was to analyze the survey data with a view to finding correlations between purpose and the levels of pressure experienced by students. I began by taking student responses to the statement, “I feel very pressurized by the system in the UK”. These responses were scored on a 7 point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). I called this score the ‘pressure score’. I then looked at the pressure scores for those students who had answered ‘Yes’ to the question

“Do you feel you have a purpose in life”, and compared these to the pressure scores of students answering ‘Maybe’ or ‘No’. The results were striking (see Figure 12). The mean pressure score for students answering ‘No’ was 5.25. This was notably higher than the mean pressure score for students answering ‘Maybe’ (4.45), and the mean pressure score for students answering ‘Yes’ (3.71). In other words, on average, students who stated that they did not have a sense of purpose, experienced a notably greater amount of pressure, when compared to students with a sense of purpose, or to students who felt they maybe had a sense of purpose.

I then sought to assess whether these differences were statistically significant. Table 2 shows a comparison of the mean pressure scores of students answering ‘No’ to the purpose question, to those who answered ‘Maybe’ and ‘Yes’. While the mean pressure score of students answering ‘No’ (5.25) was markedly higher than that of students answering ‘Maybe’ and ‘Yes’ (4.2), this difference was not sufficient to be statistically significant, $t(22) = -1.50, p = .15$.

However, I then conducted a similar exercise based on students’ responses to the statement, “I’ve found myself feeling down, depressed or emotionally disturbed as a result of the pressures in this system” (see Table 2). Again, the mean score of students answering ‘No’ to the purpose question (5.25) was markedly higher than that of students answering ‘Maybe’ and ‘Yes’ (3.05). This difference was sufficient to be statistically significant, $t(22) = -2.40, p = .03$.

Finally, I explored whether there were any correlations between students’ answers to the purpose question, and variables including students’ responses to the ‘level of challenge’ question (Figure 1), their pressure score (Figure 5), their answers to the ‘down,

depressed, emotionally disturbed' question (Figure 6), and their answers to the 'no time or head space to look into purpose' question (Figure 11). To do this, I first created a 'purpose score' for each student (key: no purpose = 1, maybe purpose = 2, yes purpose = 3), and then carried out a pairwise correlation of all these variables. The results are set out in Table 3. Not all the correlations were statistically significant, but a number were. In particular, and consistent with the findings reported above, there was a moderately strong negative correlation ($r = -.40, p = 0.055$) between students' purpose scores and their pressure scores. In other words, students who were more purposeful tended to report lower pressure scores; students who were less purposeful, tended to report higher pressure scores.

Other significant correlations included (i) a moderately strong negative correlation between students' purpose scores and their scores on the 'down, depressed, emotionally disturbed' variable ($r = -.50, p = 0.014$); (ii) a moderately strong positive correlation between students' pressure scores and their scores on the 'down, depressed, emotionally disturbed' variable ($r = .47, p = 0.020$); and (iii) a moderately strong positive correlation between students' scores on the 'level of challenge' variable and their scores on the 'no time or head space to look into purpose' variable ($r = .47, p = 0.019$). This last finding is particularly interesting. In simpler language, the finding indicates that students who reported a greater level of challenge in their academic goal, tended to agree more strongly with the proposition that they lacked the time or head space to look into purpose. This finding lends further support to my first hypothesis.

Discussion

The findings detailed above are consistent with the academic literature and lend support to the two hypotheses identified at the outset of this study. My findings show that students in the sample set themselves challenging academic goals, and do so primarily out of a desire to gain admission to the best universities. They also engage in many extra-curricular activities, and again, are motivated to do so in large part because of the benefits these activities will provide with regards to university entry, and later in life. Students in the sample are clearly very conscious of the future impact of their present actions.

The scale of this future-orientation is perhaps a factor in the levels of pressure experienced by the students. I had expected that the students would feel pressurized, but was surprised by the extent of this condition. In particular, the fact that only two students expressed any level of disagreement with the statement, “I feel *very* pressurized by the system in the UK” (emphasis added) was a surprise to me, and should be of concern to the parents and teachers of the students. Similarly, the fact that a third of the students reported having felt “down, depressed, or emotionally disturbed *as a result of the pressures in the system*” (emphasis added) is, to my mind, alarming. The most serious case, of course, is the student who reported (in the open-box survey response) that he could not see any possible future for himself, “governed by this form of 'education' in which I want to live”.

Seven students in the group (29%) stated that they felt they had a purpose in life, and a further 13 (54%) indicated that they ‘maybe’ had such a purpose, but weren’t sure. These findings should be treated with caution, given they are self-reported. Further, in posing this question, ‘purpose’ was defined only briefly and in a non-technical way.

However, the answers to the questions that followed were illuminating. Most students (62.5%) expressed interest in exploring their purpose, but also stated that they had no “time or head space” to look into this right now. A substantial majority (62.5%) agreed with the statement that their main task at this stage of their lives was to get the best grades possible, so as to be admitted to the best university. They felt that questions of purpose could be left to a later date. These findings provide a broad level of support for my first hypothesis. It would seem that, for students in the sample, the exam culture they face provides them with little time, and leaves them with little psychological capacity, to explore their purpose.

The survey results also provide a measure of support for my second hypothesis. There was a clear correlation between the level of pressure experienced by students, and the extent to which students reported having a sense of purpose. Given the small sample size, and further the fact that students’ purpose scores were self-reported, it is important not to place too much weight on this finding. Nevertheless, the difference in pressure scores between students with a sense of purpose, and those without, is striking. At the very least, it indicates that there is some relationship (within the population of students this sample was drawn from) between purpose and students’ experience of pressure. What remains unclear is the strength of that relationship, and its causal direction. In other words, while it may be true that students with purpose are better able to manage the pressures of exam culture, another explanation could be that those students who cope with exam culture more easily are more likely to develop a sense of purpose.

My findings demonstrate that the ‘purpose’ of most of the students in the sample, at this stage of their lives, is arguably to do whatever it takes to get into the best

university possible. This categorization would not meet the terms of the Damon et al. (2003) definition of purpose, but it is clearly an appropriate description of the mindset of many of the students. As already discussed, one of the consequences of this phenomenon is that the students are left with little space to engage in a deeper exploration of purpose (as envisaged by Damon et al., 2003). This situation is problematic, because it is only this deeper type of purpose that carries the benefits described in the literature. In terms of Good Work, then, the key question becomes how to foster conditions that will allow students the space, and provide them with the support, to inquire meaningfully into this deeper type of purpose. The pervasive effects of the exam culture pose a clear challenge to this. But if, notwithstanding this challenge, students are able to develop a sense of their purpose in life, this achievement will not only promote the possibilities for Good Work, but may also help them to manage the pressures of exam culture.

This last point is critical, as it seems clear that exam culture, in England at least, is not going to disappear any time soon. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is not to argue against exams. As discussed, many scholars see merit in the right kind of high-stakes testing. But given that exam culture is here to stay, the need to develop a sense of purpose – one that goes beyond the goal of getting into the best university – becomes more important. A student in the sample provided an ideal example of what it looks like when purpose and exam culture are aligned. He explained: “I feel as if university and grades are a stepping stone to fulfilling my purpose, so it seems worthwhile”. In this light, the goal for teachers and administrators must surely be to promote an alignment of this sort. The challenge is to support students in seeing exam culture as a necessary means to a larger end, rather than an end in itself.

Limitations / Avenues for Future Research

A major limitation of the study is the size of the sample. The sample is clearly too small to support any general conclusions regarding the experience of students in similar situations (i.e. boys in high-performing private schools in England), let alone that of students in the wider population. Ideally I would have included students from a range of different schools and backgrounds, and of different genders, in the study. It would also have been interesting to compare survey responses of students in Year 12, to those of students in Year 13. This comparison was part of my initial plan for the study, but for logistical reasons it proved impossible. Given the opportunity to carry out further research, I would seek to broaden the study as described.

I also need to acknowledge my personal bias in conducting the study. For a number of years I've strongly believed that we should do more to support young people to develop a sense of their purpose in life. This belief was strengthened by the research I came across as part of the Literature Review. This bias plainly had the potential to impact on my disinterestedness in conducting the study. However, the risks of this were mitigated somewhat by the fact that my conclusions are largely based on quantitative data arising from the survey.

A further limitation concerns the fact that students self-reported whether they have a purpose in life. Although a brief definition of purpose was provided beforehand, together with two examples, it would be a mistake to conclude with any confidence that students who reported that they have a purpose in life, do in fact have such a purpose. This necessary uncertainty is particularly problematic given how central this question was to the analysis that followed. Given the opportunity, I would address this issue by

including further questions designed to assess students' compliance with the three aspects of purpose described by Damon et al. (2003). I would also conduct follow-up interviews with individual students in order to assess their answers to these questions in more detail.

In terms of future research, there is also a need to explore in greater depth the nature of the relationship between having a purpose in life, and the capacity to manage the pressures of exam culture. As discussed, although I feel tentatively able to conclude that such a relationship exists, at this point the strength and causative direction of this relationship remain unclear.

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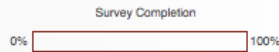
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APPENDIX 1 – Survey

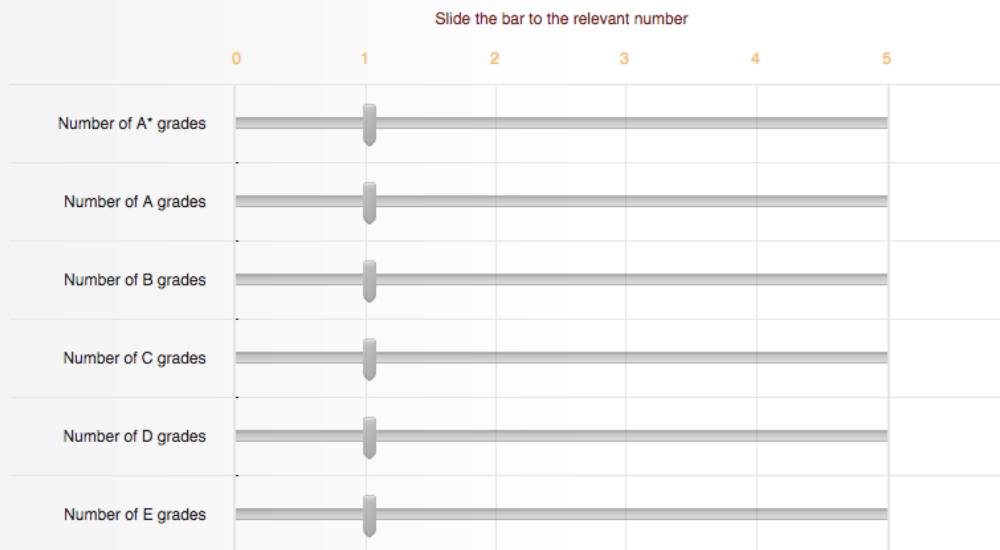


HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Thanks for starting this survey! The following questions should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential - the teachers won't know what you've written. Remember: this isn't a test! Please answer as best you can. If you feel stuck, the best advice is not to think too much and to go with your instinctive response.



What grades are you targeting in your A2 exams? (please input the grades you are personally aiming to achieve; this may be different from your predicted grades, or the grades your parents or teachers want you to achieve)



When you think about the grades you are targeting, how challenging does this goal feel to you?



I'm targeting these grades because: *(drag the rows so as to rank them in order of personal importance, 1 being the most important to you, 5 being the least important)*

- My parents / mentors want me to get these grades

- My teachers want me to get these grades

- It's important to me (for my own sense of achievement) to get these grades

- If I want to get into a good university, I need to get these grades

- I want to do as well as or better than my classmates

[New survey page]

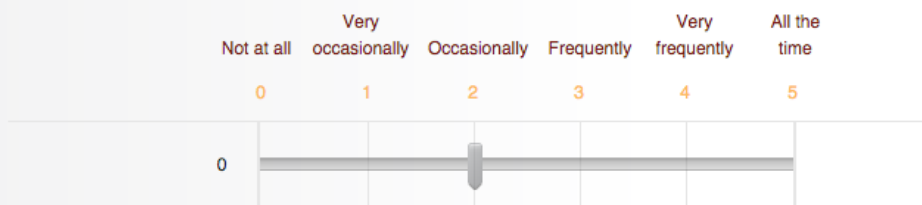
Which of the following extra-curricular activities are you involved in? (check all that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cadets | <input type="checkbox"/> Duke of Edinburgh scheme |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Music | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefect / Student council |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drama | <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering / service in the community |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art | Individual or team sports outside St James (insert
<input type="checkbox"/> number of sports in this category) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Climbing/Mountaineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sailing | <input type="checkbox"/> No extra-curricular activities |

I'm involved in these extra-curricular activities because: (drag the rows so as to rank them in order of personal importance, 1 being the most important to you, 6 being the least important. If you are not involved in any extra-curricular activities, skip this question)

- I don't know, I just ended up doing them
- My parents, mentors or teachers pushed me to do them
- It will help me with what I want to do later in life
- My friends or classmates are doing them too
- I get a real sense of personal satisfaction from them
- It will look good on my university application

How often do you find that your extra-curricular activities / sports outside St James are having a negative effect on the quality of your academic work? (if you are not involved in any extra-curricular activities / sports outside St James, select 'not at all')



[New survey page]



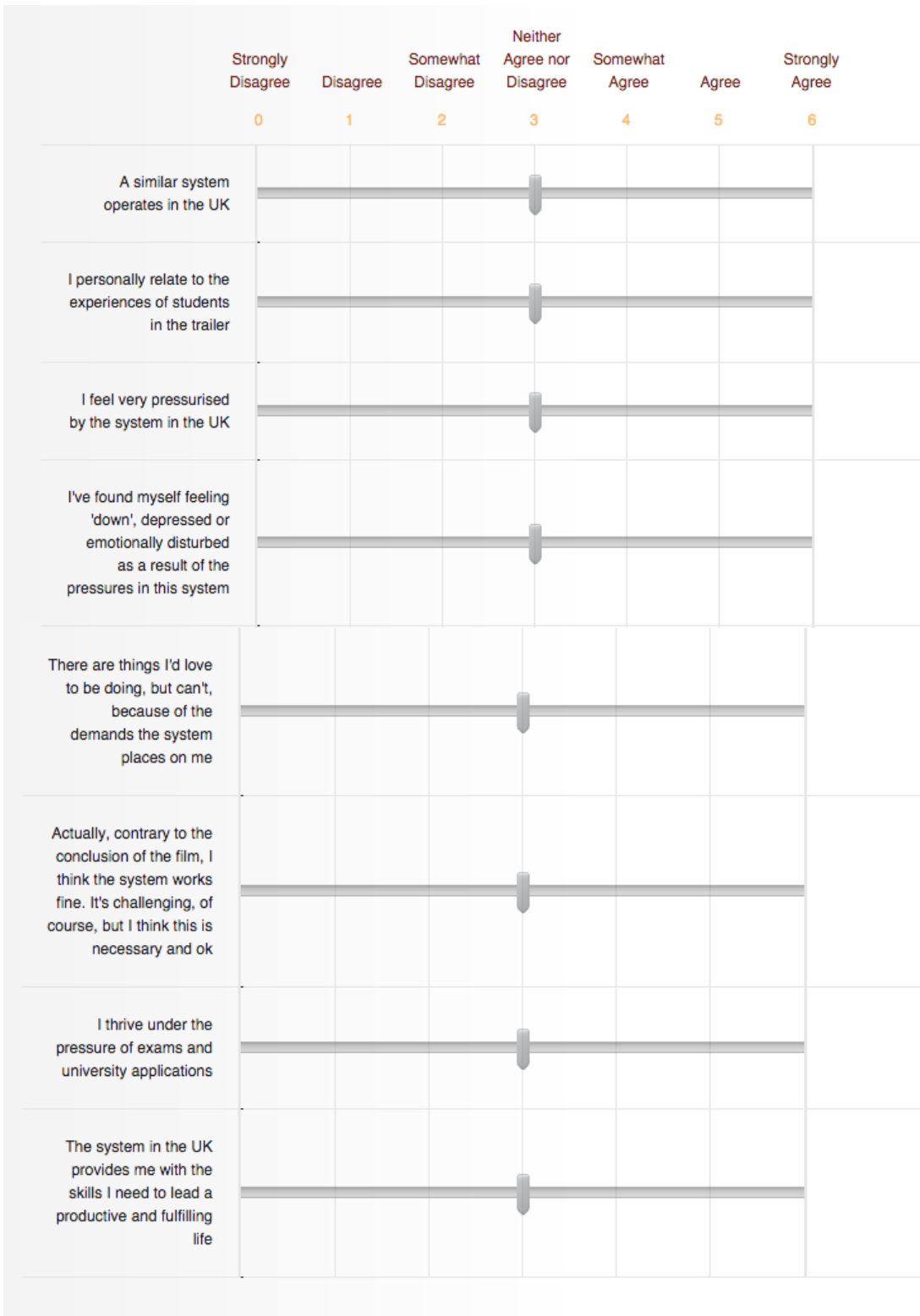
Please watch the following trailer from the documentary film, 'Race to Nowhere' (2 mins 31 secs):



The film 'Race to Nowhere' argues that, in the US, students your age are under a huge amount of pressure. They are forced to sit 'high stakes' exams, the outcome of which will have a major impact on where they can go to university. They are also under pressure to take part in all kinds of extra-curricular activities, to support their university applications. The film argues that this system is a 'Race to Nowhere', because it fails to provide students with the skills they need in order to live productive and fulfilling lives. The film also argues that students are experiencing emotional difficulties, depression and worse as a result of this system.

In light of these issues, how far do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

[Question continued on next page]



When you think about your future, what matters to you? (drag the rows so as to rank them in order of personal importance, 1 being the most important to you, 6 being the least important.)

- Being successful (and being seen to be successful by others)

- Being financially well-off

- Doing meaningful work that I feel passionate about

- Making a contribution to society

- Treating other people well

- Taking care of my family

Do you have any comments about the trailer or the questions on this page (especially as they relate to your personal experience)? If so, please write them in the box below. If not, move on to the next page.

[New survey page]

The questions that follow are about 'Purpose'.

Purpose can be defined as 'a central life aim, focused on the wellbeing of others, that organizes and guides your planning and the things you do'.

For example, Arun has a purpose of 'healing'. He knows this is what he wants his life to be about. This purpose will allow him to contribute to the wellbeing of others, and shapes the choices he makes in the short-term (he attends a first-aid course), and the long-term (he plans to become a doctor).

Another example might be Jeff, whose purpose in life is 'making music'. He is passionate about this and knows his life will always revolve around music, one way or another. He wants people to listen to his music and be moved by it. This purpose shapes the things he does in the short-term (he starts a band), and also his long-term plans (he takes an office job so that he can make enough money to travel the world, learning about music in other cultures).

Do you feel you have a purpose in life?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe, but I'm not sure

Note: different questions were shown depending on the answer to this question. If 'yes' or 'maybe', the following question was shown:

What do you feel your purpose might be? *(there's no need to go into detail here, but your initial thoughts are welcome)*

If the answer was 'no', the following question was shown:

Are you interested in exploring what your purpose might be?

- Yes
- No

The survey continued:

Some people express the following sentiments with regards to purpose. How far do you agree or disagree with each statement?



With regards to the final statement in the list above (*'If I understood my purpose, this would help me to manage the pressures I'm facing during this period of my life'*), how do you think understanding purpose might help someone manage the pressures they are under? How does this relate to your own experience?

Thank you for completing this survey! Please click to the next page to record your results.

[Survey end]

APPENDIX 2 – Figures And Tables

Figure 1

“When you think about the grades you are targeting, how challenging does this goal feel to you?” (Scale: 0 = I can do this in my sleep! 8 = Next to impossible)

N = 24; Mean score = 5.54

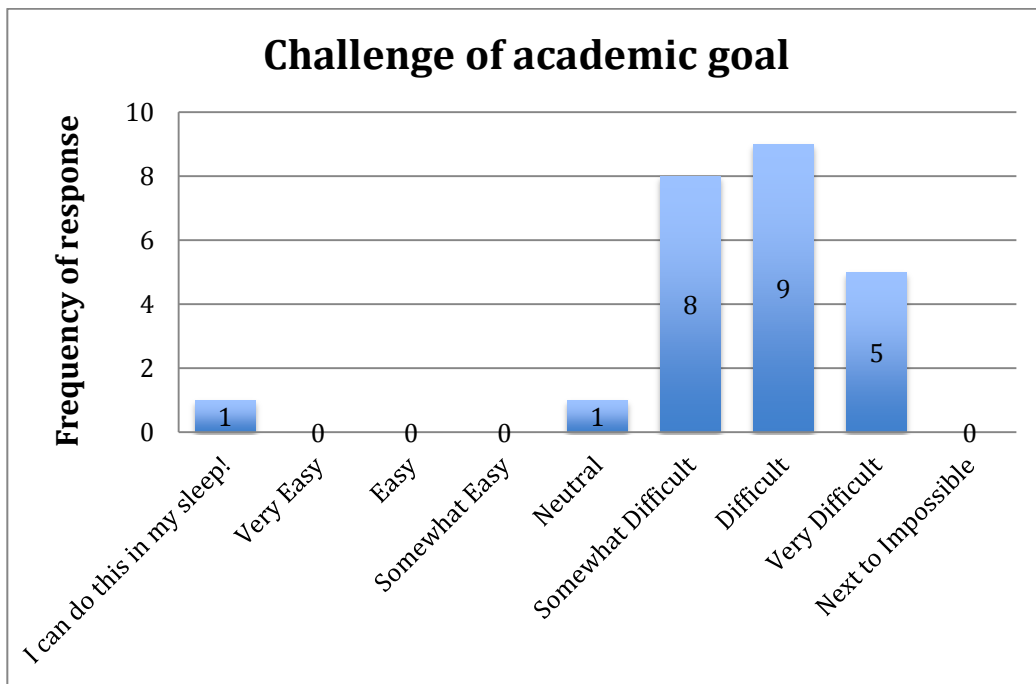


Figure 2

“I’m targeting these grades because” (rank the options in order of importance to you, 1 being most important, 5 being least important):

N = 24

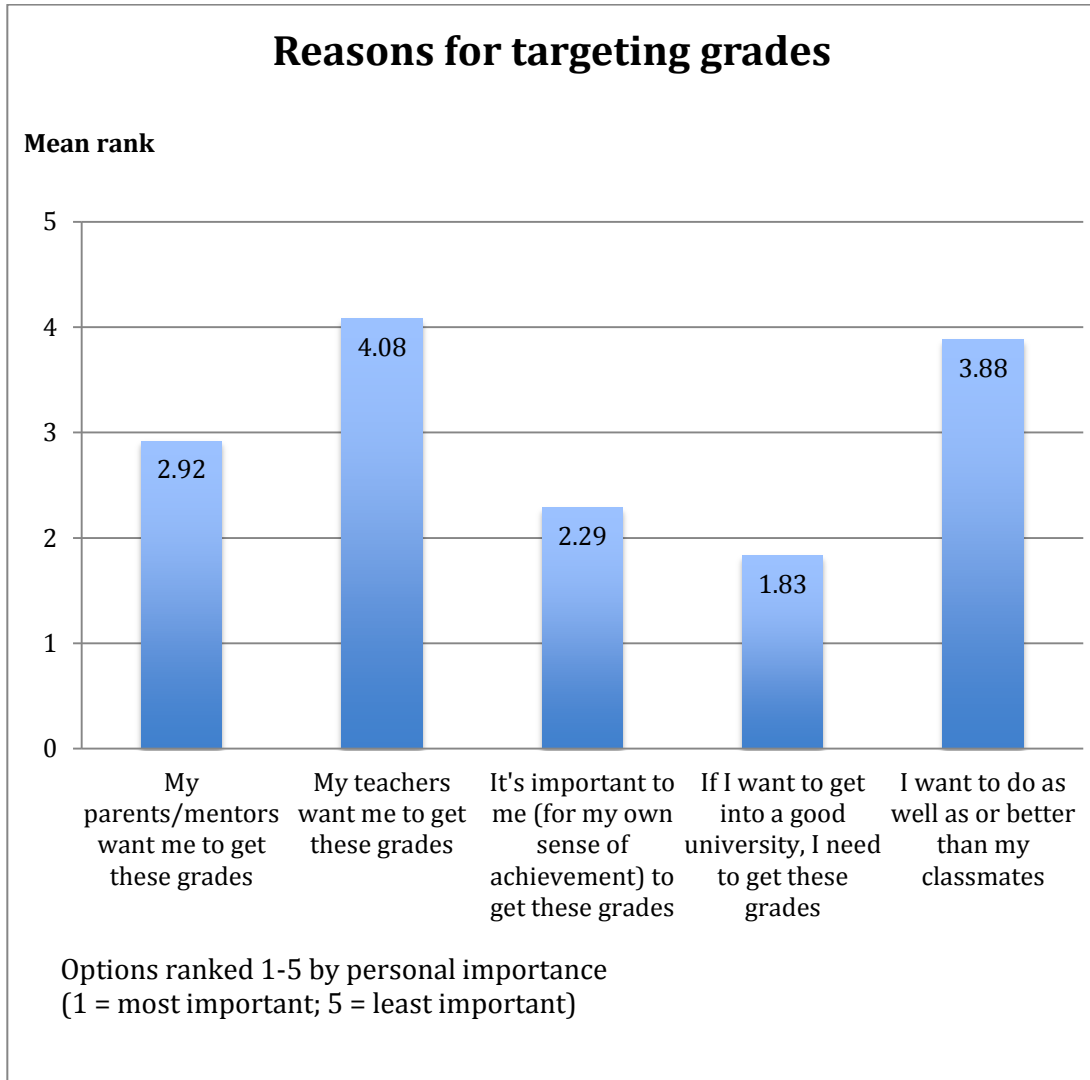


Figure 3

N = 24; Mean number of extra-curricular activities per student = 2.83

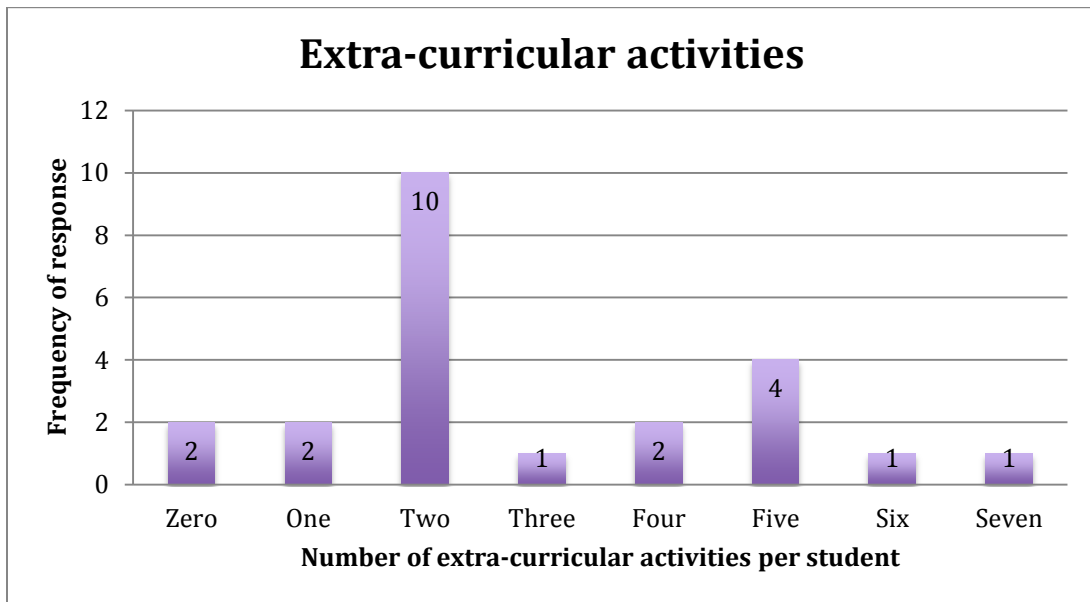


Table 1

Table 1. Number of students involved in various extra-curricular activities	
Activity type	No. of students involved
Individual or team sports outside school	14
Prefect/Student Council	13
Other	7
Music	5
Duke of Edinburgh scheme	5
Volunteering	5
Art	4
Cadets	3
Drama	2
Mountaineering	2
Sailing	1

Figure 4

“I’m involved in these extra-curricular activities because” (rank the options in order of importance to you, 1 being most important, 6 being least important):

N = 24

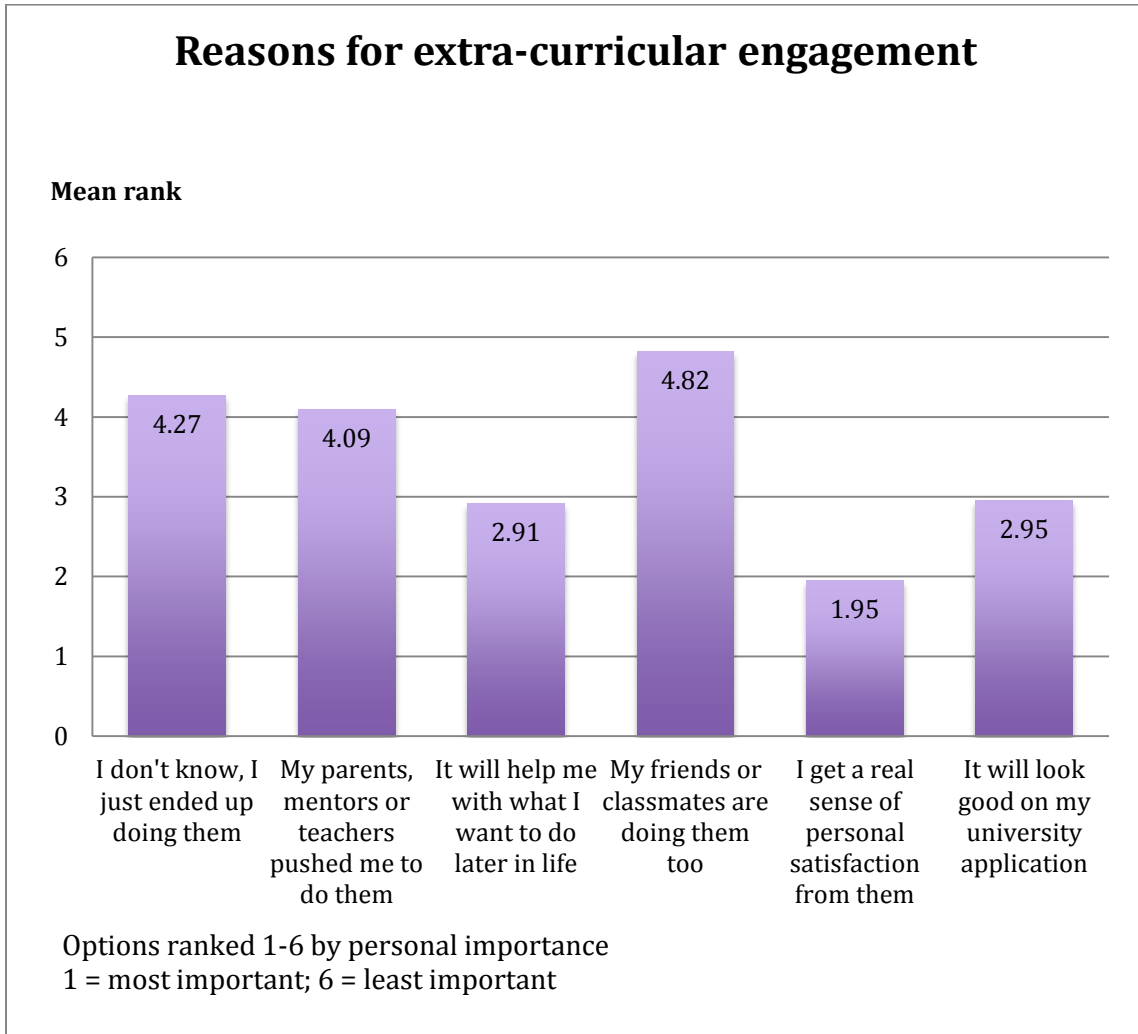


Figure 5

“I feel very pressurized by the system in the UK.” (Scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)

N = 24; Mean = 4.38

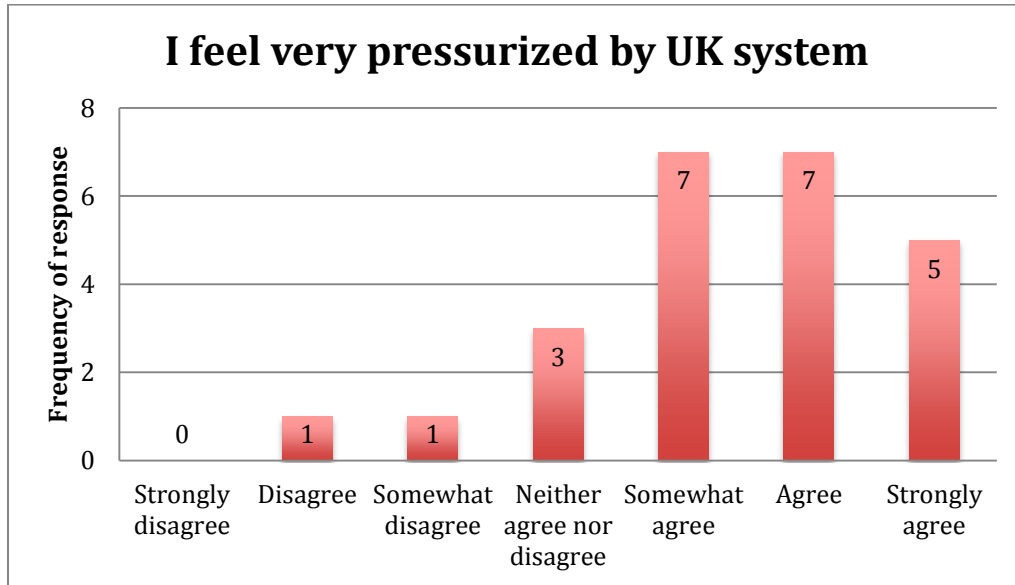


Figure 6

“I've found myself feeling 'down', depressed or emotionally disturbed as a result of the pressures in this system.” (Scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)

N = 24; Mean = 3.42

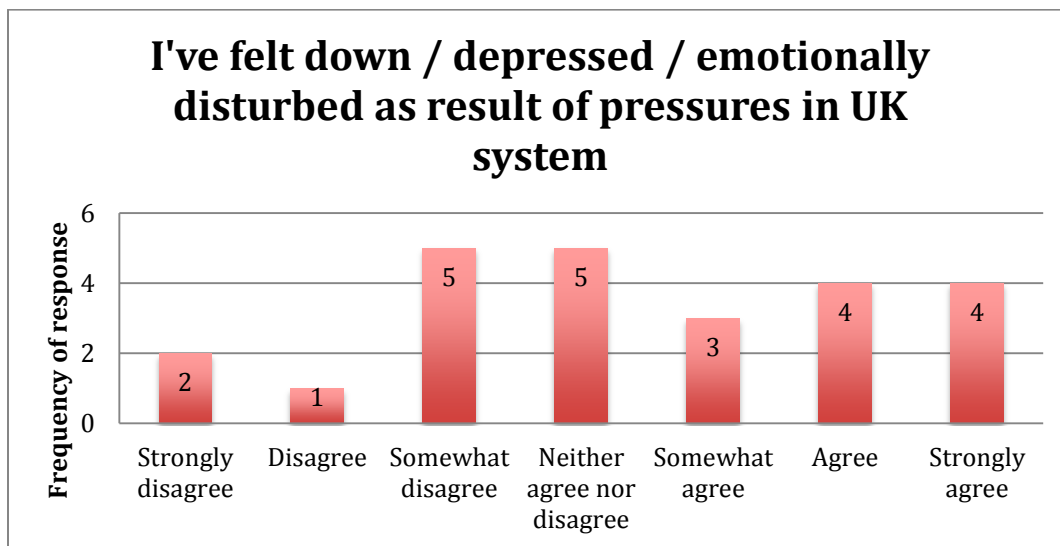


Figure 7

“There are things I’d love to be doing, but can’t because of the demands the system places on me.” (Scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree):

N = 24; Mean = 4.71

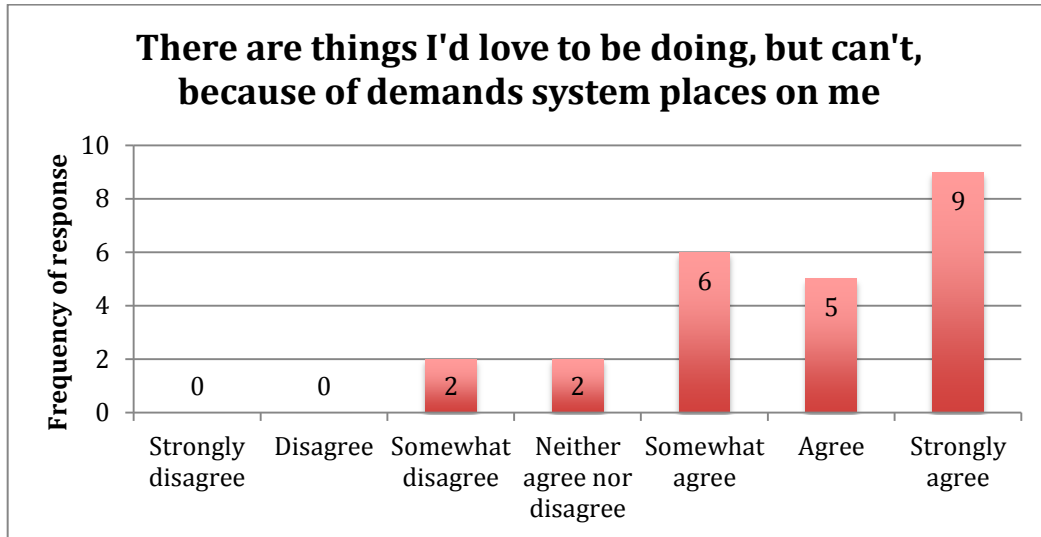


Figure 8

“The system in the UK provides me with the skills I need to lead a productive and fulfilling life.” (Scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree):

N = 24; Mean = 2.38

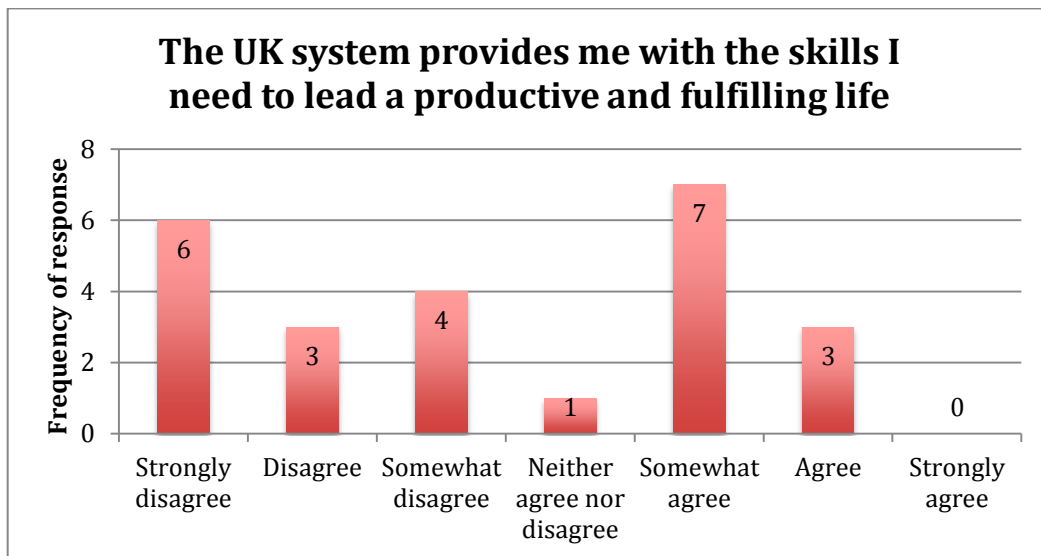


Figure 9

“Do you feel you have a purpose in life?” (N = 24)

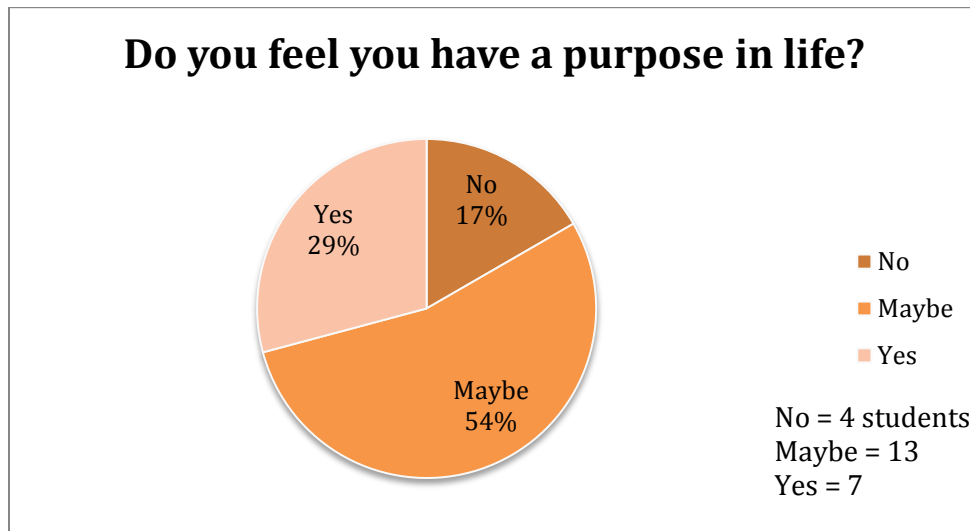


Figure 10

“My main task while in Years 12 and 13 is to study hard and get the best grades possible, so as to get into the best university. I can leave questions of purpose to a later date.”
(Scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree):

N = 24; Mean = 3.92

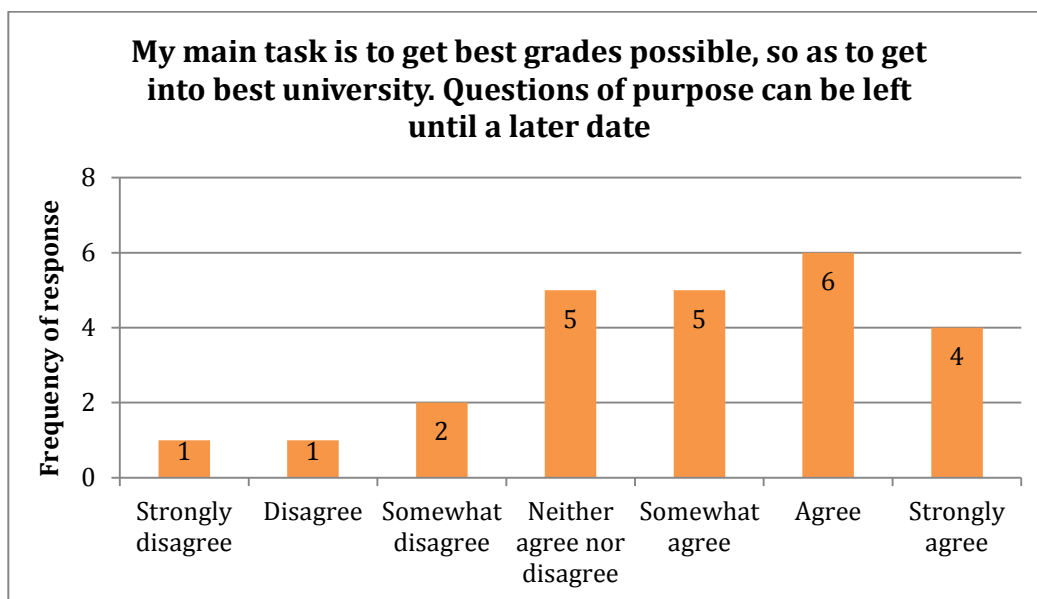


Figure 11

“I’m interested in exploring what my purpose might be, but I just don’t have the time, or frankly the headspace, to look into this right now.” (Scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)

N = 24; Mean = 3.54

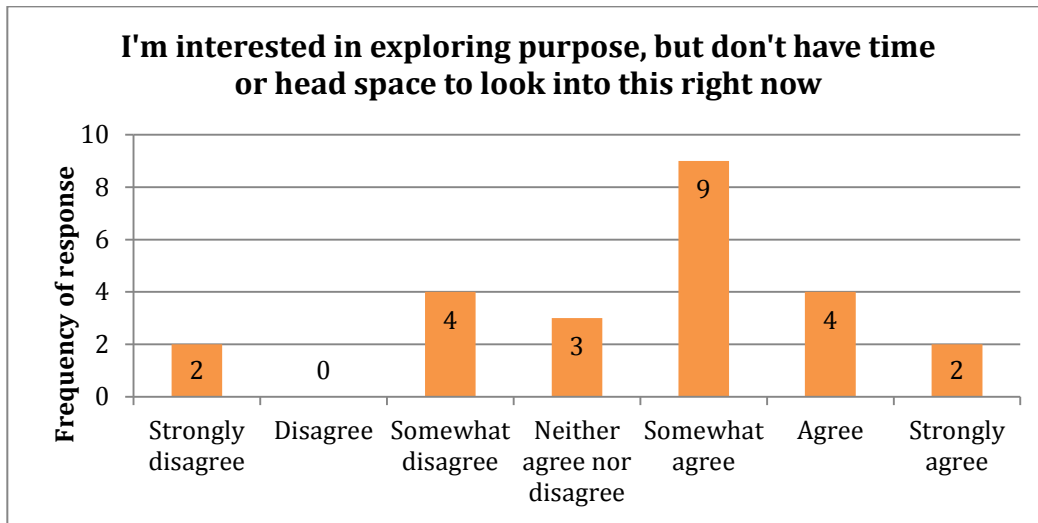


Figure 12

N = 24

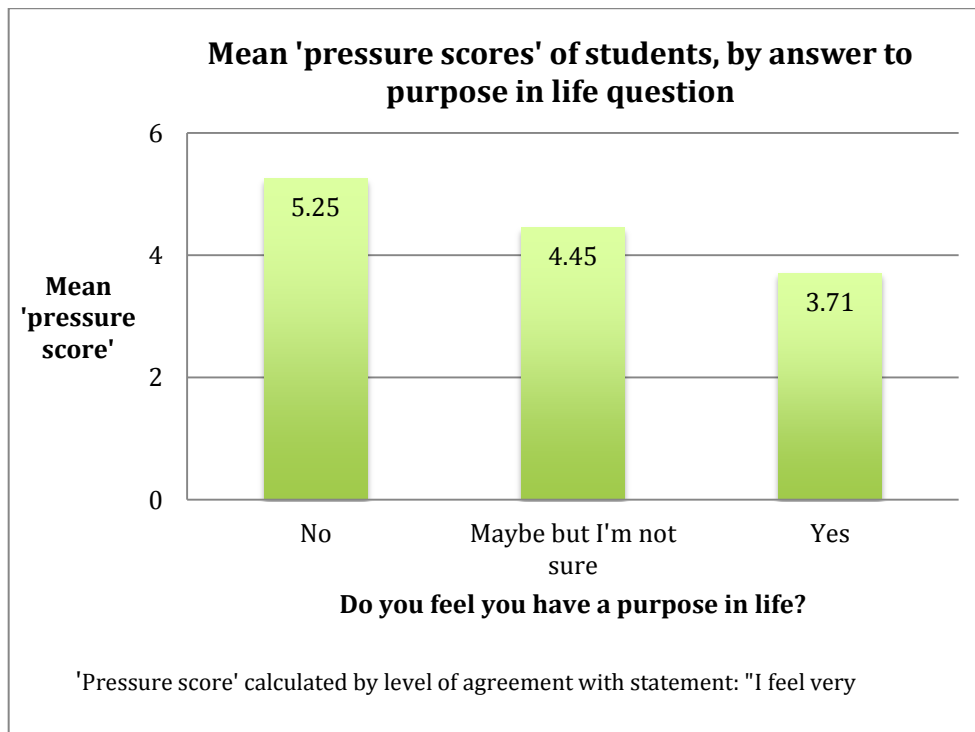


Table 2

Table 2. Comparing mean 'pressure scores' of students who answered 'no' to purpose question, to those who answered 'maybe' or 'yes'					
<u>Variable</u>		<u>No purpose</u>	<u>Maybe / Yes Purpose</u>	<u>t-value</u>	<u>p-value</u>
		(n = 4)	(n = 20)		
Feel very pressurized by system in UK	M	5.25	4.2	-1.50	0.15
	SD	.5	1.36		
Have felt down/depressed/emotionally disturbed	M	5.25	3.05	-2.40	0.03
	SD	.96	1.76		

Table 3

Table 3. Pearson correlations of variables, n = 24					
<u>Student variable</u>	<u>Purpose</u>	<u>Challenge of goal</u>	<u>Feel very pressurized</u>	<u>Have felt down/depressed/emotionally disturbed</u>	<u>No time to look into purpose</u>
Purpose	--				
Challenge of goal	.11	--			
Feel very pressurized	-.40*	-.11	--		
Have felt down/depressed/emotionally disturbed	-.50**	-.22	0.47**	--	
No time to look into purpose	.22	.47**	.00	-.32	--

* p < 0.06 ** p < 0.02