STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN YOUTH TRANSITIONS:
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES
ON VOCATIONAL FURTHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The research presented here examines the school to work transitions of two samples of 16-19-year-old college students in terms of their vocational preparation, skill development and expectations of labour market entry. The study links with a programme of research developed in the University of Surrey from the ESRC’s 16-19 Initiative.

The study aims to describe, analyse and evaluate current processes of vocational preparation primarily from the perspectives of the young people themselves. A multi-method approach involving a structured questionnaire and a series of ethnographic group interviews is used to try to discover something of the ‘lived realities’ of these young people. A central aim of the study is to explore structure and agency in young people’s lives in the light of their perceptions of the ‘new vocationalism’ and to assess how much control they feel they have over the further education phase of the school to work transition.

Part I considers some of the aims and contexts of the research and outlines the methodology used. A number of substantive issues arising from the literature on the school to work transition are discussed.

Parts II-IV consider school to work transitions in national, local, college, group and individual settings. Use is made of Evans and Heinz’s distinction between policy as espoused, policy as enacted and policy as experienced to structure the main body of the thesis.

Part II outlines policy as espoused, that is national policy on vocational aspects of further education as expressed mainly in official documents.

Part III looks at how these national policies are enacted, i.e. what actually happens in practice in the two contrasting local labour markets and colleges featured in the study. Parts II and III taken together summarise the structural influences that may be impacting upon these young people’s school to work transitions.

Part IV, policy as experienced, presents the day-to-day experiences of vocational education as expressed by the ‘matched’ samples of young people. Both quantitative data (from a structured questionnaire survey) and qualitative data (from the group interviews) are reported with special reference to possible manifestations of structure and agency in these experiences.

Finally in Part V practical and theoretical implications are considered and the findings of the study are used to assist in clarifying and developing the ‘individualisation thesis’ and a variety of concepts relating to youth transitions.
Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Economic and Social Research Council for their funding of this three-year study (Research Studentship RO 0429334300).

Special thanks must go to my supervisor, Professor Karen Evans, whose encouragement, from the presentation of the very first research proposal in 1993 to the completion of the final thesis in 1996, was an essential motivating factor.

Thanks also to Dr Pamela Denicolo, Professor Judith Lathlean and Dr Thomas Black (and other staff in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey) for their stimulating Research Methods course and personal advice and guidance. Many of my fellow MPhil/PhD students also provided valuable comments and suggestions.

The research would not have been possible without the contributions of my two ‘contacts’ at the further education colleges. They facilitated ways into the colleges, set up communication links, acted as ‘key informants’ and gave me the considerable benefit of their local experience.

Since this project is meant to be ‘from the perspectives of the students themselves’ the input of the student samples has been vital. I would like to say a big thank you to the 223 students who completed the questionnaire. Additionally, the contributions of the 23 student interviewees were central to the development of this study.
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<td>APL</td>
<td>Accredited Prior Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>Business and Technology Education Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBET</td>
<td>Competence Based Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBI</td>
<td>Confederation of British Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGLI</td>
<td>City and Guilds of London Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPVE</td>
<td>Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education</td>
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<td>CTC</td>
<td>City Technology College</td>
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<tr>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Department of Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFE</td>
<td>Department for Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfEE</td>
<td>Department for Education and Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>DTI</td>
<td>Department for Trade and Industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>EBP</td>
<td>Education-Business Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>ED(G)</td>
<td>Employment Department (Group)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESRC</td>
<td>Economic and Social Research Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>ET</td>
<td>Employment Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEADA</td>
<td>Further Education Development Agency</td>
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<td>FEFC</td>
<td>Further Education Funding Council</td>
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<td>FEU</td>
<td>Further Education Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCSE</td>
<td>General Certificate of Secondary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNVQ</td>
<td>General National Vocational Qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>HMI</td>
<td>Her Majesty's Inspectorate</td>
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<tr>
<td>HND</td>
<td>Higher National Diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMS</td>
<td>Institute of Manpower Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEA</td>
<td>Local Education Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>LMQR</td>
<td>Labour Market Quarterly Report</td>
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<td>MSC</td>
<td>Manpower Services Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>NACETT</td>
<td>National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAFE</td>
<td>Non-Academic Further Education</td>
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<td>NATFHE</td>
<td>National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Curriculum Council</td>
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<td>NCVQ</td>
<td>National Council for Vocational Qualifications</td>
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<td>NETTs</td>
<td>National Education and Training Targets</td>
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<td>NNEB</td>
<td>Nursery Nursing Examination Board</td>
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<td>NRA</td>
<td>National Record of Achievement</td>
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<td>NVQ</td>
<td>National Vocational Qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>OFSTED</td>
<td>Office for Standards in Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>OND</td>
<td>Ordinary National Diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSA</td>
<td>Royal Society of Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>RVQ</td>
<td>Review of Vocational Qualifications</td>
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<td>SATs</td>
<td>Standard Assessment Tasks</td>
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<td>SCAA</td>
<td>Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>School Examinations and Assessment Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>SVP</td>
<td>Schools Vocational Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Training Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEC</td>
<td>Training and Enterprise Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUC</td>
<td>Trades Union Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVEI</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Education Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRFE</td>
<td>Work Related Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>YOP</td>
<td>Youth Opportunities Programme</td>
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<td>YT</td>
<td>Youth Training</td>
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<td>YTS</td>
<td>Youth Training Scheme</td>
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Part I - Introduction

Chapter One - Introduction: Structure and Agency in Young People’s Lives

1.1 Aims and Research Questions

The central aim of this study is to try to assess the degree of control which young people feel they have in the transition from school to work. The research will attempt to provide some indication of the relative contributions of agency (i.e. input from young people themselves on an individual basis) and structure (i.e. inputs from organisations at national and local level, particularly labour markets, and influences of broad social characteristics such as gender, social class and ethnicity) to the school to work transition process (these terms are defined in more detail in Section 1.4). Since it would be too ambitious to attempt to study young people in all their possible contexts - education, training, work, unemployment - the emphasis here is on their experiences of vocational courses in further education.

In the background there are a number of other research objectives. One of these is to describe the contribution of two further education colleges to the process of preparing young adults for the labour market and the world of work \emph{primarily from the point of view of the young people themselves}. The study builds upon previous work carried out by staff from the University of Surrey as part of the ESRC 16-19 Initiative (Careers and Identities) and the Anglo-German Studies (see Sections 1.6 and 1.7). The project is based on fieldwork with 16-19-year-olds in two further education colleges in contrasting labour markets: one in East London and another in the ‘M4 Corridor’ towards the West Country.

Another aim is to try to find out how useful and relevant young people consider their post-16 educational experience to be in terms of preparing them for the world of work. From this there may be some indications of levels of confidence and optimism in the young people which in turn will tell us something about their feelings of control over the school to work transition. Note that the emphasis here is on the perceptions of the young people themselves: it is contended that official accounts of vocational education based on the viewpoints of various educational agencies and personnel are reasonably well documented whilst there is a scarcity of first hand, direct expressions of the points of view of young people themselves. This group is, after all, the one that is supposed to benefit from the changes collectively known as the ‘new vocationalism’ (for discussion of the meaning of this term see Section 2.2).

The issue of the usefulness and the quality of post-16 vocational education is important both for society (the economy), in terms of how well prepared the new workforce will be,
and for the individual, in terms of occupational potential, life chances and personal
development. The process of educational policy-making has been presented as a ‘battle’
between those who see education as preparing pupils for future positions in the
occupational structure and those who view education primarily in terms of self-
development and individual fulfilment (Finch, 1984, pp.1-5; Walford et al., 1988, pp.4-5).
This distinction between societal/structural purposes of education as opposed to
individualised aims and goals is relevant to much of the research presented here and the
thesis includes some discussion of various theoretical viewpoints on the purposes of
education. This discussion is included so that student comments can be related to a
broader theoretical framework based upon competing arguments about the functions and
goals of education. Other subsidiary research questions include the following:

- what has been the practical impact of the ‘new vocationalism’ on these 16-19-
  year-olds, e.g. NVQ, GNVQ courses?

- How effective have schools and colleges been in passing on the academic,
technical, vocational and social skills required for ‘success’ in the labour market?

- What are the relationships between young people’s post-16 educational
  experiences, their transition behaviours (between education and work) and their
  career outcomes?

The issue of young people’s degrees of control over their career destinies seems to be
central to much of the literature on the transition from school to work. The issue hinges
upon the significance of individual choice in the transition to work along with the
importance and relative influences of national and regional contexts such as the local
labour market and structural factors such as gender, ethnicity and class. This issue can be
linked with the concept of individualisation which, put simply, suggests that progress
through the school to work phase is based on both individual choice/activity and structural
influences (for discussion see Section 2.6 and Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp.15-17; Evans
and Heinz, 1994, pp.8-12).

An important methodological and epistemological discrepancy arises here. This is based
around the possibility that there is a tension between an individual young person’s
response to such questions and evidence provided from broader social and economic
trends and patterns. In other words, a young person will typically say that he or she is in
control of his or her life course and that occupational success is largely based on
individual effort, whilst there may be a whole mass of data and theory, developed at a
national, societal or ‘macro’ level, which suggests that many young people, especially
from particular social groups or 'trajectories', have only limited chances of 'success' (conventionally defined) in the labour market.

This perhaps partly explains why in the literature writers concerned with levels of realism and optimism in young people's career aspirations often cannot agree. Some seem to suggest that young people are over-optimistic in terms of their work goals and ambitions, whilst others suggest that they are in fact very realistic and have an appropriate awareness of the 'real world' of work.

This is just a particular manifestation of a classic problem for social and educational researchers: there is a possible discrepancy between individual/subjective viewpoints and larger-scale social and structural patterns and trends. The difficulty for this enquiry can be stated as follows: how can the social research design take account of both the micro and the macro dimensions of a complex educational, social and economic process such as the school to work transition? Consequently, as well as the substantive aims outlined above, this study also has the methodological aim of taking the first steps towards the development of a research strategy which can take account of the diversity of individual and structural dimensions affecting young people’s school to work transitions.

1.2 Origins of the Research

The origins of this study lie partly in the researcher's experiences as a teacher of secondary and post-16 students in the period 1982-1993 and partly in perceived developments in the 'youth transitions' literature. It was noticed during this period that some of the comments made by students relating to career aspirations (usually made in 'life skills' and Social Studies lessons) seemed in some ways rather out of place. At times when unemployment levels were increasing (by any definition), the youth labour market was shrinking, even collapsing, and the literature on youth transitions was generally pessimistic, young people in the classroom still seemed optimistic and confident about their vocational prospects.

This apparently applied regardless of whether the students were 'staying on' or seeking to enter paid employment at the earliest opportunity and regardless of whether they were in the academic track of schooling or the vocational track. In terms of the sources of these comments the family background, social class, ethnicity and sex of the student did not seem to make a great deal of difference. There was a certain confidence and a certain resilience amongst these young people: they were going to do well despite the problems 'out there'. One aim of this study is to find out where this resilience comes from and to try to explain the levels of optimism associated with this outlook.

On the face of it there are a number of possible explanations for this optimism. One is
that with much to look forward to it is a natural characteristic of individuals of this age to be confident and enthusiastic. While adults may be pessimistic about employment prospects, career development and standards of living, young people, with the excitement of personal and social responsibilities and the ‘freedom’ of adulthood in front of them, are bound to have a more hopeful outlook, vocational and otherwise.

Another possible explanation centres around the location of the institution in which these individuals were studying: a relatively-prosperous commuter town in the south-east of England. These students were perhaps optimistic because London was only a half-hour train journey away and the local and regional labour markets were comparatively buoyant. Unemployment was lower in this part of the country and there seemed to be plenty of job opportunities in the locality and ‘in the city’ if you were prepared to travel there. The school and the local careers office offered helpful advice and there was plenty of parental encouragement and support.

There may be something in each of these explanations, but they do not provide a complete picture. Certainly these students had some of the confidence of youth, but there was something more than that. Their social lives and friendships were important and they were certainly looking forward to adult freedoms, but additionally the importance of qualifications and the development of work skills and attitudes were clearly recognised. This confidence was not complacency, there was something that went beyond the ‘normal expectations’ of youth. The majority of these young people, rightly or wrongly, seemed to feel in control, to a large extent, of their vocational destinies, or at least their vocational plans and entry points. There was an apparent sense of agency that, in their view, would see them successfully into the early part of their working and adult lives. My own subjective feeling was that many of these students had shrewdly navigated their way through the various educational choices at 14 and 16. Most had ‘navigated’ their way through educational pathways in the sense that they had made common-sense decisions about what to do next: many had a good awareness of what options were open to them at each stage of the educational process and most appeared to have a clear sense of direction in terms of work aspirations.

There is also something in the labour market explanation for the confidence of these young people in this particular location. Clearly geography does matter and unemployment rates were lower in this area than in other parts of the country. The proximity of London did mean that there was more potential choice here than in other labour markets. However, there was still fierce competition for jobs and there were considerable pockets of unemployment in the county, including ‘unemployment blackspots’. It was easier to get a job here than in other parts of the country, but finding suitable employment was by no means a simple matter. And yet the confidence and a sense of control were still there: despite the negative impact of national economic trends and structures there were still
positive outlooks at an individual level.

It could be argued that this sense of control and a generally positive outlook were misguided. The claim could be made that these youngsters were over-optimistic within the sheltered, relatively secure and structured environment of the school and the sixth form: they had not yet experienced the real world of work and the realities of adult responsibilities. Again, there may be something to this kind of claim, but what had struck the researcher (as a classroom tutor) was the students’ individual confidence and optimism. This contradicted what was frequently reported in the literature on school to work transitions where youngsters approaching the end of their schooling were usually presented as being naive, pessimistic or passive, or some combination of these.

However, in the later part of the period under discussion (from approximately 1986 onwards) there were some interesting developments in the literature and these developments represent a second set of origins for the present study. The rather passive model of the individual in the school to work transition and the process of socialisation was being challenged. Notions of ‘accommodation’ and ‘resistance’ became important. The ‘Individualisation thesis’ was beginning to feature strongly in the youth research literature (notably Baethge, 1989, pp.28-32), hinting at the increasing importance of individual agency in school to work transitions and the breaking down of collective, structural and group influences. The discussion contained within this thesis can be loosely linked with postmodernist influenced writings that were starting to stress the diversity and fragmentation of human experiences and pathways as opposed to monolithic structural ‘narratives’, though these ideas were not as yet being specifically applied to educational contexts (Chapter 2, the literature review, discusses these developments in detail and provides examples of such writings).

Traditional explanations of youth attitudes still had some applicability but it seemed that there was an ingredient missing, an ingredient that the youth transitions literature was beginning to discover. The ‘obvious’ explanations alone did not provide a complete answer. Whilst the importance of structural factors in the social and economic development of young people could not be denied, this sense of (as yet undefined) agency seemed to deserve more attention. There was a need to investigate how the new vocationalism had affected those young people currently undergoing the transition from school to work. There was also a need to find out something of the perspectives of the young people themselves on work preparation and aspirations. We have heard a good deal about this from government sources and other official educational bodies, but not much from 16-19-year-olds themselves. The generation about to leave full-time education is in effect the first generation to have experienced the ‘new vocationalism’ in full bloom. That is, they are the first complete cohort to have experienced the effects of TVEI, the national curriculum, NVQs and other vocational reforms implemented in the 1980s and the early
1990s. They will have had new types of experiences at schools and colleges and it is important that we ascertain their views on vocational education and training and consider the implications for policy and for educational theory.

1.3 The Importance of Youth Transitions

This section outlines the social and economic importance of youth transitions and suggests a number of reasons why there is a need for detailed research on the topic of young people’s perceptions of the school to work transition. The section will also link the study’s research objectives with broader educational issues, including theoretical debates about the forms and purposes of education for this age group.

Frequent mention is made nowadays of ‘the learning society’ and ongoing, life-long forms of education. The stereotype of education ‘finishing’ at 16 years of age has largely diminished. Education can now take place at any age, it can occur in a number of different settings (including the home and the workplace as well as the school and the college), and it can take many forms, including modular and distance learning forms, as well as the more traditional formats.

The proliferation of literature on adult and continuing education is testimony to its increasing importance. New emphases on the ‘learning society’ (Jarvis, 1995, pp.40-1) and on ‘life-long learning’ confirm the renewed importance of educational experiences at all stages of the life course. Education is increasingly becoming a life-long activity as the ‘educating’ institutions strive to expand their market to include older age groups and this clearly has implications for the traditional role of ‘student’ (Pallas, 1993, p.442). In this context it may seem rather restrictive to focus on the 16-19 age group. People now enter (or re-enter) education at various stages in their lives. The traditional view of an individual leaving school and taking up employment at the age of 16 has diminished in a variety of ways. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, a much higher proportion of the age group now stay on in education to at least the age of 18. Secondly, apart from employment there is a range of other options including youth training, modern apprenticeships, training within employment (e.g. day release) and part-time work. Thirdly, as the nature of work and skill requirements are changing rapidly, so the turnover of staff and employees (of whatever age) in occupational contexts has increased. Fourthly, many of those entering the world of work are re-entering work as adult returners, perhaps trying a new career or returning after a family or educative phase.

Dramatic developments in information technology and modes of communication, along with a broadening view of what constitutes ‘education’, have led to an interest in different locations, settings and contexts for educational activities. Technological improvements
and the cultivation of distance learning strategies (for example by the Open University: Hawkridge, 1992) mean that to a large extent education can take place in the home. Baudrillard’s claim that production and consumption have given way to an era of mass communications in society is applicable to the educational context: textbooks and classroom ‘scenes’ have been partially replaced by screens and networks (Baudrillard, 1983, p.126; Sarup, 1993, p.164). Individuals restricted to the home can still participate in educational activities at virtually any level.

There has also been a renewed interest in education in the workplace, including developments in ‘shadowing’, ‘mentoring’, ‘key workers’ and the ‘learning organisation’ (Calderhead and Carter, 1993, pp.213-4; Brown et al., 1994). Such changes should bring the worlds of work and education closer together and may have economic benefits as well as learning implications. These developments are sometimes seen as part of the educational dimension of a move towards ‘post-Fordist’ work patterns where traditional methods of mass production have been replaced by more adaptable and flexible methods of management and work activity, including ‘just in time’ methods and ‘Total Quality Management’. Workers, whatever their age, according to this view, now need to be constantly updating their skills and maintaining flexibility in line with rapid economic change. Such developments should be reflected in the nature of the vocational courses being experienced by the students featured in this study.

Modes of education are also changing. The idea of a taught classroom course with a single paper qualification at the end can now be seen to be rather simplified. Individuals can follow a course in units or modules across different departments, different institutions and even across national boundaries. The use of computer networks and distance learning techniques promotes greater flexibility in course formats. Life experiences can now be taken into account so that Accredited Prior Learning (APL) can be part of a person’s educational portfolio. Many of these developments have made it easier for individuals from older age groups to return to formal education, though they have also had an effect on younger age categories and, indeed, have sometimes been piloted on teenage learners.

These developments are having a considerable impact on all age groups involved in education, whatever form they take. The age range experiencing formal education has broadened and the contexts and forms of educational courses and qualifications have changed considerably. However, there is not the space here to discuss the nature and implications of these changes in full: rather the aims of this section are to show, firstly, that these changes have had at least as much effect on the 16-19 age group as on any other age group; and, secondly, that whilst these developments are extremely important to all age groups, there are still a number of reasons why the education to work experiences of 16-19-year-olds merit particular attention. These claims will now be discussed in more detail.
The notion of life-long learning is indeed useful and significant (Jarvis, 1995, pp.23-5) and it is clearly incorrect to think of any age as a ‘cut off point’ in educational terms. However, the institutional organisation of the British education system and other factors mean that the 16 to 18 (or 19) educational process continues to have certain special characteristics: “The 16-18 sector is an important one as it is in a crucial position between secondary schooling, further and higher education and the world of work” (Tomes, 1988, p.198). Another reason for focusing on 16-19-year-olds’ educational experiences is that the individuals in this group have often been used as ‘guinea pigs’ before changes have been tried out in education more generally. This is one of several reasons why this age group was chosen as a focus for the present study. Two major educational developments or ‘reforms’ can be cited to illustrate this point. Firstly, the increased emphasis on ‘vocationalism’, or the preparation of students for the workplace, applied in schools and colleges in recent years (the ‘new vocationalism’) and, secondly, the cultivation of ‘learner centred’ models of education for these age categories.

An increased vocational emphasis has been placed, most clearly, on the educational experiences of 14-18-year-olds. This emphasis can be said to include attempts at ‘vocationalising the curriculum’, increased periods of work experience, TVEI and related schemes and the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs. Collectively, these and other changes have been labelled the ‘new vocationalism’ (further details of the formulation, enactment and impact of these policies are provided in Chapter 5). Of course, by its very nature, the ‘new vocationalism’ was aimed at youngsters being prepared for and soon to enter the world of work. These changes were targeted specifically at the 14-18 age group (and in some cases even more specifically at 16-18-year-olds). Consequently to investigate perspectives on the ‘new vocationalism’ it is imperative that we focus our attention on its foremost recipients, and the current cohort of 16-19-year-olds, as suggested previously, has experienced these changes in ‘full bloom’. Their school and college lives have coincided very closely with the era of ‘new vocationalism’ in the education and training systems. Their viewpoints should tell us much about the effects of recent vocational education and training (VET) reforms.

The research literature in this field suggests that this particular age group are well aware of their ‘guinea pig’ status in terms of the reform and expansion of vocational education. For example, Bell and Howieson, reporting on research into the impact of TVEI in Scottish schools in 1988, mention the following questionnaire comment from a student: “I have nothing but complaints on the present courses. We are guinea pigs... TVEI HAS BEEN A TOTAL WASTE OF TIME” (Bell and Howieson, 1988, p.227). To put this in context: 48 per cent of the sample in this study made ‘favourable’ or ‘very favourable’ comments about TVEI, 26 per cent made ‘mixed’ comments, whilst 26 per cent made negative comments (p.225). The point is made here, however, not to evaluate TVEI as
an educational reform, but to show that the members of this age group are very often aware of their sometimes special position in terms of the experience of innovations in vocational education. The term ‘guinea pigs’, although implying a rather passive image of youngsters on the receiving end of educational policy, has been used in several studies of this age group. What these young people have to say about their unique experiences of vocational education may have very important implications for policy-makers.

Much the same can be said about those changes that have been implemented under the guise of ‘learner centred’ education. The majority of early, serious attempts to enact this kind of model of learning arguably took place in secondary schools and 16-18 colleges, although it must also be acknowledged that ‘child centred’ learning has been a feature in many primary schools for a considerable period of time. New pedagogic techniques, new ways of assessing and reporting on individual students and innovative methods of organising and presenting courses have been important in the 14-18 age group. The use of records of achievement (including self-assessment modules), student-centred aspects of GCSE syllabuses (from 1988) and an increased emphasis on course work are all manifestations of the move towards learner centred education in this group. Whilst these changes are now also evident in primary schools and in adult education it could be argued that the first formal large scale implementations of this type of development took place with the introduction of the educational reforms of 1988-93 which mainly had an impact on late-secondary school pupils and further education, sixth form and tertiary college students. A leading proponent of these reforms, closely involved in the development of NVQs, has argued that it is essential that the emerging model of education based on these reforms should be ‘learner centred’ and ‘client-led’ (Jessup, 1991, pp.3-6).

A second reason for the importance of research into the educational experiences of 16-19-year-olds concerns the significance of this particular transitional phase in an individual’s biography or ‘life course’. Although the role and context of ‘schooling in the life course’ may be changing (Pallas, 1993, pp.441-2) what happens to an individual by the time he or she leaves full-time education (whether this be at 16 or 18 or later) remains fundamentally important in terms of setting up ‘life chances’. In this age of flexible work patterns and ongoing education, qualifications at 16+ are not the be-all and end-all, but they remain extremely significant. The qualifications an individual possesses and the job or scheme he or she enters upon leaving full-time education still tell us a great deal about the potential occupational position and general future prospects of that young person.

Whilst educational qualifications are not the only indicator used by employers in their recruitment procedures - often qualifications are used in conjunction with non-academic attributes (Moore, 1991, p.279) - they are nevertheless very important as a filtering device and a selection mechanism, especially in this age of ‘qualifications inflation’ (Raffe, 1988, p.44). Roberts, describing the ESRC 16-19 Initiative, comments that “qualifications
earned by age 16 proved the best single predictor of the directions that individuals' careers would then take” (Roberts, 1993, p.230).

There is plenty of evidence that Britain's occupational and higher education structures remain 'hierarchised'. A lack of an appropriate qualification makes it that much more difficult to move up a stage either in employment or in further study. It is difficult to generalise because individual experiences can be very different, but to a considerable extent predictions can be made about possible 'career trajectories' based upon students' school-leaving qualifications. This, in turn, to return to one of the main themes of this thesis, suggests that structures still impose at least some limitations upon individual agency in terms of educational and employment progress.

In an era when institutions are compared in statistical league tables and consumer satisfaction is heavily quantified there is no sign of a decline in the importance of paper qualifications. Higher staying on rates in full-time education may actually increase the significance and importance of educational qualifications. Hurrelmann comments that “the predominant characteristic of adolescent life is an extended school attendance with... deep biographical significance for... placement in the social structure of society” (Hurrelmann, 1989, p.18). Employment patterns may actually tell us the biographical status of an individual, but opportunities for employment are largely developed with the qualifications system:

The educational system possesses a dominant function in the qualification of the offspring of society and the selection accordingly to different levels of prestige and qualification. The final decision about the status attained takes place within the occupational system, but the pre-decision in the form of presenting school-leaving certificates of different quality is made within the education system (Hurrelmann, 1989, pp.6-7).

Hurrelmann is a writer sympathetic to notions of 'individualisation' and he acknowledges that adolescents have a degree of choice, which can be seen as an important dimension of 'agency' in some aspects of social life (p.18). Like many others in the field, he clearly does not underestimate the importance of educational qualifications at the point of departure from the full-time education system. He implicitly recognises that educational qualifications can be affected by both structure (class, race, etc.) and agency influences (individual effort). The importance of qualifications and certificates to the young people themselves (and their own responsibility for attaining these) seems to be emphasised in virtually every recent study of the age group in educational contexts.

The 16-19 transition has economic significance for both the individual concerned and for society in general. For the individual, education contributes significantly to the process of setting up of an array of life chances, or, alternatively, the process of denying
youngsters these life chances, possibly leading to 'polarisation' and the 'marginalisation' of vulnerable categories of young people. For society, or the economy, issues relating to the quantity and the quality of the supply of youth labour are important. The supply of youth labour can take many forms from the provision of temporary, part-time and unofficial work inputs, through employment on training schemes and the like, to the development of technological and other skills at the highest levels of full-time, permanent employment. Young workers may be more flexible than other groups of workers and have an important role in fulfilling employers' future training aspirations. In this age of 'flexibilisation', government reports and white papers frequently stress that it is vital that employers and economic institutions have access to an adaptable, skilled, flexible, trained workforce, and that the economic prospects of the nation depend to a large extent on the abilities and potential of its young workers. Young people are an important source of the new skills required for an ever-changing labour market (Employment Department Group, 1994, p.64).

Political and social aspects of youth transitions are also important. Recent studies have emphasised the importance of 'citizenship' and the development of young people as adults, with rights and responsibilities, who can make a worthwhile contribution both to the local community and to the wider society (e.g. France, 1996; Evans, 1995). Indeed several studies have chosen to focus on citizenship and the political socialisation of young people rather than on the economic aspects of educational transitions. The choice of focus in such studies depends to a large extent upon perceptions of the purposes of education for this age group. There are many different viewpoints on these issues, but it is worth stressing that whichever perspective is taken as a starting point, even in this age of life-long learning, there is a large measure of agreement about the special significance of educational and work experiences in the late teenage years: the 'problems of youth' are the 'problems of society'.

1.4 Defining Terms: Structure, Agency and Individualisation in Young People's Lives

Mention has already been made in this thesis of the terms structure, agency and individualisation. This section discusses some of the ways in which these terms will be used and clarifies their meaning in relation to the present project. The following section considers conceptions of 'skill' and 'skill formation' along with definitions of the 'labour market'.

As stated previously the main aims of the research are to explore structure and agency in young people's lives in terms of their perceptions of the 'new vocationalism' and to
assess how much control they feel they have over the further education phase of the school to work transition. As indicated earlier, these aims were partially stimulated by a limited, but important and now expanding, literature on 'individualisation'. It was through the development of the 'individualisation thesis' that youth researchers began to become aware of possible manifestations of structure and agency in young people's lives.

There are several versions of the individualisation thesis and the relevant conceptual frameworks are still being developed in the literature (for a fuller discussion see Section 2.6). A useful starting point in defining these terms is the fundamental question posed by Breakwell in the *Careers and Identities* study. In discussing the relative influences of education, training, the family and the peer group on the shaping of 'self' and 'identity' in the adolescent, she asks:

But where does individual agency fit into this picture? Does the young person merely respond blindly to structural and situational influences or does he or she do anything actively to control them? Are there choices to be made or merely directives from cultural roots to reproduce the same lifestyles, values and aspirations that have gone before? How are competing pressures accommodated or resisted and the dilemmas they present resolved? (Banks et al., 1992, p.109).

The definitions used in the present study stem from this kind of conceptualisation: structures are those 'structural and situational influences' which shape individual identity and which do not originate from the individual's own creative actions. Structural factors will include culture, family influences, peer pressures and dimensions of social characteristics such as class, race and gender.

Previous studies of school to work transitions suggest that some or all of these factors have an impact on young people's choices and progressions. The family may assist in finding and setting up employment for a young person through informal social networks (conversely, parental influences may perhaps restrict choices through the setting of limited horizons for sons or daughters). Race and/or gender may have a negative impact where prejudice and discrimination on the part of employers, trainers or educational institutions come into play. Social class and gender ('the primary bases of stratification in our society') will also have a considerable effect on young people's transitions and career prospects (Jones, 1986, p.9). A particularly important structure in the context of this study is the labour market, which in turn can be divided into local and national labour markets.

Agency, in contrast, is a term which refers to all those influences in the shaping of individual identity and career outcomes which come from the individual him or herself. These will include decisions about careers and future training and education options (amongst other things) made by the individual free from (or in spite of) other constraints,
such as pressure from the home, from peers or from the school. Agency involves the individual being active, acting independently and autonomously, and, to some extent, resisting broader structural and cultural influences. Of course no individual operates completely free of 'constraints' of various kinds and there are degrees of agency. In a sense agency can be represented as a continuum, moving from 'complete constraint' towards the 'ideal' (but unrealistic) situation of complete freedom, independence and autonomy in decision-making. Where the individual feels that he or she has a considerable degree of control over the school to work transition then the perceived influence of agency is likely to be high. For example, the 18-year-old girl who aims for a career in engineering and the 16-year-old 'working class' boy who stays on at school and aims for higher education, despite contrary pressure from parents and careers advisers, are both clearly exercising a degree of agency given their social and personal contexts.

Of course decision-making is a complex form of behaviour and structure and agency should not be treated as completely separate, isolated terms. When a young person decides to apply for a particular college course or to embark on a chosen career route it is very difficult to see what the often complex and numerous influences are underlying such a decision. Sometimes even the young person will be unsure of the factors motivating and shaping a decision such as this. It is virtually impossible to disentangle all the influences behind such important life course decisions. The influences can be subtle and complex and can originate from a variety of different sources. For example, a 16-year-old might deny family and school as primary influences on a particular career or further education option, whereas an 'outsider' may be able to see influences from parents or school careers advisers at work. These difficulties occur because individualisation, which involves young people ‘navigating’ through their transitions with both structural and agency influences, by its very nature, is a complex process. It is also at this stage a highly theoretical concept. This is why one aim of the present research is to try to discover if theoretical conceptualisations of individualisation are actually relevant and applicable to young people’s school-to-work transitions in practice: the project is an attempt empirically to verify the existence of individualisation processes in young people’s everyday lives, using further education as an appropriate institutional scenario. This is consistent with the statement made at the outset of this thesis about assessing the contributions made by structural and agency influences to young people’s transitions in the sense that both these types of influence must be present to a significant degree if ‘individualisation’ processes are occurring.

The increasing use of terms such as accommodation and resistance in relation to young people’s school, training and work experiences is a reflection of this kind of complexity. Early theories of socialisation presented a rather passive view of the individual being ‘shaped’ or ‘moulded’ by socialising structures such as the family and the education
system, but these theories were later challenged by writers who were able to show that individuals could, to varying degrees, resist such structural pressures (see Section 2.4).

The development of the concepts of accommodation and resistance opened up and created new possibilities for previously limited theories of socialisation. In terms of the present study there are loose links between the accommodation/resistance and structure/agency dichotomies. 16-19-year-olds can accommodate structural demands to varying degrees (from 'putting up' with them to complete consensus with these influences) and can also resist, challenge or reject them. In this sense resistance is linked closely to agency, in that creative individual thought and actions must take place in order to counter the structural influences present in school to work transitions. What the introduction of concepts such as accommodation and resistance, followed by the development of theories of active and passive individualisation (Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, pp.xiv-xv) did was to challenge purely structuralist explanations of the position of youth in society. Generation theory, functionalist theory and theories of social reproduction were now being challenged by the 'life course perspective' and the 'individualisation thesis' (Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp.5-17; see also Section 2.5). Along with structure, theories of youth transition now also have to consider individualist dimensions of these processes: this is why it is important now to conduct empirical investigations into the relative influence of agency on young people's decisions and life trajectories. The development of this new terminology, linked via the individualisation thesis to concepts of structure and agency, has provided a relevant conceptual starting point for the present study and at the same time points to a useful rationale for the conduct of the research.

1.5 Defining Terms: Skill Formation and Labour Markets

One aspect of the level of confidence young people will feel during their school to work transitions is how they see themselves in terms of the possession of various types of 'skill'. The research design will include attempts to ask young people what skills they have and how their job prospects are related to the development of skills via FE courses. There is considerable controversy about the meaning of the term 'skill' and its applicability to 14-18 educational and training processes. These problems arise because the term can be applied to a whole range of activities, from a specific task such as using a tool or typing, to more general sets of attributes such as the ability to make decisions or to work as part of a team. The question of whether 16-19-year-olds should develop specific skills, general skills, or some combination of these, has recently featured prominently in debates in education and training circles, as illustrated by the discussions about the purposes, aims and composition of NVQs and GNVQs.
The present study adopts throughout a broad definition of 'skill', seeing skills as both specific and generalised. This allows for the possibility of asking young people in Further Education colleges about both particular skills (e.g. 'how confident do you feel in using information technology?') and more generalised sets of skills (e.g. 'do you think you could pass on your skills to other individuals?'). This will permit a consideration of skill formation (or lack of it) in NVQ, GNVQ, BTEC and other relevant courses. It will also facilitate discussions on the development of skills from a variety of sources, not just the college course.

In some respects much of the official literature in the field previously took definitions of skill for granted. Government reports often stressed the importance of future 'skill needs' without really defining these precisely. More recently, this was a common criticism of NVQ requirements:

National Vocational Qualifications... provide a guarantee to employers that the individual can perform a job in a particular occupation, to the specified level of skill and competence (Department for Trade and Industry, 1994, p.36, para.4.24).

This quotation, from the 1994 White Paper, Competitiveness: Helping Business to Win, is fairly typical of official interpretations of the term 'skill'. It does not elaborate on the meanings of the terms 'skill' and 'competence' and seems to assume that these concepts can be defined narrowly and unproblematically.

Official publications still tend to treat the concept of skill as limited and unproblematic. They also frequently make mention of 'core skills', usually based on literacy and numeracy, assuming that there is universal agreement on what these skills are and why they are needed. In practice there have been considerable disagreements about what actually constitutes a 'core skill' and about the best ways of assessing and developing these attributes. However, there are some indications that this narrow focus may be beginning to change, as in the following example:

Looking beyond the current position, there is every reason to believe that we have to improve a wide range of skills at every level in the labour force... It is no longer enough to think simply of the specific skills needed by specific jobs. Change within jobs, and demands for greater flexibility between jobs, mean that we need to think in terms of giving people broad vocational skills, which can form a foundation for more specific skills (Employment Department Group, 1995, p.5, para.1.37).

In both these instances skill is not fully defined, though the second example does hint at movement towards a broader, more fluid conception of the term. The first example links the term skill with competence and NVQs are said to be based upon specific competences.
These can be assessed, measured and recorded at different levels. The notion of competence has played an important part in the development of a framework of vocational qualifications by the NCVQ (see Section 5.3).

It has been argued, however, that the measuring of specific skills does not actually tell employers (or anybody else for that matter) much about the general abilities of the individual. Many occupational skills are broad, general combinations of a variety of skills, and in an age when flexible working is paramount, indicators based on special elements of skills or competences are not particularly useful. Smithers provides an appropriate example of this:

there is no guarantee that aggregating numerous individual “competencies” will amount to skilled overall performance. Being able to dribble and do headers, for example, do not make a footballer. It is the way they are put together that matters (Smithers, 1995, p.11).

Employers often need to ask ‘how good is an individual at a range of different skills?’ or ‘to what extent can an individual use skills in combination, for example, in dealing with people?’ The introduction of GNVQs, with their broader skill requirements, was partly a response to this kind of criticism.

Much of the literature relating to skills in education and training is critical of these official attempts to define skills and to set up frameworks for the cultivation of such skills. The two main criticisms can be summarised as follows: (1) official definitions of skill are too specific and therefore too limited; (2) there is an emphasis in official documents on ‘skills as knowledge’ rather than on ‘skill as a process’. To counter these tendencies there have been attempts in the literature to “unpack the processes, meanings, and outcomes of skills development” (Brown and Behrens, 1993, pp.11-12). Critiques of the official view of skills as being based upon ‘competences’ are outlined further in Section 5.3.

To sum up, the issues of how skills should be defined, how they can be assessed and how they should be developed in further education, are clearly important both for the career opportunities of young people and for the economic well-being of the nation as a whole. This thesis, in line with recent developments in the literature, acknowledges official definitions of skill and competence as used in secondary and tertiary education, but also adopts a broad definition of skill and, as with other aspects of 16-19 transitions, seeks to find out how young people themselves interpret the notion of ‘skill’ and what skills they feel they possess as they experience the final stages of their education and early involvement in the workplace.

Linked with the concept of ‘skill formation’ is the notion of ‘labour market’. The skills that an individual possesses will significantly contribute to his or her position in the labour market with important consequences in terms of financial rewards and life chances.
Labour markets can be examined at international, national, regional or local levels. It is even possible to look at 'segmentation' within a labour market based upon gender, age, racial and occupational segments (Ashton et al., 1987, pp. 163-7). As indicated previously, the present research will concentrate on two contrasting labour markets defined geographically in terms of the boroughs which contain them: one based in an M4 corridor town and the other based in an East London borough. The pseudonyms used throughout this thesis for these two locations are, respectively, Westdown and Eastborough.

Following previous 'area studies' the local labour market is defined as the 'travel-to-work area'. In other words, for the purposes of this study, the local labour market is defined in terms of geographical proximity and feasibility as a travel-to-work destination in relation to the colleges and the communities featured. East London, with its better transport infrastructure and proximity to central London perhaps constitutes a broader geographical travel-to-work area than the M4 corridor town, but this does not necessarily mean that there are more jobs available there. On the contrary, the East London borough was chosen as an example of a depressed labour market with some 'inner city' characteristics, whilst the M4 corridor town was chosen as an example of a buoyant labour market with lower than average unemployment rates.

The ESRC 16-19 Initiative and the Anglo-German Studies (reported in the next two sections) are based on comparisons of local labour market areas, the latter at an international level. There have been many other examples of area studies and some of the more important of these are discussed in Section 6.1. Of course these area labour markets exist within a national labour market and in many respects the former are shaped by the latter. Whilst there are clear local and regional variations in vacancies, employment and unemployment, the impact of national trends is considerable to say the least (see Section 5.4). It must also be borne in mind that there may be differences between the youth labour market and the adult labour market. To some extent trends in the adult labour market will be reflected in the youth labour market, but the latter may also have special features of its own (see Section 5.5).

1.6 Links With the ESRC 16-19 Initiative

The study has been planned to link with the ESRC 16-19 Initiative. The main publication arising from this Initiative, Careers and Identities (Banks et al., 1992), along with its accompanying Youth Network Occasional Papers, provided important methodological and substantive inspirations as well as useful empirical data of various forms.

Careers and Identities is an integrated study of the economic and political socialisation of young people (aged 16-19) using an interdisciplinary approach. This particular project
influenced the present research in a number of ways: firstly, in terms of the main conceptual framework used; secondly, in terms of the methodological scheme utilised; and, thirdly, in terms of the data on young people produced.

The conceptual framework used in Careers and Identities stimulated interest in the effects of structure and agency on young people’s transitions. Banks and his colleagues commented that:

To make sense of teenage socialisation against the backdrop of turbulent economic and political change, we need to distinguish between two types of influence which shape progress and determine ultimate destination (Banks et al., 1992, p.8).

These influences are conceptualised as ‘career’ and ‘identity’: these are the ‘two critical areas of social life’ on which the book focuses. Career is defined broadly so as to include adult domestic life, leisure and politics as well as entry into and progress through the labour market (Banks et al., 1992, p.8). The concept of career is based on structural influences such as locality, gender, social class, race and (more loosely) culture and group membership (pp.8-11). Identity is influenced by individual developmental changes such as sexual and social maturity. It tends to be based on self-perceptions and can have a number of dimensions including occupational identity and political identity. The study of identity formation has included work on youth cultures (or sub-cultures) as these can play an important part in the development of adolescent identities (pp.11-14).

This conceptual model of teenage socialisation provides a basis for developing our theoretical understanding of the life patterns of this age group and may also provide pointers for policy and practice: “Knowledge of how careers develop and how identity is formed is the base on which successful attempts to enhance young people’s prospects and improve their effectiveness as adult citizens, will grow” (pp.16-17).

The themes of structure and agency underpin the respective notions of ‘career’ and ‘identity’ and in this sense the conceptual framework used in the 16-19 Initiative provides an important starting point for the present study. However, the structure-agency division is not always made explicit in Careers and Identities, nor is there a full discussion directed at the relative impact of these two types of influence on young people’s day-to-day lives. Rather, career and identity are used as ways of organising the project and as broad themes for the presentation and reporting of the study’s findings. Additionally, there are important differences between the terms ‘identity’ and ‘agency’. Whilst identity clearly can involve individual activity and control it is to a considerable extent formed and influenced by groups such as the peer group and youth cultures. In the present project, whilst acknowledging that it is virtually impossible to separate individual, group and structural
influences on attitudes and behaviour, there is an attempt to use agency in a more 'individualistic' way. It is used to express those aspects of youth transitions which young people feel they themselves can control to some degree.

A second way in which the ESRC 16-19 Initiative influences the present research stems from its innovative methodological approach. A strategic decision was made by the authors to undertake case studies - to research four different labour market localities in Britain (Banks et al., 1992, p.90). The four towns and cities chosen were Kirkcaldy, Liverpool, Swindon and Sheffield (researchers from the University of Surrey were involved in the Swindon project). The study of contrasting labour markets is not new - for example Ashton et al. (1990) studied three contrasting towns in England - but the combination of this with the use of a particular set of detailed research techniques is. A number of different methodological approaches were used, reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of the project. Data collection techniques included the following:

- a questionnaire survey, with two cohorts, carried out in 1987-89;
- interviews, using structured and unstructured questions;
- ethnographic studies, including qualitative interviews in Kirkcaldy and group ethnographies in Sheffield (for examples of the latter see Bates, 1993a, and Riseborough, 1993a, 1993b).

The study was both area-based and longitudinal and the use of different techniques meant that a number of forms of analysis were possible: "The design adopted for the project may be seen as multi-level and multi-perspective in form. It offered a particularly rich variety of analytic possibilities" (Banks et al., 1992, p.26). A particular strength of the Careers and Identities report was the way in which quantitative and qualitative information could be combined:

Blending [ethnographic] information with statistical data enabled us to uncover an exceptionally detailed tapestry of post-16 experience. The socialisation processes underlying the construction of careers and identities are revealed in both the broad patterns and the rich textures of individual and group life (Banks et al., 1992, p.27).

A similar mix of data collection methods has been used in the present study, though obviously differences in timescales and in resources available mean that such techniques could not be used in as much depth or on as large a scale as in the ESRC Initiative. The notion of area studies was also taken up, using two contrasting labour markets.
The multi-method approach and the idea of adding a qualitative layer to quantitative data were particularly appealing. The possibility of building up qualitative data to supplement, illustrate and illuminate statistical information seemed particularly appropriate for youth transition research. This is why, influenced by the ESRC 16-19 strategy, a decision was made to place ‘ethnographic group interviews’ at the heart of the methodology (see Sections 3.5 and 3.6).

The findings of the 16-19 Initiative have also assisted the present study, though it should be noted that the 16-19 Initiative was able to look in much broader terms at a variety of aspects of young people’s lives. The present study has concentrated upon school to work transitions within a further education context and has taken as a major concern youngsters’ feelings of control over such processes.

Areas of adolescent life studied by the Careers and Identities team included home and family life, social patterns, leisure activities, political attitudes and beliefs, as well as career patterns and aspirations. Careers and Identities provides detailed and rich background information on many important and wide-ranging aspects of young people’s everyday lives. It is to be hoped that the present study will build upon this by adding an extra dimension to one particular aspect of these findings: namely, it may assist in developing a more detailed understanding of young people’s beliefs, attitudes and feelings of control over school to work transitions within a further education context. The ESRC samples of young people had entered a variety of different settings in training, education, employment and unemployment, whereas the samples used in this project all had in common the context of day-to-day experience in a further education college. This limits the amount of generalisation that can be made from the samples - for example, the experiences of college students will not be the same as those of unemployed teenagers - but this kind of focusing in on a particular setting may help to illuminate and add to the broader findings of Careers and Identities and similar cohort-type studies.

1.7 Links With the Anglo-German Studies

The second set of methodological and substantive influences on the present research derives from two books and an associated series of reports that can be referred to collectively as the ‘Anglo-German Studies’. The studies by Bynner and Roberts (Eds.) (1991) Youth and Work: Transition to Employment in England and Germany, and Evans and Heinz (Eds.) (1994) Becoming Adults in England and Germany, are partly a manifestation of the ‘internationalization of youth and employment research’ (Roberts, 1995, p.24). A third study is underway, looking at processes of skill formation in England, Germany and the Netherlands (see Brown, 1996). These studies reflect a growing interest
in comparative research on the experiences of young people in different national settings, partly motivated by the realisation that although there are different national institutional contexts for youth transitions, many of the experiences of this age group, particularly within the industrialised nations, are similar. The discussion of "individualisation" as a process within youth transitions, for example, has taken place within an international framework.

The aspects of the Anglo-German Studies which link well with and provided a motivating factor for present lines of enquiry included, firstly, as with the ESRC 16-19 Initiative, the use of specific labour market areas for comparative enquiry; secondly, the selection of matched samples along with the use of interview techniques which produced detailed biographical profiles of young people's transitional experiences; thirdly, the conceptual framework of 'policy as espoused', 'policy as enacted' and 'policy as experienced'; and, finally, the findings of these studies (dating from 1988 onwards) which can usefully be compared with the findings of the present study.

One of the main aims of the authors of the Anglo-German Studies was to address questions of educational and training policy: "What should British and German policymakers be doing to maximise young people's fulfilment and effectiveness in the labour market under different economic conditions? What can each country usefully learn from the other?" (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, p.xiv). It was decided that limitations in time and resources available would make it difficult for the present study to take on a true comparative, international dimension. However, findings from studies of the experiences of young people in Germany and in other countries will be drawn upon as appropriate. Additionally, several methodological and conceptual ideas from the Anglo-German Studies are used to formulate and develop aspects of the present research, including the use of contrasting labour market area studies.

In order to discover something of the experiences of young people in England and Germany and to map out their routes to work the authors selected samples from towns twinned on the basis of their contracting or expanding labour markets. Swindon was thus paired with Paderborn (expanding labour markets) and Liverpool with Bremen (contracting labour markets). "Each pair of towns had a similar economic history and current social mix" (ibid., p.xv).

A sample of 160 16-19-year-olds was selected from each of the four towns studied, with the samples matched across the twin towns in terms of their career routes. In both studies the following broad career trajectories were utilised:
I ACADEMIC ROUTE - academic mainstream leading towards higher education;

II ROUTE TO SKILLED EMPLOYMENT - includes the dual system in Germany and apprenticeships or vocational further education courses in Britain;

III UNCERTAIN ROUTES - other forms of education and training leading typically to semi-skilled employment;

IV ROUTES TO NOWHERE - early experience of unskilled work, unemployment and 'remedial' training schemes (ibid., pp.xvi-xx; Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.6).

(Some earlier papers had used a categorisation based on five trajectories rather than four, including a two-step route, involving the move from school to a training scheme and then into employment: see, for example, Evans, Taylor and Boss, 1992, p.254; Evans, 1989, pp.46-47). The samples included equal numbers of males and females from each of the four career routes in two cohorts (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, pp.xvii, 11). This allowed a direct cross-national comparison of the various career routes.

The samples used in the present research consisted of 16-19-year-olds attending two FE colleges. Within these colleges samples were selected mainly from vocational courses, consequently most of the students will fall into either career trajectory II or III (as defined above). In the questionnaire phase two A level groups were used for comparative purposes and some of the vocational students were aiming for higher education (via GNVQs) so some respondents will be in category I. Of course all these students at the time of the research were on full-time college courses and this does not tell us with any certainty where they will end up. Transition patterns are changing all the time and while some of the students were aiming for higher education there were undoubtedly some who were in danger of ending up as unemployed or on remedial schemes.

The methodology used in the Anglo-German Studies, rather like the approach of the ESRC 16-19 Initiative, involved the use of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis was derived from postal structured questionnaires completed in 1988-9 and took the form of cross-tabulations of structural and attitudinal variables, whilst the qualitative aspect was based on 'comparative case analysis', involving interviews of matched pairs of individuals. (The second study, particularly, developed 'case histories' by interviewing 16 matched respondents from each of the four locations). Bynner and Roberts comment that:

we are aware of the limitations of cross-cultural analysis based on small numbers of individual cases and groups. However, by focusing on trajectories as they are institutionalised in Britain and Germany, and by selecting closely matched cases, we have a valid frame of reference for comparative study (ibid., 1991, p.14).
Similarly, in the second study Evans and Heinz acknowledge that they cannot make generalisations on the basis of relatively few cases:

but we think that our careful selection of cases with reference to trajectory and labour market, and our use of problem-centred interviewing and step-by-step analysis of interviews, enable us to form a coherent picture of the ways that young people perceive chances and risks and how they act to realise their occupational goals (1994, pp.210-11).

This multi-layered research design, it will be seen, has influenced the design of the present project. Another important influence, from the second Anglo-German Study, was the distinction between three different dimensions of the impact of educational and training policy (Evans and Heinz, 1995, p.3):

- **Policy as Espoused**
- **Policy as Enacted**
- **Policy as Experienced**

This three-fold categorisation provided a very helpful conceptual framework for the present study which aimed to focus down on to the experiences of young people via their national, local and institutional contexts. The discovery of this set of categorisations was particularly important as it provided a way of linking the structural contexts and individual experiences to be considered in the present research and this is why the central parts of this thesis have been organised around this three-fold policy distinction.

*Policy as Espoused* is taken here to mean national policy on vocational aspects of further education as expressed in official documents such as government reports and white papers. It refers to what the government and its agencies intend to do in the area of vocational education and training based on public declarations of policy. National VET policies are summarised in Chapter 5.

*Policy as Enacted* refers to how these declared policy intentions are actually put into practice in local and institutional contexts. Chapter 6 considers what actually happens in practice in the two contrasting local labour markets and colleges featured in the study.

*Policy as Experienced* manifests itself more at an individual level and represents experiences of vocational education ‘at the sharp end’: it involves young people’s day-to-day experiences of vocational education and training. As stated previously, a major aim of this study is to try to discover something of the day-to-day experiences of two samples of students currently in college on vocationally-orientated courses. An outline of these experiences is provided in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 which are based on the questionnaire data
and the interview responses collected during the course of the present research.

There is inevitably something of a gap between the three different policy dimensions and this is one reason why Evans and Heinz used this distinction. Many educational writers have noted the differences between national policy intentions relating to VET and what actually happens in schools and colleges. It may be that there are unintended (and unforeseen) consequences to VET policies or it may be that official institutions in education have ‘hidden’ intentions that are not publicly declared. The present research, with its focus from national to local to individual contexts, its discussion of the relative influences of structure and agency, and its emphasis on the young person’s point of view based on his or her daily experiences, hopes to throw some light on these different manifestations of VET policy.

Many of the research questions interesting the Anglo-German investigators had policy implications:

What does it mean for a young person to be equipped for the same job via a similar career track in the two countries? How does the experience differ qualitatively and what differences are there in outcomes: in young people’s effectiveness as workers and citizens, and in their attitudes and values? Are these experiences and outcomes the same or different for young people receiving their education and training in areas with contracting as opposed to expanding labour markets? (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, pp.4-5).

The Anglo-German Studies, particularly in the second phase, were also concerned with the broad ‘life patterns’ of their samples and looked at areas such as family relations, life satisfaction and political attitudes (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, Ch.X).

As with the ESRC 16-19 Initiative a broad view was taken of relevant aspects of these young people’s lives. However, once again, it would be useful to know more about young people’s feelings of control in these processes and whether or not the term ‘individualisation’ provides an appropriate description of school to work transitions. These specific objectives were not primary aims of the Anglo-German Studies, though the term ‘trajectory’ in some ways provides a basis for considerations of structure and agency in young people’s lives. The term is used to indicate that “structural factors, individual attitudes and actions should be seen in reference to each other” (1991, p.207). The authors note that their study has implications for the ongoing debate on ‘individualised youth biographies’. These implications are not discussed in detail, though the suggestion is made that German young people experience an ‘extended’ transition which “could provide more opportunity for an ‘active mode of individualisation’...” (1991, p.226).

This suggestion is taken further in the second study where Evans and Heinz usefully elaborate the distinction between active and passive modes of individualisation. Active
individualisation involves “a process of self-determined decision-making between occupational goals and in the choice of pathways to enter them” (1994, pp.xiv-xv). In England passive individualisation was encouraged by the situation whereby career choices, although plentiful, did not encourage individual decision-making competencies in young people. In both countries careers education programmes tended to be information-oriented, leading the authors to suggest that a more learner centred model of guidance is needed (1994, p.183).

Another useful concept allowing for both individual and structural dimensions is the notion of ‘transition behaviour’ developed in the second study. By transition behaviour the authors mean “the patterns of activity that young people adopt in attempting to realise their personal interests and occupational goals within social requirements and structured opportunities” (1994, p.211). Four types of transition behaviour were identified: ‘strategic’, ‘taking chances’, ‘step-by-step’ and ‘wait and see’. The first two of these are generally active forms of job-seeking behaviour, whereas the latter two are passive (pp.212-13).

As indicated above, one of the main conclusions of the studies was that in Germany school to work transitions are extended, whereas in England, in contrast, such transitions are accelerated (1991, pp.224-6). In Germany, with its highly-regulated dual system of education and training, apprenticeship system and high staying on rates, the transition process tended to take longer and this was generally beneficial to the young people experiencing this transition. On the negative side, the authors reported that there were variations in the quality of training and that in some ways the German institutional system was too rigid, almost to the extent of penalising flexibility and individuality (1991, pp.232-8; 1994, pp.243-4).

The British system had the strengths of providing a broad range of vocational experiences and encouraging the use of initiative and responsibility. It was more flexible in that there was some allowance for youngsters ‘changing track’ and early experience of the labour market often contributed to this age group experiencing adult responsibilities at an earlier stage than their German counterparts. The main weaknesses were that in some respects the system demanded too much too soon from the youngsters, staying on rates were low, there was an absence of a ‘training culture’ and too many British youngsters were on ‘routes to nowhere’ (1991, pp.238-45; 1994, pp.244-6). It was also found that “the state of the [local] labour market is critical in determining whether the diversity of routes will lead to adult employment” (1991, p.244; 1994, p.244). With a focus on two colleges in two contrasting local labour markets the present study may be able to add further evidence in relation to this issue of the impact of local employment situations.
Additionally, because the questionnaire used in the present study is based partially on the one produced for the first Anglo-German Study some of the quantitative findings might be usefully compared and contrasted. However, it must be stressed that the samples are by no means equivalent - the aim is simply to see how the experiences and opinions of the youngsters in these particular contexts compare with those discovered by the Anglo-German researchers. The pace of reform in the British system of education and training and the expected impact of the 'new vocationalism' suggests that some changes in attitudes and experiences should have taken place.

The Anglo-German Studies, along with the ESRC 16-19 Initiative discussed in the previous section, have taken research on youth transitions some way forward. Their multi-layered methodological designs and the detail of their findings have assisted our understanding of such transitions. Of course, these have not been the only studies of youth transitions and further examples of such research and their relevance to the present study, in both substantive and in theoretical terms, are considered in the next chapter.
Chapter Two - The School to Work Transition: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature relevant to school to work transitions and indicates some of the latest controversies and developments in this area. The chapter does not review the ESRC 16-19 Initiative or the Anglo-German Studies in detail because these important background studies have been discussed in the Introduction (Chapter 1). Nor does it consider in detail the literature relating to the methodology utilised in the current study, since methodological influences and critiques are outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. Rather this chapter deals with the literature relating to the substantive area of the present study: it is concerned with the school to work transitions of 16 to 19-year-olds and in particular with writings on the abilities and capacities of this age group to control and ‘navigate’ their way from education into the occupational structure.

School to work transitions can be viewed from a number of different individual and institutional angles and relevant writings can be traced in a range of different disciplines including educational studies, sociology, economics and psychology. In some respects young people’s lives were more straightforward a decade or two ago than they are in the 1990s. A considerable proportion of 16-year-olds went straight from school into employment. Finishing education and going into work was regarded as the ‘normative model’ of youth transition (Jones and Wallace, 1992, p.27). Today the 16-year-old or the 18-year-old school or college leaver encounters a perplexing array of options. In some parts of the country less than one in ten 16-year-old school leavers will move directly into work. For example in Hampshire in 1994 only 9 per cent of school leavers went straight into employment (Hampshire TEC, 1995, p.12). Possible destinations include further education, sixth form colleges, sixth form in a school setting, a training scheme, employment with day release, part-time work and unemployment.

There is a parallel between the increasing diversity of career destinations in the lives of 16-19-year-olds and the increasing theoretical sophistication of the literature on these transitions. It will be argued in this chapter that despite this range of perspectives and the diversity of disciplinary origins it is still possible to delineate certain themes or phases in the development of concepts and theories within the literature relating to school to work transitions. Whilst it is acknowledged that the literature on the ‘new vocationalism’ is now vast and that many complex (but sometimes overlapping) conceptual and theoretical perspectives are possible, the review is organised into a number of sections, each representing what is believed to be an important strand or development in the literature. Despite the complexity of the literature it is hoped that this framework will provide a certain historical and sequential coherence to writings on youth transitions and discussions.
about the potential of young people to shape these processes.

The first of these sections considers possible definitions of the 'new vocationalism' in the context of the present study and notes that as well as being concerned with what the new vocationalism is we also need to consider how it has been experienced by young people as a process.

The next review section relates these definitions and concepts to the framework of 'socialisation theory' and considers contributions stressing socialisation processes. Writings considered in this section tend to emphasise structural influences on young people's transitions, often presenting teenagers as 'passive agents' in such processes.

The following section of the review considers writings critical of the socialisation perspective. These have introduced notions such as 'resistance' to discussions of socialisation processes in general and to school to work transitions in particular. Social characteristics such as class, gender and ethnicity remain important but an element of 'agency' is introduced, emphasising that despite the importance of broad educational and economic structures, the actions of young people as individuals need to be considered too.

Section 2.5 follows this up by developing the division of transition theories into 'structuralist' and 'individualist' approaches and by considering the 'locus of control' literature. Section 2.6 introduces some of the recent writings on theories of 'individualisation'. These mainly contemporary writings provide detailed considerations of individual life courses within structural contexts and represent an important theoretical influence on the present study. There have been some provisional attempts to investigate the impact of 'individualisation' processes on youth transitions and these are considered in Section 2.7. Finally, Section 2.8 considers how postmodernist writings might contribute to a theoretical and conceptual understanding of youth transition processes, though it should be noted that the development of this type of perspective within the literature seems to be at a very early stage.

The argument is made in this chapter that, despite the quantity and diversity of the literature on youth transitions, certain historical and conceptual themes can be discerned in writings in this area. In the last ten to twenty years there have been considerable conceptual and theoretical developments in this literature, developments which have informed and assisted the present study. However, gaps remain: despite the stimulation provided by discussions of 'individualisation' there is a scarcity of writings on young people's feelings of control over school to work processes and on the viewpoints and perspectives taken by these youngsters. There are very few studies that have looked at these processes specifically within a further education context. Also, as indicated in the following chapter, there are some useful and interesting methodological approaches which have not yet been utilised to study these transitions at an individual or a micro level.
2.2 Defining the New Vocationalism

This thesis is concerned with 16-19-year-olds' perceptions of the school to work transition. An important part of this transition for young people in recent years has been their experience of educational policy reforms collectively referred to as the 'new vocationalism'. The term 'new vocationalism' is not particularly new: the phrase was being used in the late 1970s and early 1980s and was popular in educational writings from the mid-1980s onwards (see, for example, Dale, 1984; Bates et al. 1984; Cohen, 1984). Many writers trace its origins to James Callaghan's Ruskin College Speech in 1976 (e.g. Keep and Mayhew, 1991, p.205; Pring, 1991, pp.206-7; Roberts, 1995, p.12; Callaghan, 1996) in which the then Prime Minister called for an education system more closely fitted to economic needs. Since this time the term ‘new vocationalism’ has generally been used to describe attempts by government to make the education system (in terms of curriculum, qualifications awarded, skills and attitudes developed) better geared to the needs of employers and workplaces. In policy terms the new vocationalism has included increased amounts of work experience for young people, the CPVE programme, the TVEI Initiative, YTS and associated schemes, NVQs, GNVQs, Training Credits and Modern Apprenticeships (for discussion see Roberts, 1995, pp.12-13).

The demands made by supporters of the new vocationalism for a better ‘fit’ between education and the economy and an increased emphasis in schools and colleges on ‘serving the needs’ of business and industry, are also not new. They date back to at least the start of this century. One historian of education has noted how “the entire period from the 1920s to the 1950s is judged to have been one of ‘missed opportunities’ in providing the country with an adequate system of preparing young people for employment...” (Burgess, 1993, p.365; Burgess, 1994). From a reading of the literature on the links between education and the economy such a comment might seem equally applicable to the British education system in the 1980s and 1990s.

Considering the importance of the phrase ‘the new vocationalism’ and the frequency of its usage, there have been very few attempts to actually define the term or to systematically delineate its main characteristics. This is perhaps not surprising given the problematic nature of the relationship between education and the economy. One attempt at a definition which may provide a useful starting point, however, is Dale’s four-fold description based on ‘ideological’ characteristics (1985, p.7). The ‘new vocationalism’:

1. is intended for the 14-18-year-old age group, particularly the lower two-thirds of the ability range;
2. aims to encourage not just skills training, but also attitude changes and status adjustments (Dale shows an awareness here of increasing youth unemployment);
3. is not primarily concerned with overcoming gender and ethnic inequalities;
is a contested term - “the new vocationalism itself does not go unresisted or unimpeded by the interests and ideologies which have continually reasserted the values of education” (Dale, 1985, p.7).

Dale’s analysis provides a very useful reference point, though developments over the past decade or so suggest that discussion of some of these ideological dimensions needs to be updated. In relation to the third ideological dimension, concerning gender and ethnic inequalities, much subsequent research seems to support Dale’s view. It has been argued that the new vocationalism actually replaced priorities relating to equal opportunities and egalitarianism in education (linked with the development of comprehensive schools in the late 1960s and 1970s). The ‘social engineering’ dimension of education as a priority gave way to the needs of industry, the economy and the workforce (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995, p.794). Both Brown (1987) and Blackman (1987) have concluded that the new vocationalism will lead to increasing class and gender inequalities: “Within the new vocationalism lies a fundamental danger to the principles of equality, when education merely becomes training to enable pupils to gain skills which direct them to employment relevant to their social class, gender or ethnic origin” (Blackman, 1987, p.51).

In some aspects of education there may have been improvements in attitudes relating to these inequalities, but where this has occurred it seems to have occurred despite the new vocationalism. Debates on this kind of issue link with Dale’s fourth ideological dimension: challenges to a narrow vocational view of the purposes of education.

Pring has also attempted to define the ‘new vocationalism’, but using curricular dimensions rather than ideological ones. He defines the new vocationalism as follows: “Put crudely, it is argued, now by Government but previously by employers that the educational system has let the economy down by producing students with inadequate or irrelevant skills and, above all, with the wrong attitudes towards the wealth-creating basis of society” (Pring, 1991, p.212). Pring suggests that in making his 1976 Ruskin College speech James Callaghan had in mind the following requirements of education (1991, p.207): (1) skills or knowledge that industry needs; (2) a return to the industrial spirit of the Victorian era; (3) technological understanding; (4) a variety of personal qualities including flexibility and a sense of responsibility. Pring notes that the influence of these requirements has led to the development of a more vocationally relevant curriculum, but stresses that the arts and humanities should have ‘a central role’ in a more vocationally oriented education (1991, p.227).

From these critiques it is clear that “the new vocationalism... does not go uncontested” and that it “is still evolving, and the precise way in which it is best conceptualised is a matter of current academic debate...” (Walford, Purvis and Pollard, 1988, p.5). However, as indicated at the beginning of this section, the important question here is not ‘what is the new vocationalism?’ or ‘what forms does the new vocationalism take?’, but rather ‘how
have young people experienced the new vocationalism? It is important to consider whether these changes in educational provision, assessment and philosophy have increased feelings of individual autonomy in the school to work process or whether they have negated them. This review now turns to differing perspectives on this issue as featured in the youth transition literature.

2.3 Socialisation from School to Work

Not surprisingly, when employment prospects for young people were relatively favourable, sociological and educational writers tended to take the view that there was one, reasonably straightforward, transition from the school to the workplace. This took a number of slightly different forms but the basic transition was the same and for the majority it occurred at the age of 16, upon leaving school. The relevant literature of the time (the 1960s and early 1970s) was dominated to an extent by the concept of socialisation. This term referred to the ways in which the main institutions of society, but especially the school and the family, would prepare young people for their adult roles, usually defined in terms of workplace roles and responsibilities. The influence of the socialisation concept continued into the 1980s when, as the 'social reproduction' model, it was 'the most influential' paradigm for looking at the transition from school to work (Wallace, 1989, p.352).

In retrospect socialisation theory was rather one dimensional and lacked the sophistication of modern theoretical approaches to transition. The model of the young person used in frameworks based on socialisation theory was nearly always passive and often manipulable. Society, via the family, the school and, later, the workplace, would mould the young, impressionable individual into appropriate adult roles. These roles were based upon conformity, social expectations and social control and there was no real possibility in this perspective of young people having a say in how their behaviour and attitudes should be shaped or in what outcomes they desired. Consequently issues of power, control and individual input into socialisation processes were not primary features of the discussion. These theories had ended up with an 'over-socialised and over-determined subject' (Usher, 1992, p.203).

Beyond employment there was no variety of possible outcomes to the socialisation process, nor was there any great variation in routes through socialisation (though class and gender differences in socialisation patterns were acknowledged and described), rather the school and the family tended to be presented as monolithic socialising institutions. Where young people did not achieve the desired outcome, i.e. where they ended up delinquent, unemployed or in the wrong type of occupation, then socialisation had 'broken
somewhere along the line, they had been ‘inadequately socialised’ and policy changes might be necessary to correct difficulties in the socialisation process. Despite occasional problems of this sort, functionalist writers and others reminded us that socialisation was beneficial both for society (it ensured order) and for the individual (it helped the young person to know his or her place in the system).

However, by the late 1970s, as the employment situation in Britain began to worsen, as number of training schemes were introduced and as educational options began to diversify, some sociologists and educationists began to realise that there was no single transition to adulthood, nor was there a single outcome: “During the 1980s it became increasingly clear that simple unitary models of the transition to adulthood could no longer be defended” (Jones and Wallace, 1992, p.10). In addition, it was beginning to be recognised that young people were not compliant, conforming, passive beings. They were individuals with a degree of agency who could play their own creative and active part in the process of socialisation. Models of social reproduction were now being questioned: they overemphasised the smoothness of the transition to work and “concentrated more on the subordination of young people to dominant structures than upon young people’s responses” (Wallace, 1989, pp.365-6). Many young people did not accept the socialising forces of the school, including its rules and regulations and its ‘hidden curriculum’, but instead created their own experiences and identities as they moved through the later stages of their educational careers.

Some of these socialising influences could be ‘accommodated’ and made to fit in with the young person’s own attitudes and activities and some could be ‘resisted’ so that the whole concept of socialisation was challenged. Educational and sociological research, as described in the following section, began to show especially how minority groups, who seemed to be the first to suffer in an economic recession, including working class pupils, youngsters from ethnic minorities and girls, could sometimes resist socialising forces and replace them with their own alternatives.

4 Accommodation, Resistance and Youth Transitions

By the mid-1980s there was much discussion in the literature on youth transitions of the terms accommodation and resistance. The classic socialisation model was shown to be too simplistic and several sociological and educational writers were able to provide examples of complexities in the socialisation process. In particular it was shown that young people in minority groups, whether these were class, gender or ethnically-based, could resist socialising influences or accommodate them on their own terms and sometimes to their own advantage.
An important starting point for the development of notions of resistance and accommodation was Willis’s classic study *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977). Within a Marxist framework Willis was able to maintain a theory of social reproduction whilst at the same time stressing the importance of culture in the experiences of the group of working-class males featured in his study. He followed these ‘lads’ through their final year of schooling (at a secondary modern school in the Midlands town of ‘Hammertown’) and into their first year of work or unemployment. The lads’ resistance was based on an anti-school culture which included opposition to authority and a dislike of conformist pupils (referred to as ‘ear’oles’). The term opposition is stressed rather than resistance: “The most basic, obvious and explicit dimension of counter-school culture is entrenched general and personal opposition to ‘authority’...” (Willis, 1977, p.11). The lads’ culture often embraced racism and sexism and was drawn, argued Willis, from a broader working-class culture prevalent in local neighbourhoods and the shop floors of factories.

Willis argued that these young males were not being pushed into jobs they did not want, rather they were using their own culture to help shape their futures. “One should not underestimate the degree to which ‘the lads’ want to escape from school - the ‘transition’ to work would be better termed the ‘tumble’ out of school...” (Willis, 1977, p.100, his emphases). True, the ‘lads’ would probably end up in unskilled jobs, but they would try to exercise a degree of choice in this process, creating the kind of lifestyle which they wanted, but which would also, through its cultural forms, drive them into unskilled occupations or unemployment. Thus, for Willis, “Cultural practices which could be correctly construed as resistance in school situations were simultaneously forms of accommodation to working-class futures” (as summarised in Roberts, 1995, p.88).

What Willis had shown was that the reproduction of labour was not as straightforward as might have previously been thought. Patterns of socialisation were complicated by the possibilities of counter-cultures and forms of opposition within school and beyond. Much debate followed on forms of resistance and accommodation within social reproduction processes, but Willis had put these concepts onto the theoretical map of youth transitions.

He was, however, criticised from a number of angles. It was argued that he had based his findings, and the subsequent development of theory from these findings, on a sample of just 12 ‘lads’ who had been taken to be representative of the whole of the working-class. He romanticised racism and sexism as ‘somehow typical’ of all working-class youth (Ainley, 1993, pp.36-7). His work was also criticised by feminists and others for its male bias (though this was a general characteristic of much of the work on youth cultures in the 1960s and 1970s). Griffin tried to redress the balance by replicating Willis’s study with a group of young working-class women who left school in Birmingham in 1979. She followed 25 of these young women into employment, in offices, factories and engineering,
or unemployment (Griffin, 1985).

In these Birmingham schools Griffin did not find pro- and anti-school cultures - she did, however, discover a number of 'resistances' used by the girls, ranging from "not going to school at all... 'skiving off' lessons for a smoke or a chat; reading girls' magazines or passing notes in class through to daydreaming or 'cutting off' when teachers were present" (Griffin, 1985, p.19). After the school years "Young women's resistances did not follow the white working class male pattern of verbal and physical aggressiveness... They had their own more subtle, but nonetheless effective methods of managing and undermining pressures to get a man and a 'good job for a girl'..." (1985, p.192). A 'good job' in this context normally meant not factory work, but employment in an office environment (1985, pp.98-103).

Another significant discussion of the use of resistance within a gender framework can be found in Anyon's (1983) paper 'Intersections of Gender and Class: Accommodation and Resistance by Working-Class and Affluent Females to Contradictory Sex-Role Ideologies'. This paper challenged the predominant view at the time that sex-role socialisation was 'successful', arguing that complete acceptance of sex-role appropriate attitudes and behaviours is rather rare:

I will differ... with the prevalent view that gender development is primarily a one-way process of imposition by society of values and attitudes that girls internalize. I will argue instead that gender development implies not so much passive imprinting as active response to social contradictions (Anyon, 1983, p.19, her emphasis).

Anyon uses the phrases 'accommodation' and 'resistance' (taken originally from literature on black American slavery) to describe and explain such responses. From a study of 100 girls in Elementary schools in the United States she develops a typology of behaviour that could be interpreted as having both accommodative and resistant aspects. These behaviours include 'the appropriation of femininity', 'tomboyishness', 'being a discipline problem' and 'the appropriation of sexuality' (Anyon, 1983, pp.30-33). The concept of resistance challenges mono-dimensional views of socialisation, though it should be noted that according to Anyon resistances are often private (rather than public) and they rarely turn into collective actions which might challenge unequal or exploitative structures.

Davies, in a study based in a comprehensive school in the Midlands, also challenges the portrayal of the female as the passive recipient of socialising influences - the aim of her paper "is to move on from the frequent portrayal of the female as subordinate and oppressed, towards a demonstration of the creative possibilities in female resistance" (Davies, 1983, p.39). Like Anyon, she outlines a number of themes in resistant responses to teacher power, including 'bargaining', 'matriarchy', 'humour', 'femininity' and
'individuation' (Davies, 1983, pp.45-50).

Notions of accommodation and resistance have also been used in the literature on race, ethnicity and education. Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, for example, drawing upon their own educational histories, argue that black females have always had to take positive action to fight for the education to which they were entitled. They elaborate a number of examples of such resistances including 'learning to cope with verbal and physical abuse', 'overcoming racist literature/curriculum', 'countering the low expectations of teachers', 'providing alternative forms of education' (such as Saturday schools) and 'criticizing multi-culturalism' (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1987, pp.90-98). These writers comment that:

> Our aspirations were usually dismissed as over-ambitiousness by careers officers, who could hardly hide their scepticism when confronted with talk of ‘A’ levels, college or university for any black pupils... The lessons we learnt from our experiences ensured that we were now prepared to question the attitudes and practices of our teachers in a far more pointed way... Above all, we gained the confidence to resist them (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1987, pp.94, 96).

What all of these writers had succeeded in doing, whether from a race, class or a gender perspective, was to show that patterns of socialisation and transitions into work were not straightforward. Young people could resist socialising influences and to an extent accommodate them in ways appropriate to their own cultures, lifestyles and ambitions. This involved creative, proactive thinking and behaviour on the part of those experiencing education and early work situations - and these writers had intimated that a sense of agency was present, though the word agency itself was rarely used. Thus it was that by the late 1980s and early 1990s the youth transition literature was trying to build ideas of agency into general theoretical perspectives, particularly within 'individualist' explanations of youth positions in society as opposed to 'structuralist' explanations.

### 2.5 Structuralism, Individualism and the Locus of Control

The distinction between 'individualist' and 'structuralist' explanations of the position of youth in society has been elaborated by Jones and Wallace (1992) in a useful discussion of theoretical developments in youth research. Structuralist explanations, according to these writers, include generation theory, functionalist theory and social reproduction theory (Jones and Wallace, 1992, p.6). Social reproduction theories, such as those expressed by Willis, were 'partial' and limited because of their reliance on social class structures. As more and more dimensions of social inequality were introduced the process
of the 'demolition of social-structural macro-theory' began (Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp.12-13). The introduction of further structural dimensions was accompanied in some perspectives by a new emphasis on individual choice which, in turn, from the 1980s onwards, led to the development of individualist explanations.

Individualist explanations include the ‘life-course perspective’ which stresses the biography of the individual and encourages a ‘more holistic approach’ to understanding young people, taking account of not just education and employment experiences, but of other dimensions of life including family background and peer relations (for an example of a life course perspective see Pallas, 1993). This biographical perspective allows for both the ‘structuring effects of social institutions’ and the ways in which ‘individuals negotiate their way through these institutions’ (Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp.13-14; also Heinz, 1988).

Perhaps the most significant individualist explanation, for Jones and Wallace, is the ‘individualisation thesis’ (1992, pp.15-17). This thesis has received considerable attention in recent publications on youth transitions, and since it is very relevant to the themes of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, it is considered in detail in the next section of this chapter.

In concluding their consideration of theories of youth in society Jones and Wallace argue that we need to reconstruct the concept of youth: “We are at a stage in the British sociology of youth where new theoretical frameworks need to be developed. We are trying to hold together the concept of youth as a process and part of the life course, with increasing awareness of heterogeneity and diversity” (Jones and Wallace, 1992, p.18). The concept of citizenship, they suggest, allows us to consider both process and inequality in youth transitions.

Jones and Wallace themselves seem at first to take a position between structuralist and individualist explanations. The main structures controlling young people’s choices are deemed to be the education, training and labour systems (1992, pp.25-45). However, changes in employment patterns whereby “regular employment has been replaced by temporary, self-employed and flexible work” has led to a ‘de-regulation of transition patterns’ (pp.36-7). This has made planned transitions more difficult and has created risks and uncertainties for young people. The introduction of training schemes, such as YTS, has meant that young people have a ‘mediated’ relationship with the labour market, they are in fact suspended in a ‘surrogate labour market’ (Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp.42-3; see also Lee et al., 1990).

Exactly what choices individual young people have within these structural influences is not fully explored by Jones and Wallace. The issues of how agency manifests itself and how it is exercised in practice are not addressed in detail. They do suggest, however, that all, theories of youth in society need to take some account of structures: “There is general agreement that pathways out of school are still structured by factors such as social class,
family background, academic achievement... and opportunities in the local labour market. The debate is about the extent of pre-determinism, rather than whether it exists” (Jones and Wallace, 1992, p.45). They suggest that, according to the individualisation thesis:

‘choice’ is not free, but is forced upon young people by the changing structures within which they find themselves; young people are made to choose between sometimes limited alternatives and construct, in the process, their self-identities... we have argued... that young people are so constrained by the structures of education, employment and training, that they have less choice than in previous decades when there were more jobs (ibid., pp.45-6).

So Jones and Wallace argue that the individualisation thesis is a useful way of making the connection between structures and ‘choices’ in youth transitions, but end up with the view that structures still predominate, perhaps reasserting the importance of ‘macro’ social theories.

Roberts, in his comprehensive and lucid summary of the literature on Youth and Employment in Modern Britain (1995), reaches a similar conclusion, though he does not appear to support Jones and Wallace’s call for the development of ‘new theoretical frameworks’. His final chapter includes a consideration of the ‘new terminology’ relating to ‘individualization and risk’ (Roberts, 1995, pp.112-20). He suggests that a new terminology is only really necessary if there have been dramatic changes in the position and experiences of young people (ibid., pp.122-3). That there have been changes - mostly arising from the rise of youth unemployment - is beyond dispute, but the new terminology, based on ‘individualist’ theories, may exaggerate the extent and forms of these changes. The new vocabulary does, however, serve to highlight what has changed and how things have changed for young people.

In terms of the tensions between structure and agency Roberts reminds us that this issue is not a new one. He points out that in the past this debate was expressed in terms of choice and opportunity, with mainly social psychologists stressing ‘choice’ (which is largely individual and internal) and sociologists (such as Roberts himself) stressing the importance of ‘opportunity structures’. Writing in 1988 Roberts and his colleagues argued that the main propositions of opportunity structure theory were still applicable to young people’s transitions: “in general, the consequences of choices were trivial compared with the extent to which school leavers’ prospects were dependent on their family backgrounds, educational attainments, gender, and the jobs that were available in their local labour markets” (Roberts and Parsell, 1988, p.3).

Roberts and Parsell note further that “choice models of work entry were submerged by rising youth unemployment in the late 1970s” (1988, p.3). The increase in youth unemployment and the introduction of numerous schemes and training programmes means
that the nature of the pathways from school to work has changed. However, structures remain fundamental as what we have witnessed in Britain since the mid-1980s is a ‘restructuring of young people’s opportunities’ (Roberts and Parsell, 1988, pp.15-25; 1989, p.390). Alongside this ‘restructuring’ caused by the development of a variety of schemes and programmes ‘the vocabulary of choice has been revived’ (Roberts and Parsell, 1988, p.3).

We shall argue that in the 1980s, just as in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority [of school-leavers] have no real option but to accept what is available... school-leavers are confronted by pre-structured opportunities in education, training and employment that have the power to draw-in certain groups, then transport them to specific destinations (Roberts and Parsell, 1988, p.3).

One way of describing the ‘propulsion’ of 16-year-olds towards particular destinations is through the use of the notion of trajectory, as developed by Roberts and others in the ESRC 16-19 Initiative. Trajectories have ‘some explanatory power’ and are useful and appropriate categories for describing the pathways of 16-year-olds. The main issue here concerns the level of determinism implied in the term ‘trajectory’ - Roberts and Parsell acknowledge that “there are almost as many career routes as there are individuals” and that “at certain junctures... young people... have significant scope for choice” (1988, p.1) - but, in the end, rather like Jones and Wallace, reaffirm the importance of structures. One of their concluding statements echoes very closely the comments made by Jones and Wallace reported earlier in this section: “...our principal argument [is] that 16 year olds’ opportunities are structured to an extent that leaves the majority with little scope for genuine choice, as was the case in previous decades” (Roberts and Parsell, 1988, p.22).

Further aspects of opportunity structure theory have been elaborated by Roberts and Parsell in a number of papers on youth transitions (Roberts and Parsell, 1988, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992; Roberts, Parsell and Connolly, 1989).

Another debate relevant to this discussion, but phrased in slightly different terms, centres around the idea of a locus of control. This is similar to the opportunity versus choice issue, but tends to be framed within a psychological, rather than a sociological, perspective. Typically discussions of young people’s perceptions of the locus of control are developed from the responses of this age group to (usually quantitative) questions about influences on their employment/economic progressions and destinies. Young adults may be asked whether economic success (or failure) can be attributed to their own efforts (internal locus of control) or to outside factors, factors beyond their own immediate control (external locus). Furnham, in reviewing the literature on youth unemployment, notes how individual success in avoiding unemployment is frequently attributed by respondents to internal factors such as personal qualities and abilities, whereas general
failure (or actual experience of unemployment) is usually attributed to external factors such as government policies and the state of the labour market (Furnham, 1991, p.138).

A similar finding was reported by the authors of the ESRC 16-19 study: “Most young people attribute the national economic situation to political causes, but perceive their own position and that of other individuals in terms of personal failings” (Banks et al., 1992, p.12). In an attempt to find out more about the attitudes to work of the young people in their sample the ESRC 16-19 team constructed scales relating to, amongst other things, ‘employment commitment’ and ‘belief in an internal locus of control’. Attitudes towards these topics varied according to locality, career trajectory and family background, but, significantly: “The majority rejected the view that getting on in work depended on other people or was just a matter of chance, and believed that those people who did succeed generally deserved it” (Banks et al., 1992, p.45).

All of these contributions to the literature on youth transitions have helped to move the debates forward. Discussions of structuralism and individualism, opportunity and choice and the locus of control in employment outcomes have helped to challenge further the old socialisation model of progression from school to work. They have shown that individualism and individual agency are important dimensions within such transitions and that, whatever the perceived impact of these influences, they need to be considered further by youth researchers. As Branson states:

We need to view the individual as thoroughly social and cultural but at the same time unique and creative; socially constrained but calculatedly strategic in thought and action; innovative but in a culturally restricted mode; pursuing individual objectives but thereby contributing to the formation and transformation (the ‘reproduction’) of on-going social structures (Branson, 1991, pp.93-4).

Few theories, however, have attempted to integrate conceptions of structure and agency. The one exception, which has been attracting more and more attention since the mid-1980s, is the ‘individualisation thesis’. This thesis, because of its developing theoretical importance and its special relevance to the themes of structure and agency, will now be elaborated and explored in some depth.

2.6 Individualisation, Risk and Biography

Jones and Wallace, in their consideration of the life course perspective as an example of an individualist theory make a comment that could be applied equally to the individualisation thesis:
There are... new dangers: in examining all aspects of people’s lives, we could end up, through a process of infinite reduction, looking at individuals rather than social groups. In an era of post-modernism in sociology, perspectives have increasingly become 'de-constructionist', to the extent of describing a ‘fragmented self’ where there is no acting agent... Some examples of the life course perspective have lost sight of structural inequalities and the continuities of social reproduction (Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp.14-15).

Jones and Wallace are right to warn that there is a danger of reductionism in studies looking mainly at individuals rather than at social groups or movements, but there are dangers operating the other way too. Much of the youth research considered in this chapter discusses ‘individualist’ theory, including notions of choice and agency, but then reverts back to structure and macro-social theory. This is acceptable if research has shown structures to have an over-riding and exclusive influence on young people’s lives, but the argument of this chapter is that much youth research has not done this in the sense that possible manifestations of ‘agency’ have often not been seriously considered.

Whilst we cannot deny that structures, including the ‘big four’ of social class, gender, race and locality, have an influence, not enough has yet been done to deconstruct individualised aspects of youth transitions. The fact is that all young people are making choices every day and some of these choices will significantly affect their educational and employment careers. Most young people operate at a relatively optimistic and self-confident level and enjoy the degree of freedom they have to make decisions relating to work, education, lifestyle, relationships and other important areas of their lives. The almost deterministic macro-sociological perspective of ‘propulsion’ into career trajectories and their associated occupational outcomes, with very little control over these processes on the part of the young people themselves, involves a rather minimalist view of the input which young people can put into these processes.

These choices include decisions about whether or not to stay on in education at 16, which college to go to, what type of course to take (e.g. vocational, academic or mixed), how hard to work for qualifications, whether or not to work part-time, how much time to devote to social activities, and choices about friendships and relationships. It is true that many of these choices are constrained by social circumstances and by locality, but nonetheless, at a micro-level young people do face a vast array of options almost daily. Some of the literature reviewed in this chapter has considered such decision-making processes, usually as part of an attempt to map out teenagers’ attitudes and beliefs. However, many studies underestimate the degree of choice or agency evident in such processes and there have been few attempts to explain the apparent incompatibility between young people’s perceived feelings of autonomy and control and the alleged
over-arching, often unmediated, influence of ‘deterministic’ social structures on their lives. Some writers seem to cling to the old socialisation model whilst nominally adopting some of the terms featured in the ‘new vocabulary’ on youth transitions.

To date, whilst providing many useful insights, the literature has still not fully accounted for levels of youth optimism, optimism which seems to have persisted even after the dramatic rise in youth unemployment. Either young people are naively optimistic about their employment and training prospects or else much of the literature on youth research has still not explained the reasons for this optimism. More work needs to be done to discover and account for the factors which encourage a sense of agency and a belief in choice as important dimensions in young people’s attitudes. In this sense the individualisation thesis is extremely important: it is the one detailed attempt to seriously consider the theoretical influences of agency as well as structure on youth transitions.

The development of the individualisation thesis (or theorem) is accredited to a number of German sociologists and a usual starting point is the work of Beck. In Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity Beck outlines a theory of ‘reflexive modernization’. The term ‘modernization’ is associated with industrial society and ‘reflexive modernization’ is a characteristic of the new risk society (Lash and Wynne, in Beck, 1992, p.3). We are witnessing the beginning of modernity, “that is, of a modernity beyond its classical industrial design” (Beck, 1992, p.10).

The risks described by Beck are global rather than personal and include such problems as pollution, environmental disasters and radioactivity. However, the development of the risk society is accompanied by ‘the individualization of social inequality’: “In the welfare states of the West, reflexive modernization dissolves the traditional parameters of industrial society: class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles... These detraditionalizations happen in a social surge of individualization” (Beck, 1992, p.87, his emphasis). Within the ‘individualized society’ “the individual must... learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography...” (Beck, 1992, p.135). In the risk society:

The tendency is towards the emergence of individualized forms and conditions of existence, which compel people - for the sake of their own material survival - to make themselves the center of their own planning and conduct of life... In this sense, individualization means the variation and differentiation of lifestyles and forms of life, opposing the thinking behind the traditional categories of large-group societies... (Beck, 1992, p.88).

For Beck, although the importance of ‘large groups’ such as social classes has declined, inequality remains: class identities have ‘dissipated’ and have been replaced by
Beck does not directly explore the interface between structure and agency, but it is clear from his discussion of the family, education, the labour market and the workplace, that individual agency, despite the continuation of social inequalities, is of central importance in the new risk society. The individual wishes to control his or her own economic situation, living space and use of time. Within education, for example:

Schooling means choosing and planning one's own educational life course. The educated person becomes the producer of his or her own labor situation, and in this way, of his or her social biography... Depending on its duration and contents, education makes possible at least a certain degree of self-discovery and reflection. The educated person incorporates reflexive knowledge of the conditions and prospects of modernity, and in this way becomes an agent of reflexive modernization (Beck, 1992, p.93).

Beck does not relate agency to a specific age group, rather it is part of the life course, but in the central sections of his book it becomes clear that the education and employment of young people is particularly significant in the risk society:

- The key to livelihood lies in the labor market. Suitability for the labor market demands education. Anyone who is denied access to either of these faces social and material oblivion... The provision or denial of apprenticeships [in Germany] thus becomes a question of whether young people will enter society or drop out of it (1992, p.133).

The provision of employment and training becomes acutely important as Western societies move from a system of 'standardized full employment' to a system of 'flexible and pluralized underemployment' (1992, Ch.6). Early on in his discussion Beck uses the phrase 'a new twilight of opportunities and hazards' (1992, p.15) - this is a phrase that very aptly describes the situation facing 16-19-year-olds about to leave school or college and to enter the world of training, employment or unemployment.

Baethge applies the individualisation thesis specifically to the situation of youth in industrialised societies. He makes reference to 'the disappearance of class-specific socialization structures' and to a new trend towards 'double individualization' (Baethge, 1989, p.28). This latter trend involves, firstly, the structural disintegration of social classes or strata into 'individualized' sub-groups and, secondly, the formation of individualistic identities at the expense of collective identity. These trends mean that "there is less justification than ever for referring to youth as a social unit" (Baethge, 1989, pp.28-31).

For Baethge the extension of schooling reflects "the increasing individualization of careers and social mobility processes" (1989, p.31). Education plays a particularly
important part in ‘individualization’ because it involves “a situation conducive to the
development of an individual rather than a collective code of performance” (1989, p.33).
With ‘individualization’, though, comes the ‘destructuring of adolescence’:

Many studies have shown that the transitions of young people from educational
establishments to steady employment became considerably more arduous at all
levels of education and employment throughout the world in the 1970s and is
associated with increased risk, difficulty and friction... [We are witnessing]
prolongation and instability of the transition to adult status for more and more
adolescents and an increase in the number of those who are completely denied the
social basis for that status in the form of gainful employment and are therefore
marginalized (Baethge, 1989, p.37).

In a paper on The Social World of Adolescents Hurrelmann does not use the term
‘individualisation’ but he notes that previously clear forms of youth transition “have
increasingly been put into question, and have become more and more sophisticated... links
between education, training and occupation... [have] become more open and less reliable”
(Hurrelmann, 1989, p.14). The increase in post-16 participation delays the entry of this
age group into employment and now: “The occupational future is hardly calculable for
adolescents. Reliable future perspectives for the realization of life plans do not exist”
(1989, p.17). The adolescent phase is now characterised by ‘deep contradictions’, but,
significantly, on a more positive note, Hurrelmann comments that adolescents have ‘a
relatively large scope for self-determined behaviour’ in some areas of social life, including
leisure choices, consumption, relationships, politics and religion (1989, p.18).

The contributions of these German writers have illuminated some of the difficulties
encountered by young people in their transitions to adulthood. Beck’s Risk Society aptly
describes the social and economic background to making such transitions in the 1990s.
Increased elements of risk at a social level mean that the individual has to take on more
responsibility for his or her well-being at a personal level.

A similar view is taken by the English sociologist, Giddens, in Modernity and Self-
Identity. Like Beck, Giddens makes use of the terms ‘reflexivity’, ‘biography’ and ‘risk’.
Making reference to Beck, Giddens comments that: “Living in the ‘risk society’ means
living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative,
with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our
contemporary social existence” (Giddens, 1991, p.28). In place of ‘reflexive
modernization’ Giddens refers to ‘High modernity’. Modernity can be understood as
‘roughly equivalent’ to industrialism (1991, p.15) and High modernity “is characterised
by widespread scepticism about providential reason, coupled with the recognition that
science and technology are double-edged, creating new parameters of risk and danger as
well as offering beneficent possibilities for humankind” (1991, pp.27-8).

Risk and attempts at risk assessment, for Giddens, are ‘fundamental to the colonising of the future’ (p.114). Like Beck, Giddens takes a broad view of what constitutes ‘risk’: its dimensions include a broad backdrop or unstable ‘climate of risk’ alongside a reduction in life-threatening risks for the individual (pp.114-5). Many daily activities are ‘successfully routinised’ but because of rapid change in modern institutions “on the level of everyday practice as well as philosophical interpretation, nothing can be taken for granted” (pp.133-4). The individual faces a range of uncertainties, partly caused by the development of ‘abstract systems’ which depend upon trust (p.136) and encounters many dilemmas: “these dilemmas become particularly acute, or are experienced with special force, during the fateful moments of an individual’s life” (p.142).

So for Giddens, structures remain important, but also the individual has to make some very significant decisions in response to personal dilemmas and choices. He makes no special reference to particular age groups, but it would be appropriate to suggest that 16-19-year-olds are (and will be) especially prone to these types of dilemmas, uncertainties and risks as we move through modernity to ‘high modernity’:

Each of us not only ‘has’, but lives a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, ‘How shall I live?’ has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat - and many other things - as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity (Giddens, 1991, p.14).

2.7 Investigating Individualisation

These recently-developed theories of ‘individualisation’ and ‘risk’ have helped to broaden out the discussion on youth transitions. Beck, Baethge, Hurrelmann and Giddens have all shown, in different ways, how choice and uncertainty can be important dimensions in young people’s biographies in contemporary societies. Their experiences and their futures are not exclusively determined by socialising and structural influences, but also involve elements of subjectivity, choice and agency. These accounts, however, remain largely theoretical. The concept of individualisation has not been applied comprehensively to youth transitions and there are very few empirical investigations of the existence of such processes in young people’s daily lives. The theories are interesting, provocative and relevant but they are, on the whole, not yet substantiated by detailed empirical evidence based on young people’s day-to-day experiences.
Further qualitative research may help to link these experiences with current theoretical developments and to support (or refute) the individualisation thesis. Indeed, there have already been some early attempts to do this - as suggested in the previous chapter, the ESRC 16-19 Initiative and the Anglo-German Studies have begun to try to relate the reported experiences of their samples of young people to notions of individualisation.

Evans and Furlong have noted how a metaphor of navigation is now used to describe young people’s transitions into the labour market. This reflects the emergence of post-structuralist perspectives on youth transitions in the 1990s. Within this model, economic/employment success has come to be seen as being dependent upon individual skill and capability as well as upon the impact of external risks and structures:

In order to get a better understanding of the way in which young people’s lives are shaped it is necessary to explore the relationship between structural and individual factors in more detail. In particular, we need to assess the extent to which opportunity structures contribute to experiences as well as the extent to which individuals assess risk and negotiate opportunities on a subjective level (Evans and Furlong, 1996, p.2).

These writers, whilst not denying the continued importance of opportunity structures, call for a more detailed analysis of individual subjectivity in transitions to employment. The ‘life course’ perspective and the individualisation thesis allow us to contextualise the ‘negotiation of structures of opportunity and risk’ (Evans and Furlong, 1996, pp.16-17). They argue that comparisons of the actual experiences of young people over time have facilitated the testing and development of the individualisation thesis.

Both writers have been involved in empirical studies which have provided further data on ‘individualisation’. As indicated in Section 1.7, the second Anglo-German Study found evidence of a range of transition behaviours and distinguished between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ modes of individualisation. Active individualisation is “a process of self-determined decision-making between occupational goals and in the choice of pathways to enter them” - this contrasts with passive individualisation “in which goals are weakly defined and strategies to achieve them uncertain” (Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, pp.xiv-xv). Furlong and his colleagues have also attempted to investigate individual subjectivity and processes of individualisation in transitions to work as part of their series of ‘neighbourhood studies’ (e.g. Biggart and Furlong, 1996).

Writers such as Bates and Riseborough have asked whether or not the individualisation thesis helps to explain their findings developed from ethnographic studies of young people in a variety of college environments. In the introduction to their book *Youth and Inequality* (1993) Bates and Riseborough suggest that they concentrate primarily on the ‘traditional’ inequalities associated with class and gender, but note that “these are not
disappearing but rather reappearing in new forms...” (Bates and Riseborough (Eds.), 1993, p.1). Britain is not becoming a ‘classless’ society but opportunity structures are undergoing significant change. A contradiction was found in that the young people studied were still very much affected by class and family background, but: “At all levels, many young people showed a notable degree of reflexivity, a capacity for creative reconstruction of biography in terms of personal progress and fulfilment” (Bates and Riseborough (Eds.), 1993, p.6).

Bates and Riseborough have here hit upon a key problem facing researchers attempting to investigate the possibilities of ‘individualisation’. This stems from the fact that the young people who might be featured in these projects are located in a vast range of settings and contexts. The various groups “are often fairly invisible to each other, being widely separated institutionally and socially...” (Bates and Riseborough (Eds.), 1993, p.5).

In other words young people may well experience choice and control in their immediate contexts, but their attitudes and opinions may be ‘over-individualistic’ in that, because of their limited experiential contexts, they will be unable to make comparisons with other groups of youngsters or to contemplate some of the disadvantages (based largely on class, ethnicity, gender and locality) of their situation. Undoubtedly part of an explanation for this lies in the tendency for sociologists and educationists to look at what happens to groups, classes and categories of people, whilst the individual is concerned primarily with his or her day-to-day experiences and personal prospects.

This point is well illustrated in the ethnographic studies carried out by Bates. She has attempted to explore ‘class-gendered female careers’ through studies of two contrasting college groups: the ‘care girls’ (16-18-year-olds training for jobs in institutional care on a YTS programme) and the ‘fashion designers’ (on a BTEC National Diploma course in fashion design) (Bates, 1993a, 1993b). Participant observation was used in both studies and the data collected suggested that both structural and agency influences were playing a part in the shaping of these young women’s careers. The most important structures or social constraints were social class, gender, family or domestic background and the local labour market (Bates, 1993a, pp.25-8; 1993b, pp.71-81).

The employment aspirations of both groups of students were severely restricted by labour market limitations, but at the same time both sets of students felt that they were utilising a degree of choice and agency. In the case of the ‘care girls’ a ‘cooling out’ function was occurring so that career aspirations could be realistically matched to labour market opportunities: “However, belief in individual choice played a prominent role in the achievement of effective work adjustment, a necessary condition for which appears to be the maintenance of a sense of volition and personal agency” (Bates, 1993a, pp.24-5). These ‘care girls’, upon completion of their YTS programme, were heading for ‘awful’ jobs but still felt that there was an element of choice and flexibility in their experiences:
Individual capacities for adjusting their biographies in the light of labour market constraints played an important role... I have suggested that this flexibility was enhanced by aspects of current trends towards 'individualization'. The values of personal reflexivity and self-actualization facilitated the reconstruction of 'fate' as choice... (Bates, 1993a, pp.29-30).

Similar trends towards individualisation were evident in the comments made by the students on the BTEC fashion design course. To move into the world of fashion in this way was 'a high-risk step into the future' (Bates, 1993b, p.72). These young women aimed to pursue an artistic, creative, individualistic career path and their sense of personal autonomy and belief in self-made opportunities was 'striking' (1993b, p.82).

These studies represent one of the few attempts to reconcile young people's optimism and self-belief with the mainly negative impact of structural inequalities. This ethnographic work also constitutes one of only a limited number of attempts to investigate whether or not trends towards individualisation are evident in young people's daily experiences of education, training and work. There were signs of the impact of individualisation in these young people's transitions as, using Beck's terminology, they loosened social ties and connections and made themselves 'the centre of their own life plans'. Bates comments further:

The overall pattern of social class, gender and broader cultural trends combining to dislocate, rather than lubricate, youth transitions into work is not readily reconcilable with either structural or reproduction theories as currently formulated. Family, educational experience and media influences had not successfully settled the score between human agency and social structure (Bates, 1993b, p.82).

2.8 Postmodernist Contributions

The notion of 'individualisation' has very loosely been associated with postmodernist perspectives on society. While Giddens writes of 'high modernity' and Beck describes 'reflexive modernization', other writers make reference to postmodernism, a new type of social formation which represents a distinctive break from, rather than an extension to, 'modern' society. There is considerable dispute about what postmodernism actually is and there is even more uncertainty about how this perspective might be used to explain the position and influence of the individual in society. There have been few attempts to apply postmodernist scenarios to educational experiences or to youth transitions, though a literature on these themes does now seem to be developing and the few writings that do
exist intersect upon debates concerning structural and individual/agency influences in such processes.

Usher and Edwards, for example, in examining the impact of postmodernist thinking upon contemporary theory and practice of education, including the works of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, argue that questions of emancipation and oppression lie at the heart of education, and that postmodernism "gives us a fresh and radical way of confronting these questions" (Usher and Edwards, 1994, pp.4-5). These questions can in turn be linked to issues of structure and agency and such an approach provides the resources for "thinking anew the effects of education at both the personal and structural levels": individuals construct the social world, but the world then "turns around" and constructs us (1994, pp.25, 28).

These broad advantages of a postmodernist approach are illustrated by Usher and Edwards through a consideration of two major contemporary educational developments, both relevant to issues of personal autonomy in youth transitions: firstly 'reforms' in vocational education and, secondly, the development of experiential learning techniques.

Usher and Edwards argue that British educational institutions are "important sites of regulation in modern social formations" (1994, p.101). The phrase 'regulation' along with the notion of 'power-knowledge' is taken from Foucault's work relating to prisons, asylums and sexuality. The reforms of vocational education, which relate mainly to the post-16 population, contain a 'discourse of competence' which is an example of such regulation. This discourse is based upon, for example, the NCVQ's narrow emphasis on competence as performance based on skills, knowledge and understanding: "An exploration of the discourse of competence must first be related to ideas of surveillance, discipline and power-knowledge" (Usher and Edwards, 1994, pp.103-4). The current 'discourse of competence' has managed to project itself as a 'progressive' form of education and training, using 'humanistic' language (p.107):

However, competence to perform a work role also involves a form of discipline... Thus 'competence' is not just a matter of performance, but of surveillance and control over the learner... The process of continuous assessment, of credit accumulation towards an NVQ is therefore in another sense a continuously expanding surveillance of the learner, and a continuous disciplining through the goal of competent behaviour at every stage of the process. There is no space for independence of thought or action along the way... (1994, p.109).

What actually happens to individuals within the NVQ system is that they become 'a bundle of competences' (p.110). The threats to individuality and the disciplining nature of competence are both subtle and complex and because of the 'progressive' and 'humanistic' language used to justify such developments in vocational education the
individual may be ‘seduced’ rather than ‘oppressed’ or ‘repressed’ into work-based
learning (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p.111; Bauman, 1992, p.198). Note also that
disciplining effects can be applied to institutions as well as to individuals (Usher and
Edwards, 1994, pp.113-4).

Usher and Edwards also consider, from a postmodernist perspective, the effects of
experiential learning developments upon the individual. This is another recent trend in
education that has been described in humanistic terms. They take experiential learning to
be a ‘nexus’ of educational theory and practice: “Experiential learning has been
constructed as a progressive and emancipatory movement within education, a shift away
from the learning of canons of knowledge... We want to suggest that experiential learning
is far more complex and contradictory than this” (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p.187). Unconditional support for the emancipatory potential of experiential learning, they
suggest, is ‘problematic’.

Usher elaborates this point in a paper on adult experiential learning. He argues that a
postmodernist perspective can challenge what he calls ‘agency-determination dualism’
(1992, p.204) and suggests that there have been two dominant discourses in adult
education, each with its own inadequacies. The humanistic discourse, based on humanistic
psychology, over-emphasises individual autonomy and ‘constructs adults as abstract,
decontextualised individuals’ (Usher, 1992, p.202). Critical pedagogy, the second major
discourse, presents the individual as dominated by and exploited by social structures, “it
tends to deprive subjects of agency by making them social victims” (1992, p.203). A
postmodernist approach breaks down this dualism and ‘reconstructs’ individual
experience, it shows how ‘subjectivity is both constructed and constructing’ (1992,
p.203). From Usher’s perspective, the individual is ‘situated’, that is he or she can exercise
agency, but this agency is situated in an historical and temporal context, a context which
includes language: “The ‘situated’ subject provides a conception of subjectivity and
experience which preserves a needed dimension of agency whilst avoiding psychologism
and individualism” (1992, pp.201, 207-8).

The attempted application of postmodernist approaches to recent developments in
education provides some insight into how such perspectives might view the relative
influences of structure and agency in youth transitions. Since, following Lyotard, such
approaches are ‘incredulous of grand or metanarratives’ and ‘totalising explanations’
(Usher and Edwards, 1994, pp.17, 155) one might expect outright rejection of structural
influences such as class, gender and ethnicity in favour of more individual/agency inputs
into such transitions. This is not, however, the case. Usher and Edwards, as suggested
earlier, take the line that there are two ‘educational discourses’. Education is often seen
as being about either socialisation or individuation. The text of education:
is constructed and therefore understood in terms of a binary opposition of ‘repression/liberation’... In a Derridean spirit of dissolving binary oppositions we suggest that education is neither exclusively one nor the other but both and that furthermore there is no resolution... (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p.140).

Within education individuals are both constrained and autonomous, repressed and active: “Incarceration... practices of surveillance, monitoring and control, all these go hand in hand with the creation of active and ‘capable’ subjects within a discourse of autonomy and emancipation...” (ibid., pp.136-7).

So, rather like the locus of control literature and the papers on individualisation, postmodernist writings do not, indeed cannot, advocate the primacy of structural or agency influences on their own. Postmodernists “do not seek to prescribe educational solutions” (ibid., p.222) and consequently take the view that:

there are two separate but interlinked educational discourses. One is to do with social control, maintenance and reproduction of the social order, the transmission and inculcation of the norms of cultural authority. The other is to do with the realisation of agency and autonomy through developing the capacity of reason (ibid., p.140).

What these writers have achieved is to show that there are problems with ‘humanistic’ and ‘emancipatory’ claims about current educational developments - resistance and subversion are more important terms than ‘emancipation’ and ‘progress’ (ibid., pp.172, 226) - and to assist with the development of a new vocabulary relating to educational change.

2.9 Summary

This chapter has briefly reviewed the literature relating to youth transitions, particularly those contributions which have had something to say about structure and agency in such transitions. It has been argued that as young people’s transitions and education, training and work outcomes have become more diverse so too has the theoretical literature become more sophisticated. Possible theoretical influences considered have included socialisation theory, cultural and economic reproduction, accommodation and resistance perspectives, the locus of control literature, the individualisation thesis and postmodernist contributions.
To some extent it is difficult to disentangle changes in the names given to the perspectives used and their associated vocabularies from actual theoretical developments in the literature. Certainly an interesting range of metaphors has been used to describe youth transitions, including *niches, bridges, routes, pathways, trajectories* and *navigations* (Evans and Furlong, 1996). These metaphors tend to imply different assessments of structure/agency influences and have themselves been associated with different theoretical perspectives. For example, Evans and Furlong argue that ‘niches’ and ‘pathways’ are associated with functionalist perspectives, ‘trajectory’ with structuralist approaches, and ‘navigation’ with reflexive and post-structuralist perspectives (Evans and Furlong, 1996, pp.1-2).

Thus there have been changes to the nomenclature but there have also been important developments in the substance of the theories and it has been argued that certain trends can be discerned in the literature. The earlier theoretical approaches, emphasising socialisation in the 1960s and 1970s, adopted a macro-sociological perspective, suggesting that individuals were socialised by structures such as the education system and were primarily passive. There was not much room for agency in this type of approach, but by the late 1970s and the 1980s, as youth unemployment increased considerably and a number of different training and education schemes were introduced, theoretical writings began to acknowledge diversity and the possibilities of individual resistances. It was acknowledged that socialisation was not straightforward and that there were many different pathways into the world of employment.

Theories of accommodation and resistance, for example, showed how complex young people’s lives were becoming. However, such theories still emphasised the importance of ‘cultural reproduction’ (despite the possibilities of individual resistance) and also tended, ultimately, to slip back into macro-explanations without taking enough account of agency, subjectivity and individual inputs. While the possibilities of personal autonomy and creativity were acknowledged, the individual still ended up being engulfed by macro-strutures such as social class and gender.

The individualisation thesis, it has been suggested, took the debate much further forward. Developed initially by German sociologists, this showed how youth as a stage in the life course or biography involves both macro-structural factors and individual agency. The forms and manifestations of agency have differed according to the viewpoint of the particular writer and the overall societal context - modernity, reflexive modernization, high modernity or postmodernity - within which the individual is believed to be located.

Here at last was a theoretical formulation which began to take full account of the complexity of young people’s transitions. The individualisation thesis goes some way towards reconciling young people’s feelings of optimism, autonomy, creativity and
subjectivity with the rather pessimistic, 'objective', external situation of economic decline and difficulty caused by rising unemployment and increased social inequalities in the industrialised nations. One way forward now would be to investigate empirically and in more detail the question of whether or not the individualisation thesis fits with and helps to explain young people's contemporary 'lived realities' in education, training, work and other contexts. There is an important interface between structure and agency, between 'choice' and 'fate', which has yet to be articulated by youth researchers, sociologists and educationists.
3.1 Overview of Research Methodology

The previous chapter has shown how there is an important interface between structure and agency in the transitional experiences of young people. Much of the literature on youth transitions, with the exception of recent writings on the 'individualisation' thesis, neglects the potential influence of agency and subjectivity in such transitions. This is no doubt partly because it is difficult to define and to measure such aspects of transition. It is much more difficult to attribute sociological or educational meaning to individual feelings and experiences than to broader structural dimensions such as class, race and gender.

One possible way of making progress, however, on this issue of assessing young people's degrees of control over the school to work transition is to use more than one research method - a pragmatic approach. A multi-method approach, involving the triangulation of methods and data sources is most appropriate for this type of research question. Such a multi-method approach may bring into focus both subjective influences and external (structural) influences in youth transitions, and may to some extent help to answer questions concerning increasing tendencies towards 'individualisation' in young people's educational, social and economic movements.

This chapter sets out the details of the multi-method approach adopted and shows how such a strategy is appropriate for the investigation of young people's experiences of vocational further education. The following chapter, which should be read in conjunction with the present chapter, outlines the ways in which developments in the research methodology literature have informed and influenced the research design of the present study and also provides further justifications for a pragmatic approach.

The following general methodological approach, involving several different techniques, has been utilised for the present study:

1. **Information Gathering** - documentary analysis and the gathering of information about the young people, their colleges and their contexts from as many sources as possible.

2. **Structured Questionnaire** - administered to samples of approximately 100 respondents in each of the two colleges (producing mainly, but not exclusively, quantitative data). The questionnaire should provide information on a number of possible structural influences, including schooling history, qualification levels, family background and work experience.

3. **Ethnographic Group Interviews** - with group sub-samples drawn from the questionnaire respondents in each of the two colleges (producing mainly qualitative data). Since one of the main aims of the research is to elicit young people's views on the school to work transition, the use of group interviews is seen as the primary (and the most innovative) methodological strategy in the research design. These discussions should help
to draw out opinions on the degrees of individual agency, autonomy and independence experienced by these young people, as well as comments relating to possible structural influences, in their transitions from education to employment.

This type of approach is not new - methodological diversity seems to have become fashionable in social and educational research as the use of 'naturalistic', 'ethnographic' or 'new paradigm' research tools has become more acceptable in recent years. There has also been a 'breaking down' of the quantitative-qualitative divide (see Section 4.2).

Both the ESRC 16-19 Initiative and the Anglo-German Studies used a 'layered methodology'. Both involved survey data and the use of interviews, though these were individual rather than group interviews. As indicated previously, the Anglo-German Studies also developed the notion of matched samples taken from contrasting labour market areas. Hence the present research design builds upon the methodological strengths of previous studies in the field of youth transitions.

3.2 Rationale for the Research Methodology

The proposed methodology thus partially arises from previously utilised research strategies and takes account of the data collected in previous studies. However, there are also several elements of originality in the research design. Firstly, although the findings may not be directly comparable, there will be opportunities for updating some of the data from previous studies. Some of the questions used in the questionnaire were also used in the Anglo-German Studies, hence young people’s perspectives of 1995/96 can be compared with the views of the 1987/88 Anglo-German respondents. It will be possible to consider any changes in young people’s views seven or eight years further on into the era of new vocationalism in further education. Additionally, the questionnaire contains a number of new questions designed to bring out student viewpoints on levels of optimism (in terms of finding employment) and feelings of control over their post-16 destinies and pathways.

Secondly, a completely new urban context will be investigated in the form of a college within an East London borough. The studies mentioned above were based on samples from Liverpool, Swindon, Sheffield and Kirkcaldy. It is hoped that the findings from East London in the economically-significant ‘south-east’ area will provide a useful complement to data produced from the previous rather regionalised investigations.

Finally, although the research design is not new in the sense that it is a multi-method approach including both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, the use of group interviews does provide a degree of innovation. This is an under-used method in educational research and one which has enormous potential in terms of eliciting the views of young people if used sensitively (see Section 4.4).
The rationale for this methodology links with the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. The research design is based as much on common sense as it is on any discussion of methodological or epistemological paradigms. The idea is to ‘enter the world’ of college students using a general process of familiarisation with the location and with the individuals involved. Although operating on a limited time-scale and with limited resources, the plan is to use the methodological stages outlined above to work a way in to young people’s subjective perspectives on the school to work transition and their feelings of control during this transition. The use of both structured and unstructured techniques means that several different viewpoints (e.g. official, unofficial, institutional, group, individual) may be represented.

The research will focus down from a consideration of national policies relating to ‘new vocationalism’, through local labour market considerations and LEA contexts, to institutional settings and courses and, finally, to group and individual student viewpoints on the preparation for work (see Figure 3.1).

Limitations in time and resources hindered the possibility of research across a number of institutional settings, so a decision was made to focus on the further education sector. There were three main reasons for locating the study in this context. Firstly, in terms of numbers of young people, the further education sector has expanded rapidly in the last few years - recent Department for Education and Employment statistics indicate that by 1993/94 some 70 per cent of 16-year-olds were participating in post-compulsory education, with more than half of these in FE: this figure compares with around 50 per cent in 1988/89 and 40 per cent in 1979/80 (DFEE, 1995, pp.23-4 and Figure 8.3). Secondly, there was a great deal happening in this sector of education including the introduction and implementation of NVQs, GNVQs and other vocationally-oriented reforms - this was a chance to gauge the effects of the ‘new vocationalism’ in full bloom. Thirdly, the FE sector seemed to be relatively under-researched despite the recent increase in student numbers and the apparent proliferation of studies of youth transitions.

In practical terms, following the negotiation of access to the colleges (which in itself can be problematic), the first stage of the research process, information gathering, involves finding out as much as possible about the national and local contexts of students in FE colleges. This will include the analysis of various documents obtained from the institutions involved (as well as related institutions such as local Training and Enterprise Councils and careers offices) so as to find out as much as possible about their organisation, contexts, goals and provision for young people before carrying out the detailed fieldwork on student perspectives. This stage will also involve contact with ‘key informants’ or ‘significant others’ (Burgess, 1985, pp.79-81; Bynner and Roberts, 1990, p.8) in these settings.
Of course there are problems both with using official publications and with selecting key figures with institutional authority, but the use of more than one method and a variety of data sources means that other perspectives can be represented at later stages in the research process, thus possibly increasing the 'validity' of the research.

The questionnaire findings will make available a useful statistical backcloth and the group interviews, involving sets of interviews with the same groups of students, will provide more detailed, less structured responses. The intention is to use the combination of written questions and qualitative discussions to elicit details of the school to work transition from the perspectives of the students themselves, with particular reference to their feelings (or lack of them) of control and personal agency.
Some of the reasons for selecting these two colleges (one in the West country and one in East London) have been mentioned above. *Westdown* is a fairly buoyant labour market with a relatively low unemployment rate. East London represents an important area or region not yet directly featured in the school to work research on 16-19-year-olds. Within the two colleges the emphasis will be on groups taking vocationally-orientated courses (NVQs, GNVQS and BTECs). These students will be ‘critical cases’ (Bates, 1993a, p.20) in the sense that they are the very people who should be benefiting from the new vocationalism in FE along with its associated emphasis on learner autonomy and personal independence. Another way of expressing this is to say that these students (or their groups) are ‘information-rich’ cases: “Information-rich cases are those from which we can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research...” (Patton, 1990, p.169). The use of information-rich cases is one aspect of ‘purposeful sampling’.

### 3.3 Sampling, Access and Key Informants

Access, or the ‘entry stage’, in itself can be one of the most difficult and uncomfortable stages in the research process (Patton, 1990, pp.250-5). Much has been written about the *power* of the researcher over others, especially when young people or children are involved, but in the negotiation of access phase power may well be exercised in the other direction. The researcher is seeking to enter a strange environment which he or she does not know and may well be hoping for contact with many, possibly hundreds, of individuals in order for data to be generated, individuals whose primary purposes and tasks will not be to contribute to research, but to study, to pass examinations, to train, to find employment or to deal with other aspects of ‘real life’. This problem of access may be particularly acute for qualitative researchers:

> The problem of gaining access to data is particularly serious in ethnography since one is operating in settings where the researcher generally has little power, and people have pressing concerns of their own which often give them little reason to co-operate (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.53).

In order to overcome these problems in the present project, the whole process of access was planned carefully from the early stages. Once the two colleges had been identified as suitable locations a letter was sent to each of the Principals outlining the general nature of the research and requesting permission to make a preliminary visit to the college. Both principals replied favourably and confirmed that a particular individual on the staff would act as an intermediary.
The next step was to write to these two contacts to arrange a visit to each college which would include an explanation of the research strategy as it would affect the college. From the very first meetings it became clear that these two individuals would be more than just helpful intermediaries, they would act as very important information points and sources of local knowledge and were essential for communicating details of the project to college staff and in facilitating contact with them. These two individuals were 'key informants' in the sense that they were “particularly knowledgeable and articulate” (Patton, 1990, pp.260-4) and because they had a number of different important roles in relation to the researcher: as 'guide', ‘assistant’, ‘interpreter’, ‘historian’ and ‘model’ (Burgess, 1985d, pp.91-4; Spradley, 1979, p.25).

It should be noted, however, that there can be dangers in the use of key informants. On occasions such individuals can act as ‘gatekeepers’ allowing access only to certain parts of the institution, or to particular people or to limited sources of information and there is the possibility of ‘manipulating the researcher’ (Burgess, 1985d, p.95). These problems were not encountered in the two colleges visited. Each of the key informants had been working at the institution for a long period of time and was able to tell the researcher much about the history, organisation and structure (both formal and informal) of the college. Access was encouraged in all parts of the site and all information requested (either verbally or in writing) was provided. Whilst the key informants obviously had their own views and interests they also had a good overview of their college and its structures. These individuals, through their specific work tasks, were familiar with the range of courses on offer and had good contacts with the various departments/faculties, making the setting up of questionnaire groups across the colleges that much easier. In short, whilst an awareness of the possible difficulties in the use of key informants had to be borne in mind, the fact is that research on this scale in these two institutions would not have been possible without the ongoing co-operation and assistance of these two individuals.

One of the most important functions of these co-ordinators was to set up access to student groups in a way that would create matched samples in the two colleges. ‘Closely matched sampling’ had been used in the Anglo-German Studies (see Section 1.7; Bynner and Heinz, 1991; Evans and Heinz, 1993; Brown, 1996, pp.3-4) and this was an appropriate way of facilitating a comparison of student groups across the two different colleges/labour markets. Matching would be in terms of gender, age, level of study, and type of course.

In the questionnaire phase of the research, the aim was to feature a cross-section of at least 100 full-time students on vocational courses from each of the two colleges. Negotiations took place with the Principals and the key informants so that contact could be made with a number of Heads of Department. A letter was then sent to each of these Heads of Department asking for access to at least one group within their division. The
letter asked for access to vocational groups, ideally containing between ten and thirty students, with mainly students aged 16 to 19. In the case of the first college surveyed (Westdown) Heads of Department were given some leeway in nominating groups from their area within the constraints just mentioned. This resulted in eight groups/subjects being nominated at Westdown. The tutors involved were approached and these subjects/levels were then used as a basis for a more specific approach to Eastborough College for questionnaire groups, though an exact match was never possible because of the different ranges of courses on offer at the two institutions. Altogether eleven Heads of Department (or Faculty) and nineteen course tutors were approached for permission to include their groups in the study. Only one tutor, at Westdown, felt unable to assist, mainly because she was already carrying out her own research with the course group.

Thanks to the co-operation of the tutors, a close match was achieved in questionnaire groups - this would allow direct quantitative comparisons across the two college contexts. There were six core groups, i.e. groups studying the same subject at the same level at each of the two colleges, and several additional groups, including an A level group at each site to allow comparison of one ‘academic’ group with the ‘vocational’ groups.

Over one hundred students, then, from a range of different groups and courses, would complete the questionnaire at each college. The questionnaire sample would then act as a sampling frame for the selection of an interview sample. The plan was to set up two interview groups of between six and ten students at each of the colleges and to meet each of these discussion groups several times in the next phase of the fieldwork process. Students would be selected at random from the questionnaire groups and once selected they would be sent a letter asking them if they would be willing to take part in a series of ‘small group discussions’ on their feelings about their college course, vocational education and employment prospects. Obviously allowances would have to be made for refusals and for non-attenders so a degree of over-recruitment was anticipated.

Within this layered methodology two different forms of sampling were in use. Purposeful or theoretical sampling was used in the selection of the questionnaire groups and random sampling in the selection of individuals for the group interviews. “Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.45): it involves “choosing those whose testimony seems most likely to develop and test emerging analytic ideas” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.138). This was theoretical sampling in the sense that the groups selected - through a combination of requests from the researcher and nominations by the college tutors - were students of the appropriate age group studying courses that were part of the ‘new vocationalism’ in action. The ideas that were going to be tested were not yet clearly formulated - but centred around feelings of control and levels of optimism linked to new vocationalism and processes of individualisation.
Random sampling was used in the selection of individuals for the ethnographic group interviews. A gender balance was maintained by ensuring that these random selections reflected the proportions of males and females in each of the questionnaire survey groups. Random sampling was used so as to ensure, as far as reasonably possible, that certain types of individuals were not over-represented - for example, particularly vocal individuals or tutor-nominated (and probably less critical) students - in the discussions. Interestingly, when names were selected one or two tutors did try to act as 'gatekeepers' (Burgess, 1985d, p.133), saying things like 'she won't be much use' or 'she's too critical to take part in a discussion'. Where this happened points about the importance of randomness and the need for a broad cross-section of students (as far as the group size would allow) were stressed to the tutor concerned.

3.4 Data Gathering: The Questionnaire

The questionnaire phase of the research had two general aims: firstly, to provide a broad statistical overview of students' experiences of their college and their courses, a backcloth of information that could be used in conjunction with the interview data collected later in the research process; and, secondly, to generate ideas and to stimulate points for the group interview discussions.

In relation to the first aim it must be stressed that the questionnaire phase of the research was never intended to be a full-scale 'scientific' statistical analysis with detailed correlations, multivariate analysis, regression calculations and so on. There were a number of reasons for this: firstly, the use of a multi-method approach meant that there were limitations in terms of time available for each method and form of analysis; secondly, there were already in existence detailed data sets on school to work transitions; and, finally, the strategy of this study has been to use a multi-method approach, but with an emphasis on ethnographic interviews, so that the respondents' views, expressed qualitatively rather than statistically, can be given prominence in the analysis section.

Having said this, the questionnaires will generate much information and some of the findings should be useful and illuminating. The data will provide an important quantitative dimension to the study and the statistics should be useful both in their own right and as illustrations of and comparisons to points made in the interviews. These are descriptive statistics (Black, 1993, Ch.5) which will help to paint a full picture of the young people's experiences of vocational education as expressed by the students themselves.

Although the questionnaire surveys are effectively 'snapshots' describing students' experiences of college environments and courses at a particular time, a number of useful comparisons will be made using the statistical findings. The two college samples will be
compared and the hopes and aspirations of respondents in two contrasting labour markets will (at least indirectly) be considered. The viewpoints of similar subject groups in different colleges and different locations will be compared: e.g. 'are engineering students in Westdown more optimistic in terms of employment prospects than their equivalents in Eastborough?' Also the views of contrasting groups within one college will be considered: e.g. 'do BTEC or NVQ students feel better prepared for work than their more 'academic' A level counterparts?' Finally, because the questionnaire is a modified version of the one used in the first Anglo-German Study in 1988, elements of a longitudinal comparison will be possible: e.g. 'have 1995/96 students benefited more from the new vocationalism than their late 1980s counterparts?'

As already indicated, the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) is in part based upon the one used in the first Anglo-German study (reprinted as Appendix IV in Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, pp.286-303). Needless to say, this made the task of questionnaire design considerably easier, though there was still significant work to be done in developing the questionnaire for the purposes of this study. Some questions were omitted, either because they were not deemed relevant to the present study (which is confined to the FE sector in England so that, for example, cross-national questions were not required), or because they had become outdated. New questions were added usually either because recent developments in education needed to be considered, or because new information was required on the 'feelings of control' dimension of the school to work transition and on opinions concerning the impact of the local labour market situation on college leavers' employment prospects. The data collected from these new questions, because they are directly related to the aims of this project, will receive special attention in the analysis sections. For organisational purposes the questionnaire was divided into three sections:

**PART I - 'YOUR BACKGROUND'**

**PART II - 'YOUR PRESENT SITUATION'**

**PART III - 'YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE'**

In total there were 47 questions, with many of these divided into sub-questions. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for computer analysis and for presentation of the responses. Data for 155 variables had to be coded in, both by hand on the questionnaire and by keyboard into SPSS. As well as the structured questions there were a number of open questions which should help to link the questionnaire responses to the subsequent group interview data.

The questionnaire was distributed to students in the form of an A5 booklet with eleven printed pages. Although this is quite lengthy for a structured questionnaire, it should be stressed that many of the questions were straightforward yes/no or tick-a-box type
questions. The tutors who had consented to the use of their subject groups allowed the researcher into their classrooms to distribute the questionnaire and to explain its purposes to the students. It should be noted that help from the tutors often went beyond permitting access to their students and many tutors gave up considerable amounts of time to provide background information and to make comments on developments in FE in general and in vocational education and their subject areas in particular.

Consequently, in all cases, the researcher was present with the student group for the completion of the questionnaire - respondents were free to seek clarification or to make comments during the completion of the document. It took the respondents between 25 and 45 minutes to fill in the questionnaire, the average completion time being around 35 minutes. There were no non-responses, though a small number of students did fail to complete some sections of the questionnaire.

In some ways the respondents were a 'captive audience' once the tutor had given permission for the group to be used. It was stressed, however, that participation was voluntary and that in the analysis and presentation of the results anonymity would be maintained. The fact that the questionnaire had already been 'tried and tested', and that the project had the approval of the college authorities and tutors, undoubtedly helped to facilitate the 100 per cent response rate. The methodological literature suggests that the response rate to a postal questionnaire of this length would almost certainly have been less than 40 per cent and possibly less than 20 per cent, especially given that many of the respondents were preoccupied with examination and coursework commitments.

3.5 Data Gathering: Ethnographic Group Interviews

The next major phase of the fieldwork was a series of ethnographic group interviews at each of the two college sites (detailed justifications for the use of the terms 'ethnography' and 'ethnographic group interview' are provided in Section 4.3). Since this technique has rarely been used in educational research (and not at all in an FE context) this was seen as a particularly innovative aspect of the research design. Group interviews were seen as an excellent way of discovering and articulating young people's viewpoints on vocational aspirations and the transition to work. Since these ethnographic group interviews were placed at the heart of the research strategy, several parts of this thesis are devoted to discussing their uses and their strengths and weaknesses. This section briefly describes how these interviews were set up and carried out and how they relate to the overall research strategy. The next section (Section 3.6) draws upon the literature to provide more details of the strengths and limitations of the technique and also outlines what the methodological literature has to say about the conduct of group interviews. The ways in
which the literature inspired the use of this technique are discussed in Section 4.4.

These 'semi-structured' or 'ethnographic' (Spradley, 1979) interviews involved two groups of students in each college seen three times by the researcher. The groups were made up of students selected at random from the questionnaire sample groups. Thus the questionnaire sample (223 respondents) was a sampling frame for the interview phase. Initially the plan was to select these students from the six core groups, but the composition of the groups had to be modified according to the availability of the students and the subject groups. Over-recruitment was necessary and the lists of randomly-selected respondents included 'reserves' where necessary.

The interview samples were matched in terms of age, sex, level and type of course studied. In the event, because certain groups of students were not available after a certain date, an exact subject match was never possible, though the students did come from similar types of course, e.g. GNVQ, NVQ, BTEC. The idea of using group discussions is to discover something of policy as experienced. Comparative educational research often only tends to take account of institutional frameworks or general statistical trends and is consequently too generalised - the use of ethnographic interviews will allow for individual expressions of policy in action. Brown's comment about the matching process as a way of looking at skill development in England, Germany and the Netherlands also applies here:

The close matching process delivers strong contextual similarities, which then gives opportunities for a rigorous comparison of individual experiences within those contexts. This has to be supplemented with contextual analysis, but potentially it does give scope to highlight the interplay of structure and agency taking place in skill formation and development processes (Brown, 1996, p.4).

The aim is not to make large scale generalisations from the interview data, but to use the data to provide detailed, individual biographical perspectives which will inform us about important aspects of the career paths of young people.

Once the random selection had been made the students were approached by letter via their tutors. The students were asked if they were willing to be part of a small group of students to be interviewed at their college. A reply slip and a stamped addressed envelope were included. Where the students were under eighteen years of age a letter to their parents was also enclosed, asking for parental permission for their son/daughter to take part in the research. In total 40 students were contacted in this way: 23 agreed to take part, 5 did not wish to participate and 12 did not return their reply slips (in some cases this was because the students concerned had left the college or moved elsewhere).

A loosely-structured interview schedule or topic guide was drawn up for each of the three planned group discussions. In general terms the first discussion involved getting to
know each other with a range of prompts on students' backgrounds and schooling. The second discussion centred on the students' present situations, their experiences of the college and their locality. The third discussion was broadly based on future plans, including levels of optimism/pessimism about future employment and feelings of control over the transition from school to work (Appendix 3 presents a provisional topic guide). The questionnaires completed by the students who took part in the discussions were looked at carefully before each session so that any interesting comments or lines of enquiry could be followed up. Note that the topic guide was provisional - some kind of framework was necessary so that the four discussion groups could be compared, but beyond this basic framework there was much scope for flexibility.

The group interviews took place at the college sites - at Westdown in either a committee room or a small meeting room, and at Eastborough in the informal part of the Careers Guidance Unit. The plan was to have groups of between four and eight students, in the event actual numbers were between three and seven respondents. The four groups were all seen three times each, with the exception of the second Westdown group which was only visited twice because examination commitments prevented these individuals from meeting after a certain date. The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours.

In terms of physical arrangements, the students present were arranged in a circle and a multi-directional, high quality microphone was placed in the centre of the group to record the discussion. At the first two meetings name labels were used to help with identification. Usually the discussions were held at lunch-time, but there were some at other times of the day where this was more convenient to the respondents. The rooms at Westdown College were rather formal, so the furniture was rearranged to make the setting as informal as possible. The Careers Guidance Unit at Eastborough provided an excellent informal setting, with comfortable chairs and a carpeted floor. The atmosphere was conducive to students talking about their vocational aspirations and related matters, though there were one or two interruptions due to people entering via a second door and during one discussion the telephone rang for several minutes!

The interviews were spread out over a number of weeks. At Westdown they were carried out in May and June, 1995, and at Eastborough they were completed in November and December of the same year. All the discussions were tape-recorded (with permission) and then transcripts were produced. The researcher also made field notes immediately after each session, noting down any general impressions or difficulties with the discussions. The process of transcribing was not without its difficulties (e.g. identifying individuals in the discussion) and took up a good deal of 'data analysis' time. The tapes were replayed several times and the transcripts were read carefully and coded, initially in accordance with the topics in the 'interview guide', though a flexible approach was maintained and several new concepts, ideas and issues did emerge from the interview data.
3.6 Appropriateness of Group Interviews

This section draws upon the research methods literature in order to provide an account of the strengths and weaknesses of the group interview technique. Section 3.6.1 considers some of the limitations of this method, Section 3.6.2 outlines some of the strengths of group interviews, and Section 3.6.3 attempts to build upon this evaluation by summarising some of the suggestions made in the literature about the conduct of group interviews.

3.6.1 Limitations of Group Interviews

There are a number of problems associated with the use of group interviews and these may help to explain the limited use of the technique in educational research. Some of these problems also occur in the use of one-to-one interviews but, mainly because of the complexities of group interaction involved, there are several difficulties which go beyond those normally associated with the face-to-face interview.

One of the reasons for interviewing a group of people rather than a series of individuals is so as to encourage a range of ideas and opinions expressed in depth, with group members using each other for stimulation. However, in order to achieve the depth required there must be limitations on the number of questions asked or on the number of points listed for discussion. In group discussions there needs to be a focus for the session and this limits the range of topics that can be discussed. Too many topics would produce too shallow a discussion. Morgan (1988, p.56) suggests that the facilitator of a focus group should not expect to be able to cover more than two major topic areas. An appropriate balance has to be maintained between depth of response from the members of the group and the breadth of topics featured.

Similarly, there may be difficulties with the wording and style of questions when the interview is carried out in a group context. These problems occur in single interviews but are exacerbated by the presence of a group - the moderator needs to think carefully about what questions to ask, the wording of the questions, the interviewees' levels of familiarity with the topics raised, and how precisely the questions/points will be put across.

There will also be difficulties in managing a group interview. One-to-one interviews are complicated enough, but in group situations the complexities are magnified by the intricacies of group dynamics. A particular difficulty, frequently mentioned in the literature, is the impact of peer group pressure. Such pressure may introduce biases and distortions into the responses (Lewis, 1992, pp.416-7). Interviewees may say what they think their fellow interviewees will want to hear, or they may try to make an impression in front of an audience:
...in groups there is a risk that social pressures will condition responses in an artificial way. People can feel nervous about uttering views opposed to those of the rest of the group. Some people like to play to the gallery, to impress their fellow participants. To some extent these social pressures are realistic, and would be present in the real world too, but also, to some extent, they are artificial offshoots of the particular group situation the researcher has constructed (Hedges, 1985, p.74).

Where peer group pressure becomes intense there may be a 'hot-housing' effect where the group becomes overly excited about a particular idea or issue and consequently overstates its importance. The group interview is in some respects an "artificial hothouse society created for the purposes of the research" (Hedges, 1985, p.72).

Another possible problem related to the management of the group is that of the dominant individual. Dominant characters may influence the rest of the group, shaping the discussion disproportionately, and quieter individuals may become reticent so that some minority viewpoints are not expressed (Day and Loewenthal, 1992, p.325; Denscombe, 1995, p.138). In larger groups there is the possibility of 'social loafing' where individuals do not participate because the rest of the group can carry the discussion (Morgan, 1988, p.43).

However, there are things that can be done to deal with the influence of dominant individuals. The dominant participant's views can be offered to other members of the group for comment and the moderator can use body language and eye contact to discourage or encourage group members to contribute. It should also be noted that although an individual may appear to be dominating a group discussion, that individual may not necessarily be having a negative effect on the generation of data. Indeed, the opposite may be the case: "In some instances, one dominant person in the group can be an asset in that he or she can forward opinions and can begin to shape and sharpen ideas so that the discussion begins to take off" (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987, pp.28-9). Articulate and imaginative individuals may act as a catalyst for further discussion.

It is also possible that one or more members of the group may 'ramble' and take the discussion away from a desired line of enquiry. This can occur in an individual interview, but in a group the effect can be even more damaging since one person's rambling may negate the expression of several relevant, additional viewpoints. 'Rambling', however, can be controlled, and in any case with ethnographic interviews, where often the respondent is meant to be 'setting the agenda', rambling comments may be more important than they at first appear to be: "The interviewee in rambling is moving onto areas which most interest him or her. The interviewer is losing some control over the interview, and yielding it to the client, but the pay-off is that the researcher reaches the data that is central to the client" (Measor, 1985, p.67).
With group discussions an extra dimension is added to the issue of confidentiality. The researcher can make a promise of confidentiality (and anonymity) but, because opinions are expressed in front of other individuals, full confidentiality of the usual kind cannot realistically be guaranteed. The material that is shared with the researcher is inherently shared with other participants too (Morgan, 1988, pp.39-40; Lewis, 1992, p.46). Confidentiality problems may limit the types of topics that can be discussed in groups: "This makes groups generally less suitable for handling sensitive, controversial or 'private' topics like personal finance, sexual behaviour, personal hygiene or racial issues" (Hedges, 1985, p.74).

Morgan and Krueger (1993, p.6), however, argue that the belief that people will not talk about sensitive topics in groups is something of a myth. In practice, in the right sort of environment, people will readily talk about a whole range of personal, controversial and emotional topics. Researchers should also remember that individuals who agree to take part in group interviews are well aware that they will be making comments in a group context and if an individual does not want something to be generally known then he or she will not reveal that information to a group.

All of the aforementioned problems relate to carrying out the group interviews and managing the participants. There are also difficulties with the technique, however, even after the discussions have taken place. These are to do mainly with transcribing and analysing the data collected. For example, it is extremely difficult to take notes during a group interview and there are also problems with using a tape recorder. There is a particular problem of identifying individuals from tape recorded group discussions: it may be difficult to identify speakers, comments may not be clear or they may overlap, and important non-verbal interactions will not be featured. There are also the usual problems of background noise and interruptions which tend to occur if the discussions take place in an educational institution.

Transcribing group interviews is both difficult and time-consuming. It has been estimated that the ratio of transcribing time to recorded time is somewhere in the region of five to one (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.87). Typically the researcher will spend hours putting the transcripts together, ending up with a mass of written data that needs to be ordered, analysed and summarised. Very little guidance has been provided on how such data should be analysed (Knodel, 1993, p.42) and it must be very tempting for researchers to take short cuts at this point.

Group interviews normally produce detailed qualitative data and they usually encourage the expression of opinions based on respondents' real-life experiences, but these kinds of data present analysis problems. It is very difficult to quantify such data or to produce statistics from the transcripts:
The coding of group interviews is a thorny area... Group interview techniques have tended to be discussed in the context of qualitative, rather than quantitative research methods... and so discussion has been of measuring 'insights' into transcriptions rather than numerical codings (Lewis, 1992, p.419).

The data, however open-ended or unstructured, will have to be put into some kind of framework - patterns will have to be identified for analysis to take place. Issues of validity and reliability may well surface in this phase of the research process. There seem to be two major problems here - firstly, the effects of the subjective position of the researcher and, secondly, the problems of generalising from a group to a larger population: “Given the qualitative nature of the data gathered by focus group methodology, a considerable amount of subjective judgment is necessarily involved in their interpretation and analysis” (Knodel, 1993, p.43). A degree of subjectivity is unavoidable in this type of research strategy, but there are steps that can be taken to ensure that the research is still 'rigorous' even where there is an element of subjective influence. For example, a research team could be employed so as to provide more than one viewpoint on the data, a number of group interviews can be conducted so that the groups can be compared, and sampling techniques can be used to ensure a good spread of respondents.

The issue of generalising from a limited number of unstructured interviews is summarised well by Bryman, who notes that there is a tendency in qualitative research towards an 'anecdotal approach', with:

Brief conversations, snippets from unstructured interviews... used to provide evidence for a particular contention... the representativeness or generality of these fragments is rarely addressed. Further, field notes or extended transcripts are rarely available... The reader is rarely given a vantage point from which the formulation of alternative accounts is possible (Bryman, 1988, p.77).

The problem of generalising from unstructured interviews is clearly a difficult one to overcome (and is discussed in more detail in Section 10.5) though some steps have been built into the research process proposed for this study to try to counteract these problems. For example, the data collected from the interviews can be checked against those generated from the larger questionnaire sample. In this way triangulation of data sources and methods should help to ensure that there is a degree of rigour in the research process.
3.6.2 Strengths of Group Interviews

Patton notes that the focus group “is a highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique” (1990, pp.335-6) and suggests that group interviews, when conducted carefully and used appropriately, “promise to provide a rich, new way of gathering qualitative evaluation information” (1990, p.338). The strengths of this technique, relatively new to the social sciences and not frequently used to date in educational research, stem from the human interaction which is a necessary part of the group dynamics that occur in a group interview or discussion. This section draws upon the literature to summarise some of these advantages.

Sometimes reference is made to the group interview as a technique that saves time and money: “Perhaps the most obvious reason for interviewing in groups is cost and speed” (Hedges, 1985, p.71); “The practical strength of focus groups lies in the fact that they are comparatively easy to conduct. In many circumstances, the research can be done relatively cheaply and quickly” (Morgan, 1988, p.20). It is certainly a quicker way of obtaining information than a series of individual interviews and, superficially at least, a less expensive way because of the reduction in the amount of interviewer time needed. It could be argued though, that very few researchers choose the group interview for either or both of these reasons. Usually the reasons for choosing this particular method are to do with the flexibility of the technique, the potential richness of the data to be generated, or the advantages of group interaction. In any case it could be contended that with the extra organisational effort required and with the need, sometimes, for a series of group interviews, savings in time and costs are not always evident.

The main advantages, as indicated by the following comments from the literature, arise from the group dynamics and the interaction required in a group interview:

“The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1988, p.12).

“The combined effect of the group will produce a wider range of information, insight, and ideas than will the cumulation of the responses of a number of individuals” (Kinnear and Tomlon, 1991, p.384).

“...the group format aims to capitalise on group dynamics in order to throw light on the research topic. Ideas may be generated that would not have occurred to any one individual” (Walker, 1985b, p.5).

“It is the interaction between participants that is important, certainly as important as the interaction between interviewer and interviewees” (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987, pp.25-6).
"talking together with other people is stimulating. There is more to react to, more food for thought, more diversity of opinion expressed than in a typical individual interview" (Hedges, 1985, p.73).

Group interviews "can expose details about how the participants relate to one another and offer some detail on shared perspectives rather than individual views" (Denscombe, 1995, p.137).

"the information, perceptions, opinions, and attitudes expressed by focus group participants can yield valuable insights not available from other sources" (Knodel, 1993, pp.43-4).

"These discussions have the advantage of bringing to the surface the differences among the participants and the contradictions within and between their replies" (Bryman, 1988, pp.49-50).

All of these quotations support the view that it is the interaction within a group that is important for the generation of useful and meaningful data. Of course other research methods will involve interaction too, especially participant observation and the individual interview, but participant observation has the disadvantage that much of the interaction may not be relevant to the research focus, and one-to-one interviews frequently lack the depth and stimulus that a group setting provides. Morgan states:

One advantage of group interviews is that the participants’ interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer, leading to a greater emphasis on participants’ points of view... While individual interviewing is also interaction, the key point is that focus groups offer a stronger mechanism for placing the control over this interaction in the hands of the participants rather than the researcher (Morgan, 1988, p.18).

Groups are a useful source of data because they provide a social context. Much educational experience revolves around groups. With the recent rise in the importance and significance of group work, team development and interpersonal skills, the group should be a very familiar social context to students and pupils. As Hedges has noted, "most human problems have a social dimension. People are to be understood partly through their relationships and interactions with others, as well as through their own internal workings as individuals" (Hedges, 1985, p.72). Day and Loewenthal support this view:

Advantageous from the qualitative and new paradigm positions... groups supply a social context, participants being encouraged to take account of other’s views in forming their responses. This creates a more naturalistic and holistic research setting (Day and Loewenthal, 1992, p.325).
Similarly, Lewis makes the point that:

Group talk may... be very natural and less stilted than in individual interviews. A strength of this naturalness is that non-responses from one child do not curtail or stop the interview. Other children take over and so the flow is sustained. Group interviews may also be more productive than individual interviews because when one child is speaking, other children have 'thinking time', thus also encouraging greater reflectivity in responses (Lewis, 1992, p.417).

The fact that group discussions provide a ‘naturalistic’ social setting, often involving peers as discussants, means that they can frequently produce ‘rich’ data, i.e. responses that are more detailed, more personal and more ‘realistic’ than might have been obtained from other situations. While group dynamics can impose certain restrictions, they can also provide freedom of expression. In contrast, structured questionnaires, longitudinal surveys and even formal interview questions can force respondents’ opinions into restricted categories and boxes, limiting the depth of response.

This richness is particularly important if the researcher is trying to find a way into the respondents’ culture or to discover detailed perspectives on an issue. Thus “group discussions may provide considerable insight into participant culture” and the accounts produced will tell us much about “the perspectives and discursive repertoires of those being interviewed” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.148). The richness of the data comes partly from the way in which viewpoints can be passed backwards and forwards within a group. Opinions can be proposed, challenged, explored, modified, reconsidered and abandoned in the light of the comments of other individuals.

Additionally, group interviews can be used to provide detailed accounts of opinion formation as opposed to snapshot images of opinions at a particular moment in time. “Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do” (Morgan, 1988, p.25, his emphases). Individual interviews may also lead to explanations of opinion formation, but these explanations will not have had the benefit of immediate feedback and prompting from individuals with similar experiences and attitudes.

Group discussions provide a creative and stimulating environment and, as suggested previously, can be used to generate new ideas or hypotheses (Hedges, 1985, p.73; Morgan, 1988, p.21). This possibility of stimulating new concepts, ideas and lines of enquiry derives largely from the flexible and potentially open nature of group interviews. It is a flexible method that encourages an ongoing, iterative relationship between data, concepts and theory, suitable, for example, for the generation of grounded theory (see Section 4.5). The use of a series of interviews, building on previous secondary and statistical data, means that details can be checked and explored further. Respondents can
be asked to clarify or elaborate on previous comments or observations.

Group discussions, by their very nature, can reveal surprising or unexpected elements, leading to changes in direction in the research, and this is a key strength: "the value of the technique lies in discovering the unexpected which results from a free-flowing group discussion" (Kinnear and Tomlon, 1991, p.380). Research based on ethnographic interviews "allows new leads to be followed up or additional data to be gathered in response to changes in ideas" (Bryman, 1988, p.99).

The iterative nature of the research process means that 'quality controls' can be built into the investigation and into the group interview sessions themselves. "Focus groups also provide quality controls on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other that weed out false or extreme views" (Patton, 1990, pp.335-6). This will enhance the reliability of responses (Lewis, 1992, p.413).

The group nature of the interview allows for a whole range of opinions to be expressed, a greater range than might be experienced with individual interviews:

"Often a major part of our research goal is to learn more about the range of opinions or experiences that people have. Focus groups have a strong advantage here because the interaction in the group can provide an explicit basis for exploring this issue" (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p.17).

These, then, are some of the main practical strengths of the group interview technique as suggested by the limited, but now expanding, literature on the subject. Some writers, though, have gone further than merely listing the practical strengths of the technique. Morgan and Krueger (1993), for example, have outlined a number of scenarios where focus groups should be considered particularly useful. These include:

1. Situations where there are power differentials. "Thus focus group interviews, when conducted in a nonthreatening... environment, are especially useful when working with categories of people who have historically had limited power and influence" (1993, p.15).

2. Situations where policy issues are important. Focus groups are useful where there is a gap between professionals and their target audiences: "they are a powerful means of exposing professionals to the reality of the customer, student, or client" (p.16).

3. Situations where complex behaviour needs to be investigated. "By comparing and contrasting, [group participants] can become more explicit about their own views... [and] aware of things they had not thought about before" (p.17).

4. Situations where a friendly research setting is required. Group interviews tend to create an atmosphere of meaningful interaction, sensitivity and respect (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p.18).
Kinnear and Tornlon (1991, pp.384-5) also outline a host of advantages of group interviews, some of which go beyond the practical strengths usually emphasised. These include synergism, where the combined effects of the group produce more data than a number of individual responses; snowballing, or a 'bandwagon' effect where "a comment by one individual often triggers a chain of responses from the other participants"; stimulation, whereby interest in a topic is provoked by group discussion; spontaneity; structure (or lack of it, encouraging flexibility) and speed, based on the fact that a number of individuals can be interviewed at the same time.

### 3.6.3 Conducting Group Interviews

The literature offers plenty of advice on how to set up and conduct group interviews. The size of group recommended ranges from 3 to 15 individuals (Lewis, 1992, p.418) with the most popular 'optimal' size, the size that will be best for maximum interaction, suggested as between 6 and 8 (Hedges, 1985, p.76; Walker, 1985b, pp.5-6; Kinnear and Tornlon, 1991, p.382). There seems to be some disagreement on the issue of whether the group members should come from similar or contrasting backgrounds. Kinnear and Tornlon argue that the respondent group should be composed of people with fairly homogeneous characteristics (1991, p.381). Knodel agrees on the basis that it will be easier for participants sharing similar key characteristics to identify with each other's experiences (1993, p.40). Others, however, suggest that heterogeneous groups may be more useful if a large range of opinions and experiences is required (e.g. Morgan, 1988, p.48). Certainly factors such as sex, race, economic position, and age need to be taken account of when the composition of a group is being considered.

On the desired length of a group interview there is much more agreement, most writers suggesting a duration of one to two hours (e.g. Morgan, 1988, pp.42, 55) and some specifying one-and-a-half to two hours (e.g. Hedges, 1985, p.85). The length of the interview will also depend upon the number of times the group will meet. Much focus group research is based upon only one meeting - but the research scheme used here anticipates a series of discussions - this has been referred to as the use of 'multistage' groups (Morgan, 1988, p.74) or 'reconvened' groups (Hedges, 1985, p.86). Several meetings facilitate comparisons between earlier and later sessions: "as the group members get to know each other... a sense of rapport is built. In second and later groups, there is much less use for moderator guides... as these groups take on a life of their own" (Morgan, 1988, p.74). Hedges notes that meetings held over a number of weeks will produce more interesting information: "This gives more space for the input of information, and the study of the ways attitudes and beliefs evolve" (1985, p.86).
In terms of the content of the interview the facilitator will normally use a ‘discussion guide’. The aim is to allow respondents as much freedom of expression as possible, but at the same time to maintain the level of structure that is necessary for research purposes. The structure that an interview guide imposes on discussions “is both valuable in channelling the group interaction and in making comparisons across groups in the analysis phase of the research” (Morgan, 1988, p.56).

The physical setting of the discussion can be extremely important. If possible, it should be one which is familiar to the respondents, thus helping to put them at ease for the conversations. The room used needs, ideally, to have a degree of informality and the furniture should be arranged so that all the participants will feel involved. The facilitator should not be in a dominating position.

Equally important is the way in which a group discussion is initiated. The moderator will need to make some kind of explanatory statement at the commencement of the first interview. This may be an introduction to the topic in “an honest but fairly general fashion” (Morgan, 1988, p.57) or “a quick, simple, reassuring and convincing explanation of what the whole thing is about” (Hedges, 1985, p.79). This introductory explanation may be accompanied by a few requests to respondents about the format of the discussion, perhaps emphasising the need for respect for other people’s opinions and stressing that the researcher wants to hear about a range of different experiences. After this the discussion typically begins with each participant in turn making an individual statement. This serves as a good ‘icebreaker’, provides everyone in the group with basic information and reference points, and helps with voice identification on the tape recording (Hedges, 1985, p.80; Watts and Ebbutt, 1987, p.30).

Several writers stress that the early questions and prompts used in the discussion should be straightforward and non-controversial, with the more difficult, potentially awkward topics left to the later stages of the interview, or to later sessions if a series of interviews is to be held. The experience, attitudes and skills of the moderator are obviously crucially important and can significantly affect the quality and the validity of the data generated. The researcher must be genuinely interested in what the respondents have to say and should aim “to facilitate the open expression of the informant’s perspective on the world” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.129). Measor refers to ‘listening beyond’ and staying ‘critically aware’ during interviews: her approach was to be ‘neutral but nice’ (1985, pp.63-8, 74). Hedges advocates an approach of ‘passionate neutrality’ - involved with the group, but at the same time detached from it (1985, p.82). As with other forms of ethnographic research the usual aim is to maintain a more or less marginal position, “intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.112). The facilitator “will have to make decisions throughout the interview as to whether a given line of enquiry is proving useful” and sometimes the most exciting
findings come from a completely new lead raised by a member of the group (Hedges, 1985, pp.77, 78). “The interviewer wants to allow free discussion and yet at the same time keep the thread moving in a particular direction so that the needs of the research design are met” (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987, pp.28-9).

A number of writers have made useful, practical suggestions in terms of types of questions and verbal devices that can be used to bring out the best in respondents. Two examples are the ‘grand tour question’ which asks respondents to describe a typical day or session (Spradley, 1979, p.62) and the ‘ignorant bystander’ question which conveys a (feigned or genuine) lack of understanding of the topic raised by the informant, thus encouraging detailed explanations (e.g. Kinnear and Tomlon, 1991, p.383). Hedges (1985, p.84) mentions the possibility of lobbing ‘verbal hand grenades’ into the discussion to provoke reactions. Patton stresses the uses of prefatory statements, probes and follow up questions and notes that praise, reinforcement and feedback are important during the discussion (1990, pp.324-7, 329).

Needless to say a great deal will be going on during the group discussion. This is all the more reason why field notes should be written promptly and comprehensively. Field notes should be “descriptive, concrete and detailed” and are important because “the observer’s own experience is a crucial part of the data” (Patton, 1990, p.241). Hammersley and Atkinson also emphasise the importance of meticulous note-taking - ‘if in doubt, write it down’ - they maintain that “The construction of analytic notes and memos... constitutes precisely the sort of internal dialogue, or thinking aloud, that is the essence of reflexive ethnography” (1995, pp.179, 191-2).

While plenty of advice has been offered on how to conduct group interviews, little has been written about the analysis of data generated from such discussions (Knodel, 1993, p.42). Numerical descriptions of the data are possible but more usually an ethnographic or a qualitative approach is adopted in the coding and analysis stages. There is a ‘mechanical’ or ‘functional’ aspect to coding which involves the physical organisation of the data, and an ‘interpretive’ aspect, which involves looking at the data in terms of meaning (Hedges, 1985, p.87; Knodel, 1993, pp.44-5).

The interview guide will provide the basis for a topic-by-topic analysis of the discussions, but the analysis must also allow for new lines of enquiry. There must also be an appropriate balance between direct quotation of the participants and summaries of their discussions (Morgan, 1988, pp.64, 70). With ethnographic research the tendency is to use a good range of quotations so as to let the respondents ‘speak for themselves’. Qualitative research is direct and vivid and “Verbatim quotations not only make the report more interesting, but often convey the tone and quality of people’s thoughts better than the researcher’s own descriptions” (Hedges, 1985, p.90).

Techniques used during the analysis stage can help to improve the reliability and the
validity of the data produced from the group interviews. For example Knodel suggests that where multiple groups/interviews are involved the researcher(s) should produce an overview grid. The cells of this grid will contain brief summaries of the discussion as it relates to each topic (Knodel, 1993, pp.47-8).

From all of this it can be seen that the researcher needs a considerable range of skills to conduct focus group research, but the effort will be worthwhile because the output from this method can be extremely relevant and interesting. Providing some of the difficulties outlined earlier can be overcome and providing the research design and implementation allow as full an expression of student views as possible, group interviews, used flexibly and in combination with the other techniques mentioned, may be the best way to find out about young people's attitudes to college, work, careers and the future. They may also help us to discover just how much they really feel in control, as individuals, of this very important phase in their lives.

3.7 The Pilot Study

With these strengths and weaknesses in mind, a pilot study was set up to test the two main research instruments - the structured questionnaire and the group interview technique. The Eastborough Principal was approached in writing and he subsequently gave permission for a pilot study to be carried out at the college. Through the 'key informant' a meeting was arranged with the Head of the Caring Division and she agreed to a two-phase pilot study with a Nursery Nursing (NNEB) group (NVQ level 3).

The questionnaire session took place on a Thursday morning in May, 1994. The researcher introduced the questionnaire and explained its purposes and the 13 students in the group completed their responses in about thirty minutes. They had few problems with this task, though there were two or three requests for clarification of some of the terms used in the questionnaire (e.g. 'what are training credits?'). The final question was an open one, inviting comments on the questionnaire or the college/course. The responses to this question were examined carefully since they might have included any criticisms of the questionnaire in terms of wording, layout, clarity, etc. In response to this question four students made positive comments about the questionnaire - "It was interesting", "I really enjoyed it", "Very well worded" and "Good layout of questions"; two students made negative comments - "Question 37 is not worded clearly" and "Some questions weren't specific enough"; two students made comments about the course/college - "The course is very demanding" and "Some of the teachers here seem to have attitude problems..."; five respondents made no comment at all.

Around this time copies of the questionnaire were also distributed to fellow MPhil/PhD
students who made a number of useful and constructive suggestions about the wording of some of the questions.

A provisional analysis of the questionnaire responses was made, though the data produced from this pilot study are not included with those from the main sample since the questionnaire was adapted for the main survey in the light of comments made both by the college students and by fellow researchers. No major changes were required, but the wording of four or five questions which had caused problems was made clearer and there were some minor changes in layout.

The next stage was to carry out a group interview with the same set of students at Eastborough College. Relatively small groups were planned for the main fieldwork, but it was decided at the pilot stage that it would be useful to set up a discussion with the whole group (11 students on the day) since this might highlight some of the problems that could occur in managing such a discussion. The tutor agreed that there should be no problem in carrying out a broad ranging, relatively unstructured, discussion with this group. The main aim was to try to discover some of the technical, practical, ethical and academic difficulties that could arise from the use of group interviews in an educational setting, although the substance/content of the discussions would no doubt also be interesting and would provide some indications of the appropriateness of the provisional topic schedule devised for the session.

The pilot group interview took place on 23rd June, 1994. The session started with the students introducing themselves individually, followed by a number of relatively ‘neutral’ fact-finding questions about the course and the characteristics of the group. There followed a wide-ranging discussion, stimulated by questions about the demands of the course, work experience, applying for jobs, employment expectations and levels of optimism in relation to employment desires. More than three-quarters of the group intended to work as nursery nurses after leaving college. The most interesting discussions (and the ones requiring the least input from the facilitator) centred around three issues: (1) the role of the College Careers Unit in helping to find suitable courses and employment (the students were, on the whole, very positive about this); (2) job prospects in the local area (there were mixed opinions on this); and (3) the perceived low status of the nursery nurse. The latter topic attracted much comment - the students felt strongly that they were sometimes seen as mere ‘welfare assistants’ by people who should have known better. The following extracts illustrate how animated the discussion was:

**Pam:** It's hard work. It's very hard work, which people don't really appreciate. They say 'you've only been with some children all day', but it's hard work dealing with children. You don't do it for the money, no-one does it for the money...
Linda: ...It's mentally hard as well. You have to be so aware, all the time, of everything that is going on around. You can't switch off, apart from when they go home at lunch-time, you cannot switch off, not for one second...

Pam: People seem to think that NNEB is like a welfare assistant, you know, you get the ladies that go into school and like sort of tidy up and do a little bit of reading; they don't know what the NNEB actually has to do. They don't know that we have to learn about how they grow and what different stages they go through.

Linda: Half the teachers don't know what we have to learn [this is a reference to college tutors who teach subjects other than NNEB/Child Care]...

Pam: ...Actually the teachers, the teachers don't know what NNEB students do... the course is more about child development, psychology, Piaget and that kind of thing... We'd like to be more valued.

In this group discussion ‘Pam’ may come across as a ‘dominant individual’, shaping the discussion along her own lines of thought. However, the atmosphere of the group suggested that this was not the case. Pam was particularly articulate and the (non-verbal as well as verbal) indications were that the majority, if not all of, the group agreed with what she was saying. Pam was in fact acting as a kind of catalyst, stimulating discussion and acting as a spokesperson for the group. This extract also illustrates how in the later stages of the group interview a particularly significant discussion, based on students’ strength of feeling, developed. Although the early stages of the interview were difficult, the ice was soon broken, and it was pleasing that the students felt able to raise criticisms of the course and feelings of being occupationally undervalued in a fairly uninhibited way.

Immediately after the session detailed field notes were made about the experience of conducting a group interview and the pilot study was evaluated both ‘in the field’ and in periods of reflection back at the university. A list of difficulties and strengths was drawn up in the light of the experience (see Sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.2). To complete the whole process the interview transcript was analysed carefully and, as promised, generalised feedback was sent to the course tutor.

Feedback was useful in helping to maintain good relations with the tutors and showed that there may be some benefits from the research for tutors and for the college generally. The feedback process also helped to confirm the cyclical nature of this research - the questionnaire generated information that was useful in the interviews - the interviews generated useful concepts and themes that could be referred back to the students at a later date - and so on. In summary, the pilot study assisted as an evaluation of the method used, but also provided valuable experience in the use of the technique and helped to shape more firmly the research process as an overall scheme of action.
Chapter Four - Research Methods Literature

4.1 Introduction

Four broad areas of discussion within the research methods literature have helped to inform the design of this study:

(1) Discussions on the differences and similarities between quantitative and qualitative techniques, especially arguments in favour of combining these two ‘paradigms’ in a multi-method approach.

(2) The literature on ethnography as a research technique capable of discovering and describing the ‘lived realities’ of people’s everyday lives.

(3) The (rather limited) literature on group interviews or ‘focus groups’.

(4) Writings on the relationships between data collection, data analysis and the development of theory from data, particularly the notion of grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

This chapter outlines the ways in which these elements of the literature have influenced the research design incorporated into the present study.

4.2 Pragmatism and Triangulation

A multi-method approach to the study of young people was used in both the Anglo-German Studies and in the ESRC 16-19 Initiative. It will be argued that such a pragmatic approach is also appropriate for the present study, given its research aims. One particular advantage, worth reiterating, is the prospect of combining quantitative information (from the questionnaire) with qualitative findings (from the group interviews). The two strategies complement each other well, especially as the interview respondents will be a sub-sample of the larger questionnaire sample.

There are also important elements in the research methods literature which support this multi-method approach. A strong case for combining research paradigms is made, for example, by Bryman in his book Quantity and Quality in Social Research (1988). He outlines the essential characteristics of the two main research traditions and suggests that the differences between the two have been exaggerated. It is incorrect to view these paradigms as ‘mutually antagonistic’ or as ‘mutually exclusive’ types of research process (Bryman, 1988, pp.93, 105).
The rather partisan, either/or tenor of the debate about quantitative and qualitative research may appear somewhat bizarre to an outsider, for whom the obvious way forward is likely to be a fusion of the two approaches so that their respective strengths may be reaped (Bryman, 1988, p.127).

Bryman argues that the two traditions should be used in tandem - when these traditions are jointly pursued “much more complete accounts of social reality can ensue” (1988, pp.125-6). Also, in combining the two traditions, “the researcher’s claims for the validity of his or her conclusions are enhanced if they can be shown to provide mutual confirmation” (p.131).

Bryman notes how many researchers rely prominently on a method associated with one of the major research traditions, but ‘buttress their findings’ with a method taken from the other tradition (p.128). This is true of the way in which the (qualitative) group interview data will be supported (or refuted) by the (quantitative) statistical data from the questionnaire survey in the present study. Often qualitative research is carried out first and this facilitates quantitative research by, for example, acting ‘as a source of hunches or hypotheses’ (Bryman, 1988, p.134). A less common scenario is the use of quantitative research followed by a qualitative phase (as proposed here), however such an approach can be useful because “the initial quantitative research allows a ‘mapping’ of the issue to be addressed and also provides the basis for the selection of comparison groups for in-depth qualitative interviewing” (Bryman, 1988, p.137). Walker supports this point: “a survey provides a context for qualitative work which in turn permits commentary on the findings of the survey...” (1985b, p.16). More generally, qualitative research can be used to ‘interpret, illuminate, illustrate and qualify’ statistical findings (Walker, 1985b, p.22).

This appropriately sums up the approach to be used in the present study, though perhaps it should be stressed that quantitative data and qualitative data will be used to reinforce (or to challenge) ideas, findings and theories developed throughout the study. Although the questionnaire phase will be largely completed before the group interviews the use and analysis of both types of data will be ongoing throughout the research process. The questionnaire data will provide some issues for exploration in the group interviews: “the qualitative research allows the investigator to flesh out the meaning of findings established through quantitative methods” (Bryman, 1988, p.147). Additionally, the questionnaire sample will constitute a frame from which the interview sample will be randomly selected. Also the questionnaire data will frequently be referred to after the interview data have been collected, for example, to see if what an individual has said in an interview is representative of the views of the college sample as a whole: “The survey data sit side-by-side with the ethnographic data as indications of the ways in which subjects think and feel” (Bryman, 1988, p.140).

Glaser and Strauss, who are mainly concerned with the generation of theory from data collection and coding, would support this mixed methods approach. They argue that the
The distinction between qualitative and quantitative data is ‘useless’ for the generation of theory (1967, p.9). They take the position that “there is no fundamental clash between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative methods or data” (1967, p.17). Different kinds of data, or *slices of data*, provide different views or vantage points from which to develop and understand theoretical categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.65).

Patton, in an influential book on *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, also calls for a combining of paradigms. He refers to the quantitative paradigm as ‘logical positivism’ and to the qualitative paradigm as based on ‘phenomenological inquiry’. He argues that “pragmatic blinders constrain methodological flexibility and creativity... I am not an advocate of one paradigm versus the other paradigm... I prefer pragmatism... to one-sided paradigm allegiance” (Patton, 1990, pp.37-8). He favours a ‘paradigm of choices’, arguing that ‘methodological appropriateness’ is the primary criterion for judging methodological quality (1990, p.39).

A word of warning may be necessary here because there are some difficulties with a pragmatic or a ‘methodologically ecumenical’ strategy (Bryman, 1988, p.155). These include the requirements on the researcher(s), in terms of both time and effort, to prepare the various research strategies and to deal with their collection and interpretation. A good deal of skill, not to mention stamina and determination, is required where a combination of research methodologies and data types is used on a significant scale. An additional problem concerns the possible incompatibility of research approaches. Patton, following Guba and Lincoln (1988), has noted that sometimes “the internal consistency and logic of each approach, or paradigm, mitigates against methodological mixing of different inquiry modes and data collection strategies...” (Patton, 1990, p.193). There may also be problems where quantitative and qualitative techniques used to research the same issue or topic of study produce contradictory findings.

Whilst it must be acknowledged that each method *may* have its own ‘internal consistency’ it must be reiterated that both Bryman and Patton favour multi-method or pragmatic research designs. Their view is supported by Hammersley who calls for a ‘deconstruction’ of the quantitative-qualitative divide. He argues that now that qualitative research methods are widely accepted there is a situation not of paradigm-conflict but of methodological detente (Hammersley, 1992, p.1). He deconstructs the quantitative and qualitative paradigms by dividing them into their various component parts and showing that there is now a great deal of variety in social research: “this diversity cannot be encapsulated within two (or for that matter, three, four or more) paradigms” (Hammersley, 1992, p.160). Echoing the previous comments quoted from Bryman and Patton, Hammersley argues that:
we must not see research methodology in terms of competing traditions, but rather as involving a complex of assumptions and arguments... and a range of strategies and techniques that have advantages and disadvantages for particular goals in particular circumstances (Hammersley, 1992, p.197).

Hammersley provides an interesting and appropriate analogy to illustrate the range of options facing the pragmatic researcher. Diversity in research positions means:

that in doing research we are not only faced with a fork in the road, with two well-defined alternative routes between what to choose. The research process is more like finding one’s way through a maze. And it is a rather badly kept and complex maze... (Hammersley, 1992, pp.183-4).

The pragmatic researcher has important decisions to make at the planning stage of the research process, but, as suggested by Hammersley's 'maze analogy', the decisions do not end there. Further options need to be considered during the data collection and analysis phases. This is why “research design should be a reflexive process which operates throughout every stage of a project” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.24).

This use of a multi-method strategy places considerable demands on the researcher, but it should be stressed that such an approach can have considerable advantages over a single method approach. Perhaps the most obvious of these advantages is the possibility of triangulation. The notion of ‘triangulation’ is now widely used in social and educational research: it is “a powerful solution to the problem of relying too much on any single data source or method” (Patton, 1990, p.193). According to Denzin there are at least four basic types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978, pp.294-304; see also Patton, 1990, p.187; Walker, 1985b, p.15). Data triangulation and methodological triangulation have been adopted in the present study. Methodological triangulation occurs through the use of the (mainly quantitative) questionnaire survey and the (mainly qualitative) group interviews. Data triangulation occurs via the two different types of data generated by these distinct techniques. Existing information, in the form of documentation from the two FE colleges, provides an additional, mainly official, source of data.

4.3 Defining and Using Ethnography

Since the main method proposed in this study is the ‘ethnographic group interview’ it is necessary to say something about what is meant by the term ethnography and, more generally, by ‘qualitative research’. This section uses the research methods literature to outline some of the relevant characteristics and forms of ethnography, along with its main advantages and disadvantages, as they relate to the present study.
Throughout this thesis the term *ethnography* will be used in its broadest sense, rather in the way that Hammersley and Atkinson use it:

... we shall interpret the term ‘ethnography’ in a liberal way, not worrying much about what does and does not count as examples of it. We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.1).

In some respects the research strategy proposed in the present project is not technically ‘ethnographic’ in the sense that the researcher is not going to ‘live the lives’ of the students featured over a long period of time. However, if ‘ethnography’ is given a liberal interpretation and involves ‘collecting whatever data are available’, then there are several ways in which the term can be applied to the present study. Firstly, it proposes a kind of immersion into college life, taking information from official, tutorial and student sources and perspectives. Secondly, although the project has a limited timescale, many full day visits to the colleges are planned so that the flavour, atmosphere and ethos of day-to-day life in the college settings can be experienced. Last but not least, the aim is to build up a ‘research relationship’ and a rapport with the students featured in the group interviews. As Measor suggests, “the quality of the data is dependent on the quality of the relationship you build up with the people being interviewed” (1985, p.57).

These student respondents and the researcher will have met on several occasions over a period of many months, including the provisional visits to the college, the questionnaire administration phase and at least three group interviews. By the end of the fieldwork phases these respondents will have filled in a detailed questionnaire on their vocational aspirations and experiences of college life and will have spent at least three hours (as part of a small group) in conversation with the researcher. This is considerably more contact than can be expected from one large-scale survey or from a brief, single, one-to-one formal interview. It is for this reason that these sessions have been called *ethnographic group interviews* - they are part of a detailed process of collecting a mass of data which should provide a fairly broad picture of the day-to-day experiences and the ‘lived realities’ of these students. It is in this way that the subjective experiences of the students will be articulated and then considered in relation to the theoretical developments in the youth transitions literature outlined in Chapter 2.

The project will be innovative in the sense that it aims to use an ethnographic approach to map out young people’s feelings of control in the context of vocationally orientated courses in two FE colleges in contrasting economic settings. There have been very few ethnographies of students in further education settings (the exceptions to this comment
are discussed in Section 10.3).

According to Bryman, qualitative research "seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied" (Bryman, 1988, p.46). Similarly, according to Spradley, the aim of ethnography is "to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems" (Spradley, 1979, p.v). For Walker, this capacity of qualitative research to reach into subjective viewpoints makes it important in its own right - qualitative research reaches parts that other techniques do not (Walker, 1985b, p.18). Patton, who also emphasises the importance of the actor's perspective, goes further than this, suggesting that qualitative inquiry is both a science and an art: "The scientific part is systematic, analytically vigorous, disciplined, and critical in perspective. The artistic part is exploring, playful, metaphorical, insightful and creative" (Patton, 1990, p.433). In relation to the present study it is probably true to say that, in these terms, the questionnaire phase will be mainly 'scientific' and the group interviews will require more 'artistry' and 'creativity'. The processes of data analysis and writing up the research findings will require both discipline and creativity.

Bryman (1988) outlines the four main characteristics of qualitative research as follows:

1) 'SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF' - "The most fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is its express commitment to viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied" (p.61).

2) DESCRIPTION - To provide 'detailed descriptions' of the social settings investigated (p.63).

3) FLEXIBILITY AND LACK OF STRUCTURE - Qualitative researchers avoid "the imposition of prior and inappropriate frames of reference on the people they study" (pp.66-7).

4) THEORY AND CONCEPTS - Qualitative researchers "favour an approach in which the formulation and testing of theories and concepts proceeds in tandem with data collection" (p.68).

The present research project encompasses most of these characteristics. As stated previously, the aim is to look at processes of transition from the point of view of the students themselves; another aim is to use several different data sources to describe in detail the college settings and the experiences of these students; thirdly, although the research design has a structured framework, flexibility is built into the framework in the form of unstructured group interviews and the potential interplay between quantitative and qualitative data; finally, although prior concepts are clearly being utilised (particularly notions of 'structure' and 'agency') these will be developed and formulated, along with new, emergent, concepts, into a theoretical framework as data collection and analysis
proceed.

The common theme in all the above definitions of qualitative research or ethnography seems to be the central place given to the ‘actor’s perspective’. This commitment to the respondent’s viewpoint is to a large extent taken from phenomenology. Phenomenologists ask questions such as ‘what is the essence of people’s experiences of a phenomenon?’ and contend that “any attempt to understand social reality must be grounded in people’s experience of that social reality... Social action must be examined by the social scientist in terms of the actor’s own interpretation of his or her action and its motivational background” (Patton, 1990, p.76; Bryman, 1988, pp.52-3).

Another central characteristic of qualitative research/ethnography seems to be the emphasis on the role of the researcher. The researcher is not taking an objective, ‘scientific’ stance, but is actively involved in the research process, whether this be through interviews, or overt or covert participation. In ethnographic studies the researcher “is the research instrument par excellence” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.19, their emphasis).

Of course the actual role taken by the researcher depends upon the type of ethnography being undertaken. Despite the common themes mentioned above, it is now widely recognised that there are a number of different types of ethnographic study. Bryman, for example, describes Blitzkrieg ethnography where the qualitative researcher visits briefly a number of different sites or settings (1988, pp.129-30). Hammersley has described Practitioner ethnography (1992, Ch.8) where research takes place ‘in the job’ (e.g in nursing or teaching), and Critical ethnography which ‘reconstructs’ conventional ethnography and brings about human emancipation (Hammersley, 1992, Ch.6). This latter approach criticises conventional ethnography because it “neglects the constraints on the people studied, who are portrayed as simply exercising their freedom... there is a failure to identify the macro-social structural determinants of people’s behaviour” (Hammersley, 1992, p.99). Hammersley and Atkinson have also noted the rise of Interventionist ethnography (1995, p.16) where the researcher may intervene in the light of the respondents’ social structural circumstances.

These latter forms of ethnography can be linked with the contrast made by Lutz between macro and micro ethnography. He argues that ethnographic work in education unfortunately tends towards “Face-to-face analysis of social interaction or micro-ethnography, as contrasted with the broader notions of ethnography as usually applied in the field of social or cultural anthropology” (Lutz, 1986, p.109). It is essential, for Lutz, that we should go beyond the narrow focus of micro-ethnography:

Behaviour in a classroom cannot be understood apart from the influences of smaller peer groups, the larger school, and the total school district-community... therefore, it is argued that the narrower ethnographic approach to the study of education is less satisfactory than ‘holistic’ ethnography (Lutz, 1986, pp.115-6).
The present study, with its emphasis on the links between structure and agency and the use of different dimensions of policy (espoused, enacted and experienced) is, in a sense, utilising both micro and macro forms of ethnography. The face-to-face relationships of the student samples are clearly important and will influence and feature in the group discussions, but at the same time considerations of national and local educational and employment structures should ensure that the influences of macro factors are included.

The combining of methods and the use of both micro and macro forms of ethnography give the research design considerable strength, though there are of course also dangers in the use of ethnography. Hammersley, despite having used ethnographic techniques in his own studies and writing extensively about such approaches, has come to the conclusion that ethnography is "no longer... a useful category with which to think about social research methodology" (Hammersley, 1992, p.203). He argues that there are now two main challenges to the use of ethnography. The first of these concerns the issue of representation - to what degree can ethnographic accounts legitimately claim to represent social reality? The second challenge comes from the criticism that ethnography has failed to contribute to practice and policy (Hammersley, 1992, p.2).

Both of these criticisms need to be considered seriously by researchers using ethnography. The problem of a lack of representativeness or the difficulty of generalising from limited ethnographic projects or 'case studies' is one of the most common criticisms made of ethnographic and qualitative research. There are, however, ways in which the generality and representativeness of ethnographic studies can be improved and writers on methodology have recently been giving consideration to these techniques (see, for example, Schofield, 1993). The present study attempts to deal with this problem by setting out fully the contexts of the two colleges studied and by explaining at each stage how the study of these particular sites, courses and groups of students may contribute to our general knowledge about the impact of 'new vocational' courses and students' feelings of control over this form of transition into work or higher education. If the Westdown students, on vocationally-orientated courses in full-flow and about to enter a relatively buoyant local labour market, are experiencing difficulties and discontents, then it is reasonably safe to assume that students in other parts of Britain will also be experiencing problems. (The issue of representativeness and the general validity of findings from student samples in two geographical settings is considered further in Section 10.5).

Hammersley's criticism that ethnographic research is often divorced from policy and practice also needs to be taken seriously. Certainly much previous ethnographic work seems to have taken place in a policy vacuum and there are deliberate attempts within the present project to try to counteract such tendencies, particularly in Chapter 11 where the practical and policy implications of the study's findings for various groups of people, from the young people through to national policy-makers, are discussed in detail. These
implications are presented in the light of the suggestion that “What qualitative research can offer the policy maker is a theory of social action grounded on the experiences - the world view - of those likely to be affected by a policy decision or thought to be part of the problem” (Walker, 1985b, p.19). Finch (1988) has cogently argued that ethnography need not be divorced from policy-making - indeed, the technique has special qualities which make it very appropriate in terms of contributions to the formulation and reformulation of social and educational policy. In a consideration of policy relating to 14-19 education she argues that “certain questions which are crucial to policy-making simply cannot be answered by quantitative data but could be answered by good ethnographic, and other qualitative, methods of study” (Finch, 1988, pp.187-8). Three reasons are given for the usefulness of ethnographic work over quantitative data in terms of policy evaluation and development (Finch, 1988, pp.188-90):

(1) Ethnography shows ‘how much change actually occurs in practice’: “To put it more graphically, does a particular policy initiative lead to substantive change, or merely a change of labels?”;

(2) Ethnography can identify the ‘unintended consequences’ of policy initiatives;

(3) Ethnography can expose ‘the contradictions in policy’ which are apparent when it is implemented. Ethnography “... makes visible the tensions, contradictions and incompatible aims which are often encompassed in the policies themselves”.

These comments are very helpful and important in the light of the aims at the heart of the present project. The impact of new vocational courses on young people’s feelings of control and independence is an area where all of these strengths of ethnographic work can be applied. It has frequently been argued, for example, that often the labels relating to vocational training (e.g YOP, YTS, ET) have been changed while the substance of the government’s approach has remained much the same. Revelations of young people’s experiences based on ethnographic discussions should help to confirm (or deny) whether actual policy change has occurred.

Additionally ethnographic work may reveal the ‘unintended consequences’ of VET schemes and Hammersley himself has noted how ethnography “allows the discovery of unanticipated aspects of the policy process and investigation of how policies are actually implemented” (1992, p.125). For example, Shilling, investigating the impact of a Schools Vocational Programme (SVP) on a group of students in ‘Stonegate School’ in the South of England, found that by the end of a programme on ‘Factories and Industry’ a majority of his student group had rejected the values of the course and “no longer wanted to work in any large factory” (Shilling, 1988, p.106). This outcome, of course, was exactly the opposite of that which the course designers/policy-makers had intended and, interestingly, Shilling suggests that it occurred because students can actively interpret vocational
courses: "Students are not passive agents who can be formed malleably by the official values contained within such courses as 'Factories and Industry'..." (1988, p.106). The fact that by the end of the course the majority of students were less likely to want to work in industry illustrates some of the unintended consequences of vocational courses which operate within capitalist society" (Shilling, 1988, p.107). It is to be hoped that the group discussions with Westdown and Eastborough students may reveal some unintended consequences of VET policies: the distinction between policy as espoused and policy as experienced should assist this process.

Finch's third point, concerning contradictions in policy, is also very relevant to the present study: by placing student viewpoints at the heart of the discussion it is anticipated that some of the contradictions that exist between policy as espoused, policy as enacted and policy as experienced will be revealed. This is a particularly important aim given that a frequent criticism of government policy on VET is that it lacks coherence, partly because it has been devised and implemented by a variety of bodies and organisations, each with different aims and interests, and partly because of the speed at which some VET reforms have been implemented.

The distinction between official policy and policy as experienced 'at the grassroots', along with the potential of ethnographic studies to unlock these differing interpretations, is elaborated by Walford, Purvis and Pollard (1988). They argue that ethnography allows depth of understanding because of its emphasis on subjects' lives 'in the round'. This enables it to "provide insights into the effect of policies as they are interpreted by those involved and as they become the subject of varying degrees of resistance, accommodation or acceptance" (Walford, Purvis and Pollard, 1988, p.4). These writers conclude with the comment that:

...those involved in the implementation of policy at the micro level are not simply passive receptors but interpreters of policy in the light of their own situations and histories. Ethnographic studies... can show that there may well be conflicts between the official rhetoric at the macro level and the reality at the grassroots (Walford, Purvis and Pollard, 1988, pp.12-13).

This potential to reveal conflict, contradictions and tensions in policy implementation, however, is not the only advantage of an ethnographic approach. There are several other reasons why ethnography is a suitable technique for the study of educational experiences. Finch lists some of these as follows:

- Ethnographic studies can provide descriptive detail about a particular setting;
- data are derived from natural settings rather than from ‘artificially constructed’ settings;
- ethnographic approaches “facilitate study of situations in the round, reflecting the complexity of the total setting...";
Ethnographic studies can move beyond outcomes and focus upon processes; An ethnography can study processes and interactions over a long period of time (Finch, 1988, p. 188, my emphases).

For all of these reasons, a (broadly-defined) ethnographic approach has been utilised in the present study. Whilst such a strategy, it must be acknowledged, has a number of possible weaknesses, it also has numerous strengths which make it particularly appropriate as an approach to the study of young people's feelings of control in school to work transitions.

4.4 Focus Groups and Group Interviews

As indicated in the previous chapter (Section 3.6) the research methods literature provides some guidance on how to use group interviews and what the strengths and limitations of the technique are. However, finding material on focus groups and group interviews was a difficult task. A survey of the literature revealed, firstly, that there has been very limited discussion of the group interview as a research technique and, secondly, that very few examples of the use of the technique in educational research can be found.

Many methods texts do not mention group interviews at all, frequently concentrating upon one-to-one interviews, whether these be of a structured or an unstructured kind. Thus Denscombe comments:

...group interviewing has tended to be something of an afterthought so far as textbooks on research methodology are concerned... Group interviews, if they are mentioned at all, tend to be regarded as an extension of the one to one interview situation. Only occasionally do group interviews receive specific attention in terms of their distinct characteristics... (Denscombe, 1995, p. 136).

Even those texts that do mention group interviews often only make a fleeting reference to the method. For example, Cohen and Manion, in their otherwise comprehensive Research Methods in Education, devote less than a page to group interviewing (1994, p. 287), though they do provide some useful follow-up references. Patton in a 92-page chapter on ‘Qualitative Interviewing’ includes a two page section on ‘Focus Group Interviews’ (1990, Ch. 7, pp. 335-7) but tends to discuss these in a non-educational, market research type context. Lewis, who has used and researched this technique, in 1994 knew of no other detailed references apart from the few mentioned in her article concerning the views of primary school children (Lewis, 1992, 1994).

This lack of detail in accounts of group interviewing as a qualitative research technique and the scarcity of its use in educational contexts are surprising given the significance of
‘talk’ in classroom and college situations and given the importance of groups and group work in educational contexts. Thus: “Classrooms are largely conducted through talk. Talk is the medium through which classroom life, teaching, learning, being a teacher or a pupil are accomplished...” (Hustler and Payne, 1985, p.268). “Talk forms a key element in social and educational research where investigators collect, analyse and report the conversations they have conducted...” (Burgess, 1988, p.137). Much educational experience involves verbal interaction and working with others, whether they be teachers or pupils, tutors or students. With the rise of learner centred education, group discussions are now much more common in school and college settings than ever they were before. This was a primary reason for the choice of the group interview as a suitable technique for the present study. Student perspectives on vocational further education have been under-represented and the group discussion seems to be an innovative and appropriate way of redressing the balance. Students will be more likely to articulate their viewpoints in familiar surroundings and with their peers around them.

A number of terms have been used to describe the group interview, including ‘focus groups’ and ‘ethnographic group interviews’. More detailed descriptions include the following:

* a particular kind of speech event (Spradley, 1979, p.55)
* a steered conversation (Hedges, 1985, p.78)
* a group conversational encounter with a research purpose (Lewis, 1992, p.413)
* a conversation with a purpose or a controlled conversation (Saran, 1985, p.221)
* a loosely structured interview conducted by a trained moderator among a small number of respondents simultaneously (Kinnear and Tomlon, 1991, p.380)
* a group conversation initiated by an interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research relevant information (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987, p.25)

The idea of the ethnographic group interview as a type of ‘controlled’ conversation is one theme that has been emphasised in the literature on qualitative interviewing. Hammersley and Atkinson note that “ethnographic interviews are closer in character to conversations than are survey interviews... However, they are never simply conversations, because the ethnographer has a research agenda and must retain some control over the proceedings” (1995, p.152). Similarly, Spradley suggests that “It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants” (1979, pp.58-9).

Sometimes the differences between a ‘focus group’ and a ‘group interview’ are emphasised, but more often the terms are used interchangeably. Patton comments that “Focus group interviews involve conducting open-ended interviews with groups of five to eight people on specially targeted or focused issues” (1990, p.173). This type of
interview was developed in marketing research in recognition of the fact that “many of the consumer decisions that people make are made in a social context, often growing out of discussions with other people” (Patton, 1990, p.335).

One of the difficulties for contemporary ‘moderators’ is that the history of the focus group/group interview is very much embedded in (mainly American) marketing research, even though its origins may actually be in sociology (Morgan, 1988, p.10), and market researchers will not ask the same types of questions as educational or social researchers (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p.3).

Morgan’s claims that focus groups are ‘underdeveloped’ in the social sciences and that “there is very little in the way of received wisdom in the area of social science focus groups” (1988, pp.12, 14) are supported by the fact that the technique has rarely been used in educational contexts. An extensive search of the literature has revealed only a handful of studies of British education using group interview methods, and none applied specifically to a post-16 further education context. The small number of studies that have been carried out, however, do provide some useful guidance in the light of the experience of conducting group interviews in an educational environment:

(1) **Watts and Ebbutt** in ‘More than the Sum of the Parts: Research Methods in Group Interviewing’ (1987) describe their use of the technique with sixth formers to try to find out more about students’ perceptions of science education from the ages of 11 to 16.

(2) **Day and Loewenthal** provide an account of ‘The Use of Group Discussions in Marketing Library Services to Young Adults’ (1992). This involved a series of open group discussions to explore the attitudes of young adults towards public library services in the London Borough of Ealing (Day and Loewenthal, 1992, pp.324-5).

(3) **Lewis** did much to stimulate recent interest in group interviews through her paper ‘Group Child Interviews as a Research Tool’ (1992). Her study showed that the technique can be used to draw out childrens’ points of view even at primary school level: group interviews were “a viable and useful technique with that age group” (Lewis, 1992, p.413).

(4) In ‘Explorations in Group Interviews: An Evaluation of a Reflexive and Partisan Approach’ (1995) **Denscombe** reports on a study by Bennett into the attitudes towards the promotion of dance education of 14 to 16-year-old children in three Leicestershire schools. The technique was innovative because it sought to use the reflexive features of group dynamics and to empower the research subjects (Denscombe, 1995, pp.131, 133, 138).

It can be argued that all of these studies are ‘innovative’ or even ‘radical’ in terms of their methodological approach. Group interviews were used for a particular reason, mainly to do with facilitating expressions of the research subjects’ points of view. In this way the technique accords with other new types of methodology sometimes linked with “post-modernist, feminist and anti-racist critiques of the traditional research paradigm”
(Denscombe, 1995, p.139). Thus, although group interviews have only rarely been used in educational contexts, they do seem to have enormous potential in terms of a capacity to unlock respondents' points of view and consequently to assist in making practical and relevant improvements in educational policy: "The future development of focus groups in the social sciences offers many opportunities, thanks to the newness of the technique" (Morgan, 1988, p.71).

4.5 Theory, Method and Data Collection

A fourth way in which the present study has been significantly influenced by ideas from the research methods literature is associated with the notion of an ongoing (or 'iterative') research process involving, at all stages, data collection, data analysis and the development of theory from data. Particularly influential here was the idea of grounded theory as developed and elaborated by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

The use of grounded theory seems to be 'fashionable' in qualitative research at the present time, though the way in which it is used does not always strictly accord with Glaser and Strauss's conception of how such theory should be developed. Basically, grounded theory is "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.2). In other words the theory is grounded in the social research itself, it is generated by and from the data. It should be stressed that although this research has to be systematic it does not have to be planned in advance:

Beyond the decisions concerning initial collection of data, further collection cannot be planned in advance of the emerging theory... The emerging theory points to the next steps - the sociologist does not know them until he is guided by emerging gaps in his theory and by research questions suggested by previous answers (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.47).

The research should generate insights and part of the sociologist's job "is to transform insights into relevant categories, properties and hypotheses" (1967, p.254). Relating this idea to the present research strategy, it can be seen that much of the process of data collection, i.e. questionnaire surveys followed by group interviews, has been planned, but within this framework flexibility and the iterative aspects of the research process have been emphasised. The nature and content of the group discussions will partly depend upon the content of previous group interviews and of the questionnaire data. Concepts that emerge from earlier parts of the research process can be explored and elaborated in later group discussions (for an example of how this was done see Section 10.4).

Burgess notes that all the methods associated with qualitative research are flexible and that "a rigid framework in which to operate is not required. Researchers can therefore formulate and reformulate their work... and may modify concepts as the collection and
A further characteristic of qualitative research is that:

data are not usually collected to support or to refute hypotheses but categories and concepts are developed during the course of data collection. The theory is therefore not superimposed upon the data but emerges from the data that are collected (Burgess, 1985c, p.9).

The development of grounded theory in this way is ‘difficult’ but ‘exciting’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.8). It is in this sense that although the present project sets up more of a research framework than Glaser and Strauss’s guidance would recommend, it maintains a high degree of flexibility and fulfils at least some of the requirements of a grounded theory approach. In any case, Glaser and Strauss acknowledge that existing concepts, as well as emergent ones, may also be taken into the research process: “A discovered, grounded theory, then, will tend to combine mostly concepts and hypotheses that have emerged from the data with existing ones that are clearly useful” (1967, p.46).

Concepts are being assessed, evaluated and generated all the way through the research process. Indeed, “Wide and comparative reading should inform the generation of concepts throughout the research process” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.162). The existing concepts taken into the investigative process of the present study include ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, but note that it has been argued that not only are these relatively under-researched concepts, in terms of school to work transitions, but also that they could generate a whole series of additional concepts and categories that could contribute to the literature on youth transitions. Indeed one of the research aims is to confirm, challenge or add to the ‘new vocabulary’ on youth transitions that has recently been developed.

Also taken from Glaser and Strauss is the notion of theoretical sampling which is an essential part of the process of generating grounded theory.

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.45).

A recent example of this kind of ‘cyclical’ approach is provided in a study by Kelchtermans of teachers’ careers. He interviewed twelve primary school teachers in Belgium in an attempt to identify significant phases or stages of development in teachers’ careers. His research procedure involved a ‘cycle of biographical interviews’ containing a constant interplay between data collection and data analysis. Texts and comments were frequently offered back to the respondents for confirmation or amendment: “Through repeated cycles of data collection, analysis and reflection we refined our initial framework
of sensitising concepts" (Kelchtermans, 1993, pp.203-5).

A similar process will be used in the present study involving a cycle or a series of group interviews which are, to some extent, biographical. Theoretical sampling has been used in the sense that the college sites and the types of courses and student groups selected were chosen specifically because they could assist in the process of generating data relating to student perspectives on vocational further education. Data collection, coding and analysis will, to a considerable degree, go on simultaneously, generating theoretical concepts related to student experiences of, and feelings of control within, vocational FE courses. According to Glaser and Strauss sampling and data collection should cease at the point of theoretical saturation: "Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category" (1967, p.61). To put this in a slightly different way, "the researcher observes only as many activities, or interviews as many people, as are needed in order to 'saturate' the categories being developed..." (Bryman, 1988, p.61). Hopefully a picture will emerge of these students' feelings of control and levels of independence relating to school to work transitions, and from this picture there will be the potential for the development of a number of relevant new concepts and descriptive categories.

4.6 A Methodological Problem

Chapter 2 has shown how, as youth transitions have become more complex, and as a considerable array of educational, training and employment possibilities has opened up, a 'new vocabulary' relating to this field has developed. It was also shown that there is some dispute as to whether this new vocabulary actually reflects real, large-scale changes in the experiences of young people between school and work or whether it is mainly a consequence of academic discourse which tends to exaggerate the scale of change experienced in youth transitions in recent years.

Certainly the existence of the 'new vocabulary' on youth transitions sets up an interesting methodological problem for the research planned here. It is one thing for academics to write about relatively abstract conceptions of career trajectory, transition behaviour and individualisation and quite another to draw out empirical evidence relating to these concepts from the experiences and comments of young people themselves. Any attempt to research youth transitions needs to include discussions about how we can faithfully and accurately discover, articulate and map out young people's attitudes and beliefs relating to their education, training and career opportunities, and particularly the part they play themselves in creating these opportunities.

We also need to give consideration to the language used and the methodological stages and procedures required in such research investigations. 18-year-olds may not respond particularly well to abstract enquiries about individualisation and structures, but may have
plenty to say, for example, about 'concrete' aspects of their lives such as ethnic origins, peer and family influences, decision-making processes at school and beyond, and experiences of NVQs, GNVQs and BTECs. Youth researchers must strive to bridge the gap between abstract (but nonetheless important) theoretical conceptions and the 'lived realities' of young people experiencing vocational education and training policies.

A key aim of the present project is to go some way towards bridging this gap. It attempts to do this in two ways. Firstly, by making use of the set of categories developed by Evans and Heinz, already mentioned in Chapter 1 (p.23): policy as espoused, policy as enacted, and policy as experienced. This three-fold categorisation of policy dimensions allows links to be established between structural concepts and individual experiences. The present study uses this categorisation both to make such links and as a general organising framework for the data collection process. However, the emphasis on young people’s perspectives means that the findings relate mainly to the third (and to a more limited extent, the second) of these dimensions of policy.

Secondly, the study also attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice through the collection of empirical evidence from young people relating to labour market influences, individualisation, and conceptions of structure and agency. As indicated in Chapter 3, this will be done through the use of a number of research strategies within a multi-method approach, including a detailed questionnaire and a series of ethnographic group interviews.
The two groups of students featured in this study (and their colleges) clearly do not exist in a social and economic vacuum. Whilst these students will experience VET policies at the 'grassroots' level, it is clear that these policies are formulated at a national, governmental level and mediated by a number of local institutions and organisations. Therefore, Chapters 5 and 6 map out the national and local contexts within which the students featured in this study will express their views, focusing upon 'policy as espoused' and 'policy as enacted' respectively. These summaries will provide details of national and local employment, education and training contexts, facilitating an assessment of how much influence these contexts and institutions (as 'structures') will have upon the young people featured in the study.

Chapter Five - National Structures: Further Education and the Labour Market

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of policy as espoused, i.e. national policies on vocational education, youth training and employment as expressed in official publications including a series of white papers published in the 1990s. It summarises recent developments in further education in terms of curriculum, organisation, funding and assessment, providing details of the implementation of new vocational qualifications for the post-16 age group, such as the competence-based NVQs and GNVQs. It also considers briefly training and employment schemes such as Youth Credits and Modern Apprenticeships and looks at national trends in employment and unemployment with special reference to the youth labour market. This will allow for the mapping of young people’s aspirations, as expressed in the questionnaires and interviews, against the 'external reality' of the national employment market.

In terms of the national educational context, the 1980s and the early 1990s seem to be universally acknowledged as a period of rapid change for educational institutions, personnel and policies. Change and intervention have occurred on a massive scale, “shaking this country’s VET structure” (Raggatt and Unwin, 1991, p.x). The period during which the present research was carried out, 1994-96, seems to have been a very turbulent phase for further education colleges in particular and this chapter will outline briefly some of the major changes that have had an impact, either direct or indirect, on the colleges featured in this study and on the students within them.

Of course it will not be possible here to provide a detailed outline of all the policy and institutional changes that have impinged upon this sector of education in recent years. Rather, the aim is to provide the reader with an outline of some of the more important
trends and developments as they may have affected and shaped the contexts of the groups featured in this study and to relate these changes to the research aims of the project. To study such developments is difficult because of the sheer quantity and pace of such changes, given a further layer of complexity by the diversity of educational institutions and frameworks within the post-16 sector. In order to try to make some sense of these developments, the changes will be considered under two broad headings:

- changes in the curriculum, organisation and funding of colleges
- changes in assessment and qualification frameworks

The emphasis will be on changes in FE mainly because most of the responsibility for VET policies in recent years seems to have fallen upon this sector. However, it is sometimes difficult to separate these changes from those affecting education generally, particularly the promotion by successive Conservative governments of the ‘market’ and ‘competition’ as essential organising principles in the world of training and education.

Following this summary of developments in FE as they may affect the experiences of the samples of young people featured in this project, Sections 5.4 and 5.5 will set out some of the main trends in the national and youth labour markets, especially in terms of their possible effects upon the aspirations and experiences of current cohorts of school and college leavers.

5.2 Further Education: Curriculum, Organisation and Funding

In terms of the curriculum the pattern in the late 1980s and the 1990s seemed to be for the government and other official institutions to emphasise and re-emphasise the importance of the vocational aspect of educational content. The term ‘new vocationalism’, as we have seen previously, is now more than ten years old, but these restatements of the importance of vocationalism in education are still regular occurrences: “Employers have been complaining about our system of vocational training since at least 1867” and the resurgence of employer interest in education is “the continuation of a perennial theme” (Hyland, 1994, p.81). The history of vocational education and training in Britain “is one of recurring cycles of concern” (Keep and Mayhew, 1991, p.197). McNay commented in 1992 that vocationalism is “Not a new issue - there is a ten-year cycle of attempts at exhortation and legislation” (McNay, 1992, p.10). This cycle has included the Barlow Report of 1946, a report on Technical Education in 1956, the Polytechnics White Paper in 1966, James Callaghan’s 1976 Ruskin College speech and the DeVille Report on the RVQ in 1986. Extending this idea to 1996, it could be argued that the Dearing Report is the latest manifestation in the cycle of encouragement for a vocationally-orientated curriculum.
One of the problems here is that official reports do not always spell out what they mean by ‘vocationalism’, nor do employers necessarily agree on what constitutes ‘vocational education’: the term is “a very slippery and ambiguous concept” (Dale, 1991, p.234). Despite these occasional problems of definition, official exhortations continue to stress that education must be more closely linked to the world of work and the process of ‘vocationalizing the curriculum’ continues apace (Bynner and Evans, 1990, p.184; Coles and MacDonald, 1990, pp.35-40; Banks et al., 1992, p.5). The main manifestations of this process are generally believed to have included the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), first introduced in schools in 1983, the Certificate in Pre-vocational Education (CPVE), introduced in 1984, the National Curriculum, implemented via the Education Reform Act 1988, and the recent National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) programmes.

Of these official policies, TVEI, which was aimed at the 14-18 age range, was perhaps the most obvious and widespread attempt to introduce a more vocational curriculum. This programme has been described as “possibly the most significant attempt to bridge education and training, school and the world of work, liberal and vocational education” (Pring, 1991, p.218). The Initiative was announced in Parliament in 1982 and a pilot scheme started in the following year. The scheme rapidly moved beyond the pilot stage and by 1988 was present in one form or another in every Local Education Authority in England and Wales (Dale et al., 1990, pp.12, 169). The Initiative had the central aim of giving ‘much greater weight’ to technical and vocational education and thereby assisting schools and colleges in the preparation of the workforce (Dale, et al., 1990, p.4). It was funded and, to a degree, controlled by, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) which at one time employed 30,000 people and was spending £3 billion a year on TVEI and other schemes (Ainley, 1993, p.44; Ainley and Corney, 1990). Gleeson has suggested that, since 1979, the MSC “has been at the forefront of government training policy, directly intervening in curriculum development” (1989, p.6).

TVEI and other attempts to relate the curriculum more closely to the world of work have frequently caused disagreement and controversy in educational circles. They have, for example, rekindled controversies about the true purposes of education, usually summarised in terms of ‘liberal’ education (for individual self-development) versus ‘vocational’ education (for the benefit of employers and the national economy). Gleeson notes that:

To some, current government training policy is conspiratorial in nature, reflecting little more than the government’s desire to create a more compliant work force. To others, vocational reform in our schools and colleges is long overdue, reflecting a positive step towards furnishing a more relevant curriculum for the majority of school leavers (Gleeson, 1989, p.2).
Some commentators argue that “a money-led curriculum serves and is subservient to, the requirements of the labour market” (Blamire Prosser, 1993, p.1) while others suggest that individual, educational and academic goals are also served by and remain consistent with the vocational element of the curriculum introduced in recent years.

A number of writers have been steadfastly opposed to the way in which the curriculum has been adjusted to serve the ‘narrow requirements’ of the workplace. Pring is typical of these writers, suggesting that “the whole skill-based approach to curriculum development represents a shift... towards a much more mechanically and externally controlled conception of what the curriculum is about” (1991, p.222). He goes on to argue that the new vocational curriculum will not prepare students personally or psychologically for ‘a future which is unpredictable’: consequently “the arts and humanities should be central to education” (Pring, 1991, pp.222-4). Similarly, Holt and Reid argue that schools and colleges have been taken in by ‘delusions of vocationalism’ - too few institutions challenged new vocationalism in the curriculum with a liberal philosophy of their own (Holt and Reid, 1988, pp.29-30). The point is made again that ‘vocational education’ may not properly equip young people for the diverse demands of the future: “by its very nature, liberal education equips students to solve the unknowable problems of the future, [and] it ought to be a much better bet in economic terms than the ‘short-termism’ so clearly embedded in the vocationalist position” (Holt and Reid, 1988, p.26).

There may, however, be positive, as well as negative, elements in these vocational initiatives and some of these may encourage student autonomy:

there are various positive features associated with the new vocationalism, such as new forms of assessment, profiling and records of achievement, development of new teaching styles, an integrated curriculum approach and the new pedagogic relations between teacher and student (Gleeson, 1989, p.9).

It could also be that some elements of these initiatives have beneficial effects in terms of equal opportunities, though this suggestion is rigorously contested by some commentators (see, for example, Blackman, 1987; Brown, 1987).

Whatever the broad explicit or implicit intentions of the government and the Department for Education and Employment, it is important to discover how these vocational initiatives operate in practice at school or college level (Gleeson, 1989, p.2). The majority of students featured in this project are on vocational courses within the FE sector and to some extent are part of the ‘TVEI generation’. Their views on the curriculum experienced in schools and then in colleges should help in any assessment of the success, quality and relevance of such initiatives and may help to guide policy makers on the appropriate design and content of future NVQ and GNVQ courses. Additionally, underlying the various curriculum changes was an attempt to move towards a learner led model of
education (McGinty and Fish, 1993, pp.57-8) and the students featured in the present study should have experienced increased autonomy in their learning patterns. There are specific requests in the questionnaire for opinions on the national curriculum and other recent educational reforms. The group interviews should also allow for discussion of the purposes of education and the relationships between course content, qualifications, perceived employability and student levels of satisfaction and independence.

Linked with these curriculum changes are several important ongoing developments in the way colleges are being financed and operated. Exactly how aware students are of these developments is open to debate, but there can be no doubt that they are having important consequences on day-to-day student experiences. Relevant changes in these areas include the transfer of administrative and financial control of FE colleges from the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to college councils (‘corporate status’ or ‘incorporation’), and the increasing influence of other agencies such as (until 1988) the Manpower Services Commission (later renamed the Training Agency) and, more recently, the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA).

The process of central government giving financial ‘freedom’ or ‘independence’ to various educational institutions has been developing since at least 1989 when ‘polytechnics’ and higher education colleges were provided with financial autonomy. From 1st April, 1993, under the terms of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, all Colleges of Further Education were funded directly by central government rather than by LEAs. The funding takes place through newly created ‘college councils’ which “will be responsible for a new funding regime designed to provide a powerful incentive to recruit additional students and reduce labour costs” (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.I, p.59) supposedly enabling colleges “to respond to the demands of students and of the labour market” (p.58). As well as receiving direct funding from the FEFC, colleges could also receive grants from TECs or other approved training organisations and from a range of other sources (McGinty and Fish, 1993, p.5). An element of the funding is ‘student related’, based on numbers of actual student enrolments (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.II, pp.26-7): “From this year, funding for the sector will be linked to the retention and achievements of its students. An additional demand-led element will encourage efficient growth” (DTI, 1994, p.37, para.4.25). Currently the policy of promoting financial independence and market responsiveness is being extended to sixth form colleges and there are plans to introduce a voucher scheme for all post-16 education.

The new financial status of the colleges has meant that college managers can draw up conditions of service and pay agreements with their staff. In some cases these conditions have followed nationally recommended guidelines, but in others there have been attempts to enforce new local conditions and pay scales. Not surprisingly, this has sometimes led to disputes between staff unions, such as NATFHE, and college managers. In some colleges this has resulted in industrial action (as in one of the colleges featured in this
study) and in negative staff-management relations. To add to the environment of change there has often been an atmosphere of unrest and distrust which may well have had some indirect effects on FE students.

The FE sector first fully experienced government intervention in the form of youth training programmes in 1977, with the introduction of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP). This became the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) in 1983, renamed Youth Training (YT) in 1990 (Macfarlane, 1993, p.13). By 1996 Dearing was suggesting that Youth Training should be relaunched and that YT places should be renamed ‘National Traineeships’ (Dearing, 1996, p.38, para.5.14).

Some of the MSC’s influence, both political and financial, has now been transferred to the Training and Enterprise Councils. The creation of these TECs was inspired by the American idea of Private Industry Councils (PICs) (Unwin, 1991a, pp.86-7). The first TECs were set up in 1989 and the 1991 White Paper stated that “We have given TECs, from the outset, important responsibilities for the vocational training of young people, and given them influence in key areas of education” (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.I, p.30). The aim here was to increase the influence of employers in FE both through the TECs and through representation on college councils. The responsibilities of the 82 TECs in the early 1990s included TVEI plans and reviews, ‘compacts’ in inner cities, Education-Business Partnerships, funding for Work Related Further Education and the overseeing of Youth Training/Youth Credit pilot schemes (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.I, p.30). The increasing influence of TECs on FE and the consequences of this for staff and students in the colleges are areas which would benefit from further research.

5.3 Further Education: Qualification Systems and Assessment

Accompanying, and very often overlapping with, these curricular, institutional and funding developments, have been important changes in the way college courses have been operated - changes which have had direct effects on students’ day-to-day experiences. Recent developments that could feature under this heading include the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs, Training/Youth Credits and the Modern Apprenticeship scheme.

Many of these changes have been part of an official attempt to increase the status and efficiency of vocational as opposed to academic education:

While we are second to none in securing results for those in our society who choose the most academic options, we need to raise further the attainment of those, whatever their age, who choose vocational education and training (DTI, 1990, p.30, para.4.5).
The government has pledged itself:

to remove the remaining barriers to equal status between the so-called academic and vocational routes. We want academic and vocational qualifications to be held in equal esteem. Vocational qualifications are appropriate for many more young people than currently take them, but too few are prepared to look at the alternatives to A levels (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.1, p.24).

This latter statement neatly begins to shift the blame for the low status of vocational courses onto young people themselves. That young people staying on in education continue to favour the academic route is not surprising given the continuing 'gold standard' status of A levels in the eyes of both government ministers and some employers, despite numerous suggestions from various quarters about the reform of A levels in a way that would broaden the 16-19 academic curriculum. There appears to be something of a contradiction in officially espoused policies and soundings relating to the nature of education and work preparation for this age group.

The attempt to increase the status of vocational routes to employment and to impose some kind of standardised framework on vocational qualifications has largely been implemented through the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), established in 1986 following the Review of Vocational Qualifications (RVQ). The NCVQ was to play an important part in the development of VET qualifications and courses and its establishment can be seen as a 'watershed' in the reform of VET (Burke, 1991, p.37). As early as 1981 the MSC's New Training Initiative (NTI) had introduced the concept of 'standards' based on 'outcomes' (Jessup, 1991, pp.10-14). The idea of NVQs according to Jessup's (1991) 'Model of Education and Training' was to establish a modular, client-centred, competence based system of vocational education. Competence "refers to the standard required successfully to perform an activity or function" (Jessup, 1991, p.25). The NVQ framework was based on five levels of competence in eleven different occupational areas, such as Health, Construction and Engineering (Jessup, 1993, p.44; Macfarlane, 1993, pp.33-6). It is envisaged that this framework will eventually cover all occupations and this policy has been described as "the first time that any nation has attempted to describe effective performance for its entire workforce" (Debling, 1991, p.11). Modularisation would introduce flexibility into these courses and due account would be taken of 'accredited prior learning' (APL). It should also be noted that NVQs do not have to be implemented by educational institutions - they can be used by companies and workplaces as part of their workforce training (for an example of this see Unwin, 1991b).

The setting up of the NCVQ and the nature and development of NVQs have been and still are the subject of much debate in educational circles. In a report published by Smithers (summarised in a Channel 4 Dispatches television programme) NVQs were criticised because they were based on what students could do rather than on what they
knew. It was alleged that NVQs lacked formal syllabuses and that teachers and lecturers had little guidance on what to teach: Britain was 'on the road to a training disaster of epic proportions' (reported in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 17th December, 1993, p.6). Another criticism has been made by Blackman and Evans who have argued that the NCVQ has failed to acknowledge ‘previous good practice’ and that its model of learning is based on a rather crude form of psychological behaviourism (Blackman and Evans, 1994, pp.6-7).

Hyland, in a comprehensive critique of NVQs and associated reforms, argues that the competence-based education and training (CBET) approach, backed by the NCVQ, is "fundamentally flawed, disastrously misguided and entirely inappropriate to our current and future education and training needs" (Hyland, 1994, p.ix). Rather than assist learner centred education, "NVQs severely restrict and circumscribe learning" and Hyland suggests that "The 'autonomous learner' depicted in CBET writings is largely mythical..." (1994, pp.12, 13).

Many of the problems of NVQs stem from the pace with which they were introduced and the additional demands which were imposed upon college tutors. Common criticisms of the NVQ assessment system are that it involves too much paperwork and that it is 'mechanistic, cumbersome and costly' (Hyland, 1994, pp.36, 44). The introduction of NVQs, maintains Hyland, was part of a process of hijacking progressive educational terms by the industrial-training lobby. Words such as 'autonomy', 'competence' and 'standards' are now used as slogans: “A complete competence slogan system is now fully operational in British educational theory and practice” (Hyland, 1994, pp.13, 27, 30). As in postmodernist critiques, competence and autonomy are simply *images* cultivated for the benefit of those who wish education to serve the interests of the economy and employers rather than those of the individual. CBET strategies are in ‘direct conflict’ with the basic tenets of experiential learning and reflective practice (Hyland, 1994, p.92). Hyland concludes that “The employer-led and occupationally specific nature of NVQs makes them unsuitable and inappropriate for the tasks assigned to them of enhancing the status of VET in Britain and upgrading the skills of the workforce” (84).

The ‘National Commission on Education’ in its ‘radical’ report on education and training in the United Kingdom, however, did have some positive things to say about NVQs: they were seen as a ‘stepping-stone for the future’ - “The approach to qualifications developed by NCVQ undoubtedly helps point the way forward” (National Commission on Education, 1993, p.280). However, ultimately they suggest that NVQs should be subsumed under their proposed ‘General Educational Diploma’ and ‘traineeship’ schemes (National Commission on Education, 1993, pp.71-2, 273-287).

As we have seen, the NCVQ has been criticised for its rather limited view of what constitutes ‘competence’ in an NVQ programme. Typically, it has been argued that competences have been too narrowly defined and have been based purely on the interests of employers: they are “a form of domination by employers over the workforce” (Usher
Several writers have also argued that NVQ units are too specific and that we need generally-educated, flexible individuals rather than specifically-trained workers (Gray, 1992, p.68). The definition of ‘skill’ implied in the NCVQ’s notion of ‘competence’ is much too narrow.

A number of recent examples illustrate these criticisms. Ainley provides a very thorough and broad-ranging discussion of the meaning of the term ‘skill’ in Class and Skill: Changing Divisions of Knowledge and Labour (1993). He considers contrasting definitions of skill initially using perspectives from gestalt and behavioural psychology. The former perspective emphasises quality and defines skill in terms of risk and uncertainty: the more uncertainty there is built into a process, the more skill is required to enact it (Ainley, 1993, pp.8-9). The behaviourist perspective in psychology emphasises quantity, describing skills in terms of tasks, operations or competences. This type of definition, based upon the listing of narrowly-defined skills or competences, had an influence on the Manpower Services Commission's development of an ‘occupational skills inventory’ (Ainley, 1993, pp.10-11). This inventory, in turn, has influenced the development of the idea of ‘generic skills’ (or skills grouped together into ‘Occupational Training Families’) which features in the NCVQ’s assessment of ‘competences’.

Ainley also discusses a typology of enskilling, multiskilling, reskilling and deskilling. New technology means that all of these processes can be happening within one occupation and even to one working individual (1993, pp.21-2). He argues that the ‘skills problem’ is usually defined on the basis of narrow employer and government viewpoints expressed as ‘skills shortages’ or ‘skill requirements’ (as, for example, in the MSC view). In fact the skills problem is class-based and constitutes “a need of the majority to use and develop their skills for the full benefit of society” (Ainley, 1993, p.49).

Blackman and Evans in their article ‘Comparative Youth Skills Acquisition in Germany and England: Training as a Process Not an Outcome’ (1993) also trace the origins of the competence-based model of skill formation to the MSC’s New Training Initiative of 1981 and note that its underlying philosophy is still evident in NCVQ communications. The NCVQ’s approach is criticised for its tendencies to break up skills into small components and to define skills in terms of outcomes (Blackman and Evans, 1993, pp.7-8). Analysis of their research on young people in England and Germany leads these writers to comment that the ‘critical flaw’ in the NCVQ’s view has been to put outcomes at the centre of their approach rather than learning processes. “NVQs are not attempting to measure general knowledge or understanding, but only the specific knowledge which is necessary to be competent on the job” (Blackman and Evans, 1993, pp.19-20).

This line of criticism is maintained in Brown et al.’s study Keyworkers: Technical and Training Mastery in the Workplace (1994) which stresses the fluid and ever-changing nature of skills needed for the workplace:
The essential point about the requirements of the future is that, at the level of detailed or specific skills, they are unknown... The pace of industrial and technological change, coupled with major uncertainties, means that key attributes of workers will be more general: a willingness to learn, the ability to work as a member of a team, the ability to transfer existing skills and knowledge to new situations (Brown et al., 1994, p.2).

It is often stated that Britain lacks a ‘training culture’ and that it suffers from a ‘low-skills equilibrium’ which in turn means that a low level of vocational competence is transmitted from one generation to the next (e.g. Finegold and Soskice, 1991, p.215; Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.294). Much more needs to be done to produce a suitably skilled workforce and the emphasis should be on quality and breadth of skills.

It was partly because of this kind of criticism that in 1991 the NCVQ began to develop a number of General NVQs that would “offer a general preparation for employment and higher-level qualifications and... keep open the option of students proceeding to higher education” (Macfarlane, 1993, p.38). Thus by 1994, officially, the purpose of NVQs was to “provide a guarantee to employers that the individual can perform a job in a particular occupation, to the specified level of skill and competence” (DTI, 1994, p.36, para.4.24), whilst, on the other hand, “GNVQs prepare young people for employment in broad occupational areas, while also offering a route to higher education” (DTI, 1994, p.36, para.4.23). The creation of GNVQs was in some ways an attempt to create a vocational ‘track’ for 16-19-year-olds that would have parity of esteem with the academic track represented by A levels. GNVQs also represented an attempt at ‘recontextualizing’ the notion of competence by introducing range statements, generic competences and core skills (Hyland, 1994, pp.23-6, 31).

It is now widely recognised, both officially and unofficially, that we have a three-track FE system. In place of the twin-track vocational/academic routes we now have three routes, with GNVQs in the middle and “A GNVQ/A level duopoly is likely to leave NVQ candidates out in the cold, and might reduce the status of the occupationally specific route to that of the old CPVE or low-grade TVEI programmes...” (Hyland, 1994, pp.103,113). The first GNVQs were implemented in colleges from September 1992 and the student samples featured in the present study were some of the first groups to experience this new type of course - their comments and opinions should provide some very useful indicators of the impact and relevance of these new vocational qualifications.

One question which has clearly preoccupied national policy makers in recent years, associated with the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs, is the issue of whether college vocational courses should be related to specific occupations or whether they should provide a general vocational preparation. Governments of the past few years have apparently not resolved this issue because both types of course seem to have been
implemented at different times. Courses such as BTEC, RSA courses, City and Guilds programmes and NVQs have clearly been related to particular occupations. CPVE and GNVQs, however, have aimed to provide a general level of skills and vocational preparation, supposedly encouraging flexible workers, both within a single occupation and across different employment sectors.

The White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century*, produced by the Department of Education and Science and the Employment Department in 1991, shows awareness of, but does not necessarily resolve, this problem. One chapter of this document outlines the importance of ‘occupationally specific NVQs’, while another acknowledges that “Many young people want to keep their options open... Employers, too, want to have the opportunity of developing their young recruits’ general skills as well as their specific working skills” (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.I, p.18). The views of young people on this kind of issue, particularly on whether they prefer specific occupational training or a more general, broad-based preparation for life, would clearly be of interest to policy makers and others.

An important role of these qualifications - whether they are occupationally specific or more generalised - is their incorporation into national targets. Since 1991, following a recommendation made in the CBI’s 1989 document *Towards a Skills Revolution*, the government has adopted a number of National Targets for Education and Training (NTETs, previously NETTs). In 1996 these included a number of ‘Lifetime Learning Targets’ for the year 2000 (Figure 5.1). These targets were ‘updated’ in line with the requirements of the 1995 White Paper *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* and they represent an important statement of official policy goals.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Figure 5.1 - Lifetime Learning Targets for the Year 2000</th>
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<td><strong>Target 1</strong> - 60% of the workforce to be qualified to NVQ level 3, Advanced GNVQ or two GCE A level standard.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Target 2</strong> - 30% of the workforce to have a vocational, professional, management or academic qualification to NVQ level 4 or above.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Target 3</strong> - 70% of all organisations employing 200 or more employees, and 35% of those employing 50 or more, to be recognised as Investors in People.</td>
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*Source: Labour Market and Skill Trends (DfEE, 1996, p.71, Figure 6.1)*

The Dearing Report - the *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year-Olds* (1996) - places considerable emphasis upon these national targets and also attempts to pull all the qualification systems together into one overarching framework. Dearing proposed the creation of “a coherent national framework, covering all the main qualifications and the
achievements of young people at every level of ability" (Dearing, 1996, p.3, para.1.11). The suggestion was that the three main post-16 pathways: A levels (academic), GNVQs (applied) and NVQs (vocational) should be placed within a national qualifications grid, including national awards, national certificates and national diplomas. Dearing did not advise the abolition of the A level ‘gold standard’, nor did he overtly recommend a baccalaureate-type qualification, partly because of the political constraints imposed upon him (Times Educational Supplement, 29th March, 1996, p.6). The report was, however, explicit in stressing the need for real parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses and qualifications:

At the heart of the review is a recognition of the centrality of applied and vocational education, and the need for both to be accorded the respect and esteem historically given to achievement in academic qualifications (Dearing, 1996, p.74, para.9.27).

One way in which Dearing attempted to encourage this change was to rename GNVQs ‘applied A levels’. He also encouraged changes that would allow transfers between the three different pathways.

One sub-theme of the Dearing Report which is relevant to the research proposed in this study and which did not receive the attention it deserved in the media activity surrounding the publication of the report, was its emphasis on the ‘self-management’ of learning. Dearing, with his encouragement of a ‘portfolio’ of educational output and a proposed relaunch of the National Record of Achievement (1996, p.44, para.6.21), was here continuing the emphasis on the ‘learner led’ model of education which was a supposed part of the ‘competence’ approach (indeed, the Report itself, unusually for an official document, included evidence based on student viewpoints). Student autonomy would be encouraged, said Dearing, by the use of a National Record of Achievement (NRA) folder, to be introduced by the age of 14:

The NRA has another potential role beyond recording achievement. In a society that needs to be committed to life-long learning, a vital competence that should be mastered during the later stages of statutory education is the management of one’s own learning. This includes setting personal objectives, monitoring performance, reviewing work plans in the light of achievement, and reviewing both short-term objectives and long-term aspirations (Dearing, 1996, p.42, para.6.7).

The students featured in this study had not experienced this type of recommendation, but their comments on independence and autonomy should help to tell us something about the implications of the proposed extension of a learner led model of education and training.
Two additional policy changes are also worth mentioning here. Firstly, the introduction in 1994 of ‘Modern Apprenticeships’. This scheme, according to the 1994 White Paper *Competitiveness: Helping Business to Win*, will involve work-based training up to at least NVQ level 3 for 150,000 young people (16 or 17 years old on entry) by the end of the decade (DTI, 1994, p.39, para.4.30). Secondly, there have been developments in the Youth Credits (previously Training Credits) voucher system. The credit is ‘a voucher... put in the hands of young people leaving full-time education at 16 or 17’ which enables them to ‘buy’ their vocational education and training: this scheme is meant to improve young people’s motivation by ‘making obvious to them the scale of investment available’ and to ‘enhance the market in training provision’, i.e. training providers will be paid according to their ability to attract credit-holders (DES/DE, 1991, Vol.I, pp.34-5). Both of these schemes were supported by Dearing (1996, Section 5), though a name change (to ‘National Traineeships’) was proposed for Youth Training. To date little effort has been made to discover the opinions of those 16-17-year-olds who will be directly affected by these schemes.

The research that has been carried out on Youth and Training Credits suggests that there are still a number of problems with these schemes. Unwin conducted an evaluation of the first year of South and East Cheshire TEC’s pilot training credits scheme (locally called Prospects). Her investigations revealed that the individuals on this scheme had a negative view of ‘training’: “It is ironic to discover that the main achievement of some sixteen or so years of government-led youth training schemes has apparently been to embed a negative view of ‘training’ in the minds of young people” (Unwin, 1996, pp.184-5). Those youngsters who did not opt for full-time education found that all the credit would buy them was a ‘re-vamped’ youth training place. In this way, “training credits are serving to expose even further the weaknesses of this country’s VET structure” (Unwin, 1996, p.195). Hodkinson and Hodkinson found that the new credits-based system “is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the ways in which young people make decisions about training” and did not lead to any improvement in training quality (1995, p.10) (see also Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996; MacDonald and Coffield, 1993).

5.4 The Impact of the National Labour Market

Many of the changes and initiatives in vocational education outlined in the previous two sections had the broad aim of improving the relationship between the education system and the world of work. This meant providing a suitably trained and skilled young workforce for business and industry. However, whatever the aims, nature and quality of
developments in vocational education, much depends on the state of national and regional labour markets.

Although the present study focuses on a comparison of two different local labour markets, particularly youth labour markets, the national employment situation provides an important overall context. Employment policies will clearly be at least as important in affecting young people’s job prospects as educational policies. This section outlines some recent developments in national labour market trends to set the scene for the consideration of local contexts which follows. It examines briefly the changing size and structure of Britain’s labour force, patterns of unemployment, and trends in training provision and skills development. All of these tell us something about employment policy as espoused by central government. The next section looks in particular at the national youth labour market.

One difficulty in attempting to outline employment trends arises immediately. This is the reliance upon official statistics on employment and unemployment, usually produced by government departments and related agencies. Labour market researchers, however, are now usually well aware of possible problems and pitfalls associated with such statistics. Changes in conceptual definitions and in the way statistics are collected and presented can have a considerable impact on numerical data. Thus it is important to maintain an awareness of the difficulties associated with official data on employment, training and skill trends. However, such data can be very useful simply because of the scale and frequency of their collection, which few research organisations and individuals can match. They do at least provide one perspective on the prospects for employment and training of today’s 16-19-year-olds, an official portrayal which, if necessary, can be challenged via other perspectives, including the views of young people themselves, as presented later in this study.

In 1993 the workforce in employment (Great Britain) stood at 24.1 million people: this had previously increased year by year until it reached a peak of 26.3 million in 1990 (Employment Department Group (ED), 1993, p.9,-figure 2.1). Projections provided by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick, discussed in the Employment Department’s Labour Market and Skill Trends 1994/95, suggest that the national labour force is likely to experience ‘moderate growth’ to the year 2000: employment is expected to be around 25 million in 1995 and around 26.1 million by the end of the century (ED, 1993, p.9).

If these projections are accurate then young people will be entering a moderately expanding national labour market, but there are a number of complicating factors. Firstly, the nature and quality of the work, as well as the quantity of jobs, available, will change considerably. The numbers of people in part-time employment, home working and self-employment are all expected to increase (ED, 1993, pp.12-14). Changes in technology
and work organisation, as suggested in notions of ‘post-Fordism’ and ‘flexibilisation of the workforce’, mean that new skills and attitudes will be required (Murray, 1991; Phillimore, 1991). Secondly, the composition of the labour supply (particularly the supply of young workers) has been and will be affected by changing demographic trends (both these points are discussed further below).

Patterns of unemployment since the 1980s are well documented. According to official statistics the overall numbers of registered unemployed increased considerably from 1979 to the mid-1980s, reaching a peak of over 3 million in 1986. From 1987 to 1990 the official numbers of unemployed declined to around 1.3 million, but between April 1990 and January 1993 the numbers increased steadily. By September 1992 registered unemployment stood at 2.8 million (ED, 1993, p.11) and by November 1994, when the fieldwork for the present project commenced, officially unemployment stood at 2.4 million. By March 1996 this figure (for ‘claimant unemployment’) had dropped to 2.1 million or 7.9 per cent of the workforce (Labour Market Trends, September 1996, Table 2.2, p.S16).

Labour Market and Skill Trends 1994/1995 points out two important general trends in unemployment up to 1993 relevant to the present study. Firstly, there has been a change in the geographical distribution of unemployment: “There has been an equalisation of unemployment rates across the country and, if anything, a reversal of previous patterns” - this means, for example, that previously hard-hit areas such as Scotland currently have unemployment rates below the national average, whilst London has a rate above the national average (ED, 1993, p.11). Secondly, “The responsiveness of the labour market to changes in the economy has improved considerably”, suggesting that employers’ recruitment (and laying off) activities are now more closely in tune with increases in demand and falls in output (ED, 1993, p.11). These developments may have important implications for the two area labour markets featured in this study.

Patterns of training provided by employers, colleges and government institutions have also seen changes in recent years. These changes in the nature and organisation of training are to some extent a reflection of changes in the quantity and nature of the various types of employment available. The official picture provided in Labour Market and Skill Trends is that ‘Training has held up well in the recession’ (ED, 1993, pp.55-6). On-the-job training is still the most common format: over half of reported training activity takes place on employers’ premises. Within employment young people are more likely than other age groups to receive training. In 1993 24 per cent of all 16-19-year-olds in employment received some training (ED, 1993, p.57). The so-called ‘training infrastructure’ put in place by government and its agencies currently includes the NVQ framework, the ‘Investors in People’ programme and the National Targets for Education and Training, which are overseen by the National Advisory Council for Education and Training.
The challenge for training providers, whether they be FE colleges, employers or other organisations, according to the official viewpoint, is to provide for the ‘skill needs’ of the late 1990s and the early 21st century. One problem here is that ‘skill needs’, as indicated previously, as well as being difficult to predict, can be rather difficult to define and measure. The Labour Market and Skill Trends publication stresses three different sources of skill demand:

* Occupational trends - those changes resulting from the general growth in higher level occupations at the expense of lower level ones.

* Professional skill enhancement - the increasing skill requirements within specific occupations.

* Broadening work demands - general trends in the labour market are leading to a wider range of skill requirements in all jobs (ED, 1993, p.24).

In other words, there is likely to be a continued expansion in the number of jobs requiring specialised, higher level skills; higher levels of skill will be needed within existing occupations; and, finally, there are general trends towards greater skill requirements across the whole workforce. These kinds of definitions of skill have influenced the formulation of post-16 educational curricula and qualifications systems. For example, the requirement for common core skills in GNVQ programmes and in the Dearing proposals, such as competence in the use of information technology, can be seen as an attempt to help to satisfy the need for the broad cross-occupational skill demand mentioned above.

Non-official summaries of the impact of government VET policies would agree with the need for better training and for higher skill requirements, but are rather more critical of the policies already in place. Finegold and Soskice, for example, state that “Britain’s ET [Education and Training] system turns out less-qualified individuals than its major competitors...” and that “...there is a consensus in the growing body of comparative ET research that Britain provides significantly poorer ET for its workforce than its international competitors” (Finegold and Soskice, 1991, pp.215-6).

There is a need to assess how schools and colleges are adapting to these changing skill demands and to find out the degree of young people’s awareness of these developments. For example, it would be useful to discover how confident current students feel about their competence in relation to relevant technical skills (such as the use of computers) and employment-related social skills (such as decision-making and the capacity for team work). Such questions and issues form an important dimension in the aims of this investigation.
5.5 Changes in the Youth Labour Market

The relationship between educational structures and the youth labour market is by no means straightforward. Clearly educational policies will affect skill formation and the level and timing of young people's entry to the labour market, but equally, economic factors have an important role to play in shaping the nature of education and training institutions and processes. On this point Raffe writes of a 'dual perspective', "with education influencing labour-market outcomes at the micro level, but constrained or shaped by the labour market at the macro level" (Raffe, 1988, p.6).

Furthermore, the relationships between the youth labour market, regional (adult) labour markets and the national (adult) labour market are rather complex. There are, for example, divergent opinions on the question of whether the youth labour market (usually defined in terms of numbers of 16 to 19 or 16 to 21-year-olds available for or in employment) operates to some extent independently of the national labour market, or whether it is a reflection of national, adult employment patterns.

Most commentators agree that in the 1980s the youth labour market 'collapsed'. Statistics on this, however, are difficult to analyse because of the complications caused by (1) the introduction of training schemes which removed some young people from the unemployment register; (2) changes in the way in which unemployment statistics have been collected; and (3) the way in which age categories are broken down in the statistics for unemployment. Officially, claimant unemployment for the 18-24 age group stood at 764,000 in July 1994, declining to 654,000 in July 1995 and 579,000 by July 1996 (Labour Market Trends, September 1996, Table 2.5, p.S23). In April 1996 there were 152,200 unemployed 18-19-year-olds and 406,100 unemployed 20-24-year-olds. This compares with figures of 528,900 for 30-39-year-olds and 339,400 for 50-59-year-olds (Labour Market Trends, September 1996, Table 2.7, p.S26). In other words, with more than 25 per cent of the unemployed in the 18-24 age group, school and college leavers are still finding it very hard to find employment.

What is clear from official and other sources is that the numbers of young people available for employment in Britain have declined in recent years. The number of 16 and 17-year-old entrants to the labour market fell from 563,000 in 1987 to 276,000 in 1992 and this decline is likely to continue (ED, 1993, p.47). This decline has been due to a combination of factors including: (1) a decrease in the overall numbers of 16 and 17-year-olds (a demographic trend); and (2) an increase in the number of 16-year-olds electing to stay on in education in some form (an educational/social trend with a whole range of possible causal factors). The youngsters featured in the present research are, of course, in further education colleges, and their reasons for staying in education, rather than entering work at 16, will be explored as fully as possible.
Although the number of 16-year-olds directly entering the labour market has declined the continued presence of this group has important theoretical and policy implications. The general increase in ‘staying on’ rates and the expansion of ‘opportunities’ in further education are usually viewed positively. The development of a more skilled, better qualified workforce via training and the education system is seen as beneficial to both individuals and to the economy. However, a form of ‘qualifications inflation’ (Raffe, 1988, p.44) may be developing which could have negative implications for those who choose to (or have to) leave school at 16 and who are consequently less well qualified. The work that these teenagers move into may involve routine jobs with low levels of qualification, training and job satisfaction. Such occupations usually have low financial rewards, poor conditions and very limited career prospects. The ‘better’ jobs may increasingly be reserved for better qualified college leavers aged 18 years or more. Hence some writers have suggested the possibility of ‘polarisation’ or ‘marginalisation’ in the youth labour market (E.g. Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.xvii). Whilst the ‘new vocationalism’, including NVQs and GNVQs, may produce better qualified and better trained young workers it may not be much help to those who leave education at 16 years of age. As well as planning for the needs of 16-19-year-olds in further and higher education, policy makers, educators and trainers need to consider whether they are doing enough for direct entrants to the workforce.

In the 1970s and 1980s it was clear that in terms of ‘staying on rates’, i.e. the proportions of 16, 17 and 18-year-olds remaining in education, Britain lagged behind its major industrial competitors. There are variations in the ways in which this type of statistic is measured and presented, but two examples will illustrate the point.

(1) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development produces comparative statistics for its 24 member countries. Figures for full-time enrolments from public and private secondary schools show that:

British figures are worrying. In 1991, at 16-plus only 62.4 per cent of the age group was still in education - the lowest proportion of any nation apart from Turkey (38.7 per cent). Even Portugal, which has shockingly low participation rates at 14 and 15, has more children still in school at 16 (quoted in Times Educational Supplement, 10th December, 1993, p.12).

(2) Byrner has compared the percentage of 17 and 18-year-olds participating in education in the period 1982 to 1991 in England, France and Germany (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2). Thus Britain lagged considerably behind both France and Germany in 1981 and 1991 in terms of post-16 education participation rates. Although there was an improvement in this decade this did not to any extent match the improvements that occurred in France and
Germany.

Table 5.1 - 17-year-olds’ Participation in Full and Part-time Education (Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bynner, 1994, p.6 and Table 1

Table 5.2 - 18-year-olds’ Participation in Full and Part-time Education (Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bynner, 1994, p.6 and Table 1

More recent government-produced statistics, however, present a slightly more optimistic scenario:

The pattern of post-16 transition has changed dramatically over the past five years. In 1987/88, less than 47% of 16 year olds in Britain continued in full-time education. By 1991/92 this had risen to 64%, and provisional figures suggest a further rise to 69% for 1992/93 (ED, 1993, p.47).

So despite a poor starting base, staying on rates do seem to be improving and the further education sector in particular has expanded considerably since 1988. The reasons for increased educational participation post-16 are varied and complex but may include:

- increased youth unemployment
- rising attainment levels following the introduction of GCSEs
- financial pressures on colleges to attract students
- increased take up of educational provision by particular groups, e.g. females, ethnic minorities
a change in cultural attitudes among young people, challenging the traditional view of early entrance to the labour market as a way of gaining adult status
the possible attraction of new types of qualifications and courses such as NVQs and GNVQs

Even with these improvements in post-16 participation rates in education there is no room for complacency on the part of policy-makers and educators. Steedman and Green (1996, p.1) note that in the UK participation rates are still low by comparison with countries like Japan, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, France and the USA, where in every case over 90 per cent of 16-year-olds are enrolled in full-time education. In very recent years a "slowing or possible halting of growth" has been detected and "It would appear... that participation in education and training amongst 16 year olds has now reached a threshold which will be difficult to pass" (Steedman and Green, 1996, pp.8, 22).

Nevertheless, overall the proportion of 16-19-year-olds in full-time education has increased considerably and in terms of the labour market, this kind of development has two major implications: firstly, in theory, increased staying on rates should mean a better qualified, more skilled, pool of potential workers aged 18-plus. Secondly, as indicated previously, more young people staying on means less young people (usually unskilled and with a low level of qualifications) going directly into employment from school. There is an overall trend towards later entry into the labour market, a trend which is likely to continue into the next decade (ED, 1993, p.47).

5.6 Summary

It is difficult to discern clear patterns in the various complex packages of educational and employment changes described above, hence Blackman and Evans's description of a UK training tradition of 'adhocery' (1994, pp.1-4). Finegold and Soskice have described these changes (up to 1991) as an 'uncoordinated series of reforms' which are 'incoherent' and 'scattershot' (1991, pp.233-4). Keep and Mayhew suggest that a major reason for poor VET performance "is Britain's inability to evolve and maintain a coherent national VET system" - they continue, "The result of this ad hoc style of reform has been the promotion of a jumble of uncoordinated, overlapping schemes sponsored by rival bodies" (Keep and Mayhew, 1991, pp.204, 209). There can be no doubt that for many years the lack of a coherent system of VET caused difficulties for employers, students and colleges. This is in contrast with other national VET systems. Steedman, for example, compared qualification systems in Britain and France in the 1980s and concluded that "It seems clear to us that great benefits derive both to employers and young people from the clarity and coherence of the 16-19 framework for qualifications in France..." (Steedman, 1991,
This situation of complexity, and sometimes confusion, partly arose because there have been several political and policy influences on strategies for VET, even from within particular governments.

If there has been any pattern over the past ten to fifteen years it probably stems from the increasing influence (or imposition) of the 'market' and 'competitiveness' on post-compulsory education. This has been an important part of policy as espoused. For example, the 1994 White Paper argued that ‘Competitiveness is the key to our future prosperity’:

> Our living standards and quality of life are not entitlements; they depend ultimately on the ability of firms throughout the economy to create jobs, improve productivity and to win business in home and overseas markets. Success has to be earned through improved competitiveness (DTI, 1994, p.8, para.1.20).

This increased influence of the market, along with the drive towards competitiveness, has been developed in two ways. Firstly, behind the changes was a desire to ‘improve’ the relationship between education and the labour market, i.e. the hope was to enable colleges and schools to produce a suitably skilled workforce for employers. But by suggesting that ‘skills’ are lacking the government is placing the blame on young people themselves. Whether these (official) aims have been fulfilled and even whether they were the genuine and original aims of government are matters for debate. It has been argued, for example, that YTS was used simply to keep unemployment figures down and to provide a kind of ‘warehousing’ function for young people about to enter the world of employment (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, pp.49-50).

Secondly, there have been attempts to subject educational institutions and services to the influence of the market, i.e. to encourage the marketability (and therefore the ‘effectiveness’, ‘competitiveness’ and ‘efficiency’) of educational provision. This can be seen in the development of grant-maintained schools, corporate status for colleges, demand-led funding, the provision of training credits and a number of other reforms. Schools and colleges will have to ‘sell’ their courses and recruit ‘customers’ in a competitive environment:

Since 1979 the Government has introduced a series of major reforms to boost the outputs from our education and training system. Schools and colleges have been galvanised by a new emphasis on choice, quality and sharp accountability for results (DTI, 1994, pp.30-1, para.4.6).

One writer, in the context of higher education, has called this process the ‘commodification of academic relations’ (Schuller, 1992, pp.33-4).
Again, whether this has actually happened or not, and whether these were the original aims of government, are matters of debate. Whilst local authority control over FE may have been weakened there are several respects in which central government’s influence has been strengthened (via various official bodies). Gleeson claims that:

... under the aegis of enlightened reform... the Conservative government, via the MSC and more recently NCVQ, has established direct control over non-advanced FE and training and achieved a tighter grip over both the transition and transmission points between school and work (Gleeson, 1989, p.23).

We need to ask here ‘who actually benefits from these changes?’ Educational policies have important socio-political aspects and this would not be the first time that education has been used as an instrument to serve the needs of employers. The vocational-industry side of education has been emphasised in these reforms at the expense of liberal/humanitarian aspects. Young people’s educational experiences may well have been restricted because of the ‘needs’ of government to reduce the unemployment statistics, to shift the blame for a ‘skills shortage’, and to service the ‘needs’ of employers and businesses.

This situation of competition in FE services and institutions brings us back to the question of how much the young people in these colleges feel in control of their own career destinies. Given the scope and quantity of structural change, to what extent will these students see themselves as individual agents of change and influence? Much of this discussion of recent developments in vocational FE may need to be reconsidered in the light of what young people themselves think and feel about these changes.
Part III - Policy as Enacted

Part II looked at policy as espoused by government and other official organisations. These were policies expressed at a national level through national initiatives such as TVEI and the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs. However, the implementation or enactment of these policies varies according to local circumstances:

...close attention must be given to the ways in which nationwide initiatives articulate with local conditions. National ‘blueprints’ rarely simply reproduce themselves at the local level. Rather, they become mediated through local cultures and local contexts (Coles and MacDonald, 1990, p.30).

This part examines the local cultures of the two boroughs featured in this study. Chapter 6 sets out the main dimensions of the local contexts, including the characteristics of the local economies and the settings of the two colleges. It also outlines the characteristics of the student samples used in the study, providing details of the sex, age and ethnic composition of the samples. The aim is to set out details of some of the local ‘structures’ so that assessments can be made of how these will affect the students featured in the sample and how their job aspirations and educational ambitions may be assisted or constrained by local conditions.

Chapter Six - Local Structures: Further Education Colleges and the Local Economy

6.1 Introduction: The Importance of Area Studies

This chapter outlines the characteristics of the local social and economic infrastructures of each of the two research sites - Westdown and Eastborough. It also provides details of the local educational contexts and includes descriptive accounts of the two colleges and their institutional settings. As suggested previously, these two locations were chosen as examples of contrasting labour markets.

In Section 1.5 (p.17) it was indicated that ‘labour market’ will be defined here, following previous definitions, as the ‘travel-to-work’ area (e.g Garner et al., 1985, p.142). It is accepted that this type of definition is by no means clear-cut, especially in the context of large towns or cities, and that there may be other important influences apart from geographical area, such as social class, ethnicity and gender. All of these are structures which may impinge upon any sense of agency which the young people in these localities may feel that they possess. The relative impact of the local labour market, along with the perceived influence of these other social and economic characteristics, will hopefully be indicated in the respondents’ comments reported in the data analysis.
This ‘area studies’ approach was partially inspired by a number of previous studies of geographically-defined youth labour markets. These have included the *Careers and Identities* study (Banks et al., 1992) and the Anglo-German Studies (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991; Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994) discussed in Sections 1.6 and 1.7, along with the work of Raffe and his associates (Raffe (Ed.), 1988) based on the ‘Scottish School Leavers’ Survey’ and of Ashton et al. (1990).

The Scottish study mentioned above involved at least 100,000 young people, predominantly from the cities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Garner, Main and Raffe compared the post-school destinations of school leavers in these four cities and noted that each city did tend to function as a single labour market. These writers suggested that “Geography does matter”, but also stressed that “many inequalities affecting young people’s transition from school and their progress within the labour market cannot be expressed in spatial terms” (Garner et al., 1988, p.133).

The *Careers and Identities* study was based on four British locations: Swindon, Kirkcaldy, Liverpool and Sheffield (see also Section 1.6, p.19). The authors of this report noted that national surveys “give the best overall picture of the destinations of school leavers” (Banks et al., 1992, p.18) but also stressed the need for area studies to bring out the importance of local context: “Young people relate to particular schools, training establishments and jobs within a particular locality... Young people are socialised by a particular set of local agencies in relation to a particular set of local opportunities” (1992, p.19).

The authors of the Anglo-German Studies also used an ‘area studies’ approach, but with an international dimension (see Section 1.7, p.21). The two English localities of Swindon and Liverpool were matched with Paderborn and Bremen respectively. These towns were twinned initially “on the basis of their contracting or expanding labour markets” (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, p.xv). The second of these studies indicated that the local labour market did have an impact on young people’s career aspirations and outcomes and even on their social identities:

The influence of place emerged in two main ways in our interviews; first, as an identification with a particular area, whether this was seen in a positive or a negative light; second, the influence of local labour markets. Some of our respondents viewed their local area, with its associated social life, as an important element in their lives (Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.162).

With reference to the English labour markets, the authors comment that flexibility does seem to depend on local labour market conditions (1994, p.162). In depressed labour markets such as Liverpool, young people often drop out of the education system at the earliest possible stage and their career options, and consequent ‘transition behaviours’ are severely limited. In ‘expanding’ labour markets, such as Swindon, however, “we find more
examples of flexible career patterns" (1994, p.163). This kind of finding has influenced the choice of two contrasting boroughs as the settings for the present research on youth transitions via further education. The following sections outline the main characteristics of the two boroughs and the colleges that serve these localities. The statistics provided - unless otherwise stated - relate to 1994, the year when the fieldwork commenced at these two sites.

6.2 The Boroughs

One of the problems with the research presented here is that, because of the absence of any significant longitudinal element, we do not know for certain what the employment outcomes will be for the young people involved. They will be able to tell us something of their aspirations and desires in the questionnaires and interviews, but usually they cannot predict with any certainty what their actual employment or educational destinies will be and what type of 'career trajectory' they will follow. However, it is possible to build up a general picture of local circumstances using information produced by local organisations such as the TECs, the employment service and the careers office. This section introduces the two local economies and outlines their major characteristics including reference to employment possibilities for young people, thus providing some indication of the possible impact of local economic structures.

6.2.1 Westdown

Westdown is used both as the name of a town and as the name of the borough containing that town. There is a large overlap since the town accounts for about 85 per cent of the borough's population. The locality was chosen as an example of an expanding town with a relatively buoyant labour market, though there were some indications that the area had not escaped the effects of the recession. There were certain features of this local economy and labour market which made it particularly attractive to a young labour force and appropriate for a study of this kind.

The special characteristics of Westdown include its location in relation to the south-east (as well as the south-west) economic infrastructure and its position within the 'M4 corridor'. Although some way west of London, Westdown is very much influenced by the prosperous south-east region. There are several towns along the M4 corridor, between West London and Bristol, which, like Westdown, have a reputation of expansion, prosperity, high technology-based industries and services and positive employment opportunities based upon a flexible local labour market. With its mainly expanding (post-war) economy and population and its 'buoyant' and changing labour market, Westdown provides a very appropriate setting for the study of young people's vocational strategies.
and aspirations. If there is a good range of opportunities in Westdown, and towns like it, then the young people should have higher levels of optimism and increased feelings of control and autonomy than their counterparts in more depressed labour markets. To put this another way: if young people are found to experience career difficulties and a lack of control over their vocational pathways in Westdown, then it seems likely that this age group will also experience difficulties, perhaps more severe difficulties, in other parts of the country, particularly in urbanised, inner-city areas such as East London.

In terms of population size, Westdown grew rapidly in the 1980s and early 1990s, with an average population increase of 2,000 people per annum. In 1991 the total borough population was just under 175,000, an increase of 13 per cent on the 1981 figure (Westdown Trends, 1994, pp.5-7). Approximately half of this growth was due to net inward migration, much of this stimulated by continued local growth in employment opportunities, which has in particular attracted younger age groups to the area. The area does not have the same ‘ethnic mix’ as other major British towns and cities: the non-white ethnic minority population in 1991 stood at around 5,000, or just over 3 per cent of the total borough population. In the mid-1990s population growth continues at a rate considerably above both the regional and the national average (Westdown Trends, 1994, pp.11-14).

Owner occupation in the borough now accounts for 73 per cent of all tenures (Westdown Trends, 1994, p.17). Housing and employment patterns mean that young people (in the age group 20-24) in Westdown had a much higher propensity to form a household than in other parts of the country - some 27 per cent of individuals in this age group had ‘head of household’ status in 1991 (Westdown Trends, 1994, p.21). The taking on of ‘adult status’, measured in this way, occurs sooner in Westdown than it does in other parts of the country.

Walking through the centre of Westdown one could easily gain the impression of a ‘modern’ town centre, with a ‘modern’ shopping centre, beginning to become dated and slightly untidy at the edges. It seems that 1960s and early 1970s optimism, confidence and expansion have been replaced by 1990s realism, uncertainty and diversity. It was not surprising that during the period of research in this town the local newspaper gave details of the borough council’s intention to revamp and completely redevelop the town centre: in 1994 an announcement was made by the council that it would be spending half a million pounds on environmental improvements in the centre of the town.

In terms of appearances, though, much depends upon where you are in Westdown. The town has a very rural hinterland and visits to the suburbs and outskirts suggest that a kind of de-urbanisation process has taken place. The inner, older part of the town can seem somewhat run down but, close by, the outskirts are characterised by new housing developments, modern office blocks, leisure centres and business parks with high-tech ‘designer’ architecture. It becomes evident that Westdown is still expanding in several respects, but it is also adapting and diversifying. The town, while in many respects an
economic 'success', contains a number of social and economic contradictions and complexities. However, the young people of Westdown still, on the face of it, have good reason to be optimistic about their job prospects and the relative degree of control that they have over career choices.

In 1994, the year when the main fieldwork began in Westdown, both the service and the manufacturing employment sectors in the locality experienced growth (Westdown Economic Review, 1994, p.1). Between September 1993 and September 1994 the number of people claiming unemployment benefit in Westdown fell by over 1,000 to a total of just under 6,000, thereby bringing the unemployment rate down from 7.5 per cent to 6.3 per cent. The rate of 6.3 per cent was well below the national average at this time (10.5 per cent in September 1993 and 9.0 per cent in September 1994) and below the average for the south-west region (8.1 per cent in September 1994) (Westdown Economic Review, 1994, pp.15, 20). It should be noted, however, that rates of unemployment in the different wards of the town vary considerably, from 2.7 per cent to 14.1 per cent (p.20).

On the basis of a survey of local companies, the authors of the Westdown Economic Review 1994 report that "The generally buoyant picture of investment and employment growth during the year confirms the underlying strength and diversity of the local economy" (p.5). In September 1994 43 per cent of firms stated that their general business situation had improved in the past 12 months (p.7). The number of people in employment in the borough rose by around 3,000 between September 1993 and September 1994, taking the total workforce to over 90,000 individuals (p.11). This labour force includes 17,000 people commuting into the borough to their workplace and approximately 10,000 workers commute outwards each day (Westdown Trends, 1994, p.36).

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that local analysts are optimistic about economic trends in Westdown for the remainder of the century: "the changes are encouraging in that they are helping to maintain a well balanced and mixed local economy and thereby strengthening it against possible adverse economic conditions" (Westdown Economic Review, 1994, p.27). Another local report states that:

Although the recession continues to have a serious impact on the local economy the Borough has nevertheless maintained a relatively strong economic position when viewed in a regional or national context. Although this relative advantage did fall away to some extent during the early 90s there are new signs that the Borough may be regaining that advantage as it hopefully begins to resume steady economic growth (Westdown Trends, 1994, p.29).

These optimistic comments were supported by a manager at the local Training and Enterprise Council who, in an informal interview, summarised the local economic situation as follows: "The local economy is still reasonably buoyant. Westdown is coming out of the recession quicker than other towns".
By the 1990s, then, although the young people of Westdown could still expect to find employment upon leaving school or college, they also needed to be adaptable in line with the new requirements of employers. To an extent increased uncertainty had crept into young people's lives in terms of changed employment options. Expansion and growth were continuing but were no longer guaranteed. As in a number of towns in this area, predominantly male industrial cultures were being replaced by diverse, flexible, multi-stranded work cultures (Bassett et al., 1990, pp.216-8). The development of a new 'service class' was accompanied by an expansion in female employment and more part-time work. The school and college leavers of Westdown still have a number of economic opportunities available to them, but in some cases they have had to lower their aspirations and have had to be prepared to be flexible.

6.2.2 Eastborough

Though there are some similarities, Eastborough is very different from Westdown. The most obvious difference is in physical/regional location. Westdown is a clearly identifiable town within a predominantly agricultural county: Eastborough, on the other hand, has a much more urban location, placed as it is in the heart of East London. Westdown is therefore much more easily identifiable as a travel-to-work area, with Eastborough's residents generally travelling much further afield to their places of employment. It is virtually impossible to separate the economic characteristic of Eastborough from those of East London. Consequently some of the following details are based on the 'London East' area (the six boroughs covered by the London East Training and Enterprise Council) though borough-based statistics will also be provided.

Like other parts of East London, this area has a history of multi-racial settlement. 1991 Census data reveal that 71 per cent of people in the borough classified themselves as 'white' while over 21 per cent indicated that they belonged to other ethnic groups. The largest ethnic group was Indian, constituting over 10 per cent of the population. There is also a long established Jewish community which has been estimated at 20,000 or nearly 9 per cent of the population (Eastborough Community Care Plan, 1993/4, p.56). Many of the questionnaire respondents were 'second generation' immigrants, i.e. born and bred in Britain but also taking on significant aspects of their culture of origin, including non-English languages and religious beliefs. The local economy reflected this cultural diversity:

East London is a fascinating area full of contrasts - from the leafy suburbs of Upminster and Emerson Park to the deprived areas of Spitalfields and Brick Lane. It contains the futuristic Docklands development as well as historic Epping Forest and the Tower of London. There are Green Belt areas, major industrial sites like the Ford factory at Dagenham, and a growing incursion of major financial and service industry businesses from the City of London (LETEC, 1993b, p.3).
East London is indeed an area of contrasts and Eastborough is in a way a microcosm of this half of our capital city. It is a ‘fairly typical’ East London borough if such a thing is possible. At the time of the research it had a resident population of just under a quarter of a million people. Like other urban boroughs it had been losing population (at a rate of about 2 per cent per annum) though the population was expected to stabilise between 1991 and 2001. Some 38 per cent of the borough’s population were of non-working age (Eastborough Community Care Plan, 1993/4, pp.13-14). The borough is largely residential in nature: nearly four-fifths of households were owner-occupied and the proportion of local authority householders had fallen due to the ‘right to buy’ council housing policy (Eastborough Community Care Plan, 1993/4, p.55).

Eastborough has strong economic links with Central London, with the local economy being highly inter-dependent with that of Greater London and the south-east region. There are good rail and tube links to Central London and to the West End and a nearby motorway link with the M25. In 1994 Eastborough had the highest proportion of any London borough of residents working outside the borough boundaries. This makes it less self-sufficient than other London boroughs and more dependent upon the City and the West End. One spin-off from this is that school and college leavers can have high aspirations linked with ‘glamorous’ jobs in the City, such as high finance, advertising, sport and the music industry. Commuting has become a tradition so that many young people expect to work outside Eastborough and many positively want to do so (LETEC, 1993b, p.22).

Eastborough itself had a working population of around 110,000 - though it must be reiterated that many residents commuted to Central London and beyond to work. The industrial structure of East London, like many other parts of Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, had become more services orientated. Of the 110,000 workforce about 10 per cent worked in manufacturing and 84 per cent in services of one kind or another. This particular part of London seemed to attract small firms rather than large companies, with 91 per cent of firms having under 25 employees (LETEC, 1993a, pp.56, 60).

There are few industrial estates in the borough and those that do exist are relatively small. There are a few small manufacturing firms, including two engineering firms. Some national companies have administrative centres and distribution depots in the borough. The biggest employers are the Borough Council and the local Health Trust. British Telecom and North Thames Gas have offices in the area and there is also a British Rail depot. There are a number of supermarkets and chain stores and one major department store, in the new shopping centre on the High Street, opened in 1991. This new shopping area has given a ‘new focus’ to Eastborough, though many of the jobs created were part-time (LETEC, 1993b, pp.22-3).

By 1994, however, like other parts of East London, Eastborough was feeling the effects of recession. There was a declining labour market and this may have affected young people particularly badly. (When one of the tutors was told that this was a study of the
labour market in Eastborough, he responded with the comment "That's easy, there isn't one!"). It was hoped that indirect links with Docklands and the planned developments in the East Thames Corridor would lead to new economic opportunities, but unemployment increased steadily in the early 1990s. In September 1991 the official unemployment rate stood at 7.9 per cent, by September 1992 this had increased to 10.1 per cent and by September 1993 the figure was 11.0 per cent (Eastborough Careers Office, Information Pack, 1994). This compared with a national unemployment rate of 10.5 per cent and a Greater London rate of 13.4 per cent. Unemployment rates for the area covered by the London East Training and Enterprise Council increased from 11.9 per cent in 1991 to 14.2 per cent in 1992 and 15.2 per cent in 1993 (LETEC, 1993a, p.55). There were significant variations in unemployment rates across the borough, with some wards experiencing rates as low as 6 per cent and others suffering an 18 per cent rate. Long term unemployment was becoming a problem - about a third of those unemployed in Eastborough had been out of work for a year or more.

Where there were vacancies, according to the local Careers Centre Information Officer, these were not in areas such as banking and insurance, but were more likely to be in occupations such as hairdressing, travel agencies and the building industry. Good office jobs were relatively scarce in 1994, though there were some 'office junior' positions.

The local economic climate was continuing to cause concern at the time of the fieldwork. The London Chamber of Commerce reported that:

> The prolonging of the recession has meant that London continues to suffer more than the rest of the UK. Falling home prices, above average rises in unemployment and slower earnings growth act to constrain customer spending activity in London (reported in LETEC, 1993b, p.40).

Given these problems, the Borough's Careers Centre Information Officer was asked what was being done to help school and college leavers in the area. She stressed that over 95 per cent of school leavers and 75 per cent of college leavers were seen individually by the Careers Office. Vacancies were noted and assistance was given to the youngsters to draw up 'action plans'. This Careers Centre Officer acknowledged that 'things were getting difficult' and that sometimes sexism and racism operated in the local labour market. She was asked if the young job-seekers she met seemed to feel in control of their occupational destinies and replied "Individuals can make a difference - but there are also structures. If you are bright you can overcome the difficulties. But race, sex, class and family background all matter".

Young people in Eastborough have good transport facilities available and are close to the relatively huge labour market of Greater London, but by 1994 they were facing increasing unemployment rates, a decline in the range of vocational opportunities open to them and a number of other problems. These economic difficulties may well dampen down
the job ambitions of many young people, whatever their initial levels of optimism and self-confidence.

6.3 The Colleges

As suggested in Chapter 5, further education, at the time of this research, was undergoing enormous change. Changes were occurring in the organisation of FE, in methods of funding, in employment contracts, in types of course offered and in methods and content of teaching. This ethos of change was present in both institutions studied, however the colleges and their staffs were not simply passive receptors of government demands: "Colleges do not have to view themselves as powerless victims of inexorable external forces which are trying to change them against their will. Action at the individual college level can help shape the national scene" (Cook and Crook, 1991, p.168). Policies initiated at the national level by government and other bodies "are modified by factors in the local context and are implemented in ways which are acceptable to individual organizations" (Raggatt and Unwin, 1991, p.xv). Thus whilst policy as espoused is crucially important, it can in some circumstances be shaped and affected by policy as enacted at the institutional level.

The two colleges featured here had a number of similarities. They were both FE (as opposed to 'tertiary' or 'technical' colleges), they both served large numbers of students, both had something of an emphasis on vocational courses and both were in the process of bringing new types of courses, such as GNVQs, on stream. There were, however, some important differences between these two institutions, as the following summaries show.

6.3.1 Westdown College

Westdown College has been in existence for over 100 years and is one of the country's largest Colleges of Further Education. In 1994 it had over 2,000 full-time students and over 20,000 part-time students, including those taking evening classes. The college operates on two sites: one near the centre of the town and another about half a mile away. Both sites have good access to transport connections. The college has expanded considerably throughout the century and the buildings are a mixture of old and new. The mission statement stresses that the college aims "to provide a comprehensive programme of high quality education and training services to the communities which we serve" (College Charter, 1994/95).

The college exists in a fairly competitive local educational environment, though it has the advantage of a well-established tradition of providing for post-16 educational needs in the town. Indeed it seems likely that in the near future it will expand into higher education, whilst at the same time developing its further education provision. Some of the
local schools have sixth forms and there is also a sixth form college in the town, though this latter seems to serve mainly 'academic' students. Westdown College attracts students from the town itself, from the rural hinterland and villages beyond, and even from neighbouring counties. In the past schools in the area have not had particularly good 'staying on' rates (at 16) mainly because there were reasonably good employment opportunities for the school leaver and the local culture amongst young people positively encouraged going to work and taking home a pay packet as a means of acquiring adult status.

The courses on offer include a range of GCSEs and A levels, along with NVQs, newly developed GNVQs and a number of 'Access' courses. Many of these can be taken full-time during the day or part-time in evening classes. The college has "a well deserved international reputation in Engineering Technology" and "an international reputation in Art and Design" (College Information Sheet, 1993). It also claims an 'enviable' national standing in a range of other subjects including Community Care, Beauty Therapy, Catering, Leisure and Recreation and Construction.

The college curriculum has a vocational emphasis and the institution has something of a history of vocational training and preparation. It educates and trains employees for over 2,000 companies and organisations each year. "As the main provider of vocational and professional training Westdown College has established particularly strong links with industry" (College Information Sheet, 1993). The college has a team of employer liaison specialists led by a Business Development Manager: "Programmes have been designed in conjunction with local employers to ensure that students are fully equipped to meet the needs of their chosen career, and the needs of the new technological era" (College Information Leaflet, 1994). The college offers a 'consultancy' service to companies and expresses a willingness to 'customise' training programmes and to deliver these at venues convenient to employers.

The management team consists of a Principal, Vice-Principal and eight 'Faculty Directors', each faculty having three or four 'divisions' or subject areas. There are separate Directorates for Student Services and Marketing and Business Development. The college is an accredited 'Investor in People' and has an Equal Opportunities policy.

There is a strong pastoral and welfare system to support students. Each student has a personal tutor and a 'learning programme'. This is a planned programme of learning to meet student needs 'for personal development, employment or further study' (College Charter 1994/95). A 'Learning Agreement' is signed by both the student and the personal tutor. Provision for students includes a programme of recreational, cultural and welfare activities, a bookshop, a comprehensive welfare and counselling service (with five trained counsellors), careers guidance, support for speakers of languages other than English and a range of childcare facilities.

In terms of resources and physical facilities the college provides everything you would expect for an institution of this size. There are numerous workshops, laboratories,
computer suites, studios and a training restaurant. Each college site has a refectory and a library/study area. There is also a new Management Centre which is used for conferences and external events, as well as for college purposes.

In terms of careers guidance, students are promised access to 'confidential, unbiased advice' throughout their studies:

Careers guidance is provided by experienced staff in all departments. The college also enjoys the services of Careers Advisers provided by the [County] Careers and Guidance Service who are available to see students on college premises. All students complete a survey form to identify the careers advice they have already received; and what further guidance they need. Personal interviews can be arranged through a simple appointment system... (College Information Leaflet, 1994).

The county careers advisers are actually located in one of the college buildings, though they are not officially part of the college set up. Students have easy access to careers advice, but they have to be pro-active in seeking information from the careers personnel.

In some respects Westdown College dominates the town. Its buildings are located in prominent positions and large numbers of young people and adults have some experience of or connection with the college. As the main college in quite a considerable geographical area it was understandably looking to expand its student numbers in a variety of ways, including more 'basic skills' training and a further expansion in access and adult education courses. In many respects the college is a reflection of the 'buoyant' and expanding town in which it is located.

6.3.2 Eastborough College

Eastborough College opened in the late 1960s and is located on a green field site in the heart of an East London borough. The main two-storey building accommodates most of the classrooms, but there are a number of additional buildings, including a sports hall and five 'huts' for overflow classes. There are plans to extend the main building as student numbers increase. At the time of the research the college had over 1,000 full-time students and 5,000 part-time students, including those who attended evening classes. There were approximately 100 full-time and 150 part-time teaching staff. The aim of the college, according to its mission statement is "to serve the local community by promoting the intellectual and personal development of young people and adults" (College Recruitment Pack, 1993).

The college exists in a very competitive environment. While most of the surrounding boroughs have 11-16 systems of secondary education, Eastborough has mainly 11-18 schools (including two grammar schools) and the college is competing directly with local school sixth forms as well as with other colleges in East London. There was sometimes
a 'problem of access' to 16-year-olds in some parts of the borough, but on the whole the college was managing to maintain and improve its popularity in terms of student numbers and there were plans for expansion.

East London as a whole has traditionally had a relatively low proportion of 16-year-olds continuing in education at school or college. This was due to a number of factors including the following:

* the existence of a traditional working class community in many areas
* the tendency of city firms to recruit 16-year-olds
* the lack of a 'higher education culture'
* the number of poor families
* the supply of reasonably well-paid jobs (LETEC, 1993b, p.35).

From the late 1980s, however (later than in other parts of the country), there has been a trend towards staying on at 16 and at 18 years of age. This was due to the effects of the recession, increasing youth unemployment, the removal of the entitlement to unemployment benefit of people under 18, and a number of other factors. Consequently the ‘staying on’ rate (of 16-year-olds) in Eastborough by 1993 had reached 78 per cent from around 40 per cent in 1985. In 1991 only 7 per cent of 16-year-olds went directly into employment and 8 per cent went straight into unemployment (LETEC, 1993b, pp.36-9). This trend of increased staying on seems likely to continue into the late 1990s.

At the time of the research Eastborough College, with an annual budget of around £6m, offered GCSEs and A levels in a large range of subjects, NVQs (at all three levels), and, from September 1993, GNVQ courses, initially in Business and Leisure and Tourism. It also offered six ‘Access’ courses (with ‘distance learning’ packs), a number of BTEC courses and a diverse range of part-time, recreational and sporting activities. A College Factsheet (1993) listed the main college specialisms as adult and continuing education, GCSEs and A levels, supportive education, English as a Foreign Language, Catering, Electronics, Computing, Caring, Hair and Beauty, Languages, Business Studies, Construction and Fashion. Units of curriculum provision are grouped into programme areas, each led by a team leader.

From this list of specialisms it can be seen that the college has something of an emphasis on vocational courses, although a range of academic options were available too, including A levels in 15 subjects. “The majority of the work of the college is directed towards work related vocational provision... Training in marketable skills is provided for those seeking employment” (College Plan 1993-96, p.3). The requirements of local industry have been catered for through the delivery of tailor made courses and by the provision of day-release modules. There are also plans to develop further provision for the unemployed.

An important characteristic of Eastborough College is its position as 'a regional centre of excellence' for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (College Factsheet, 1993). The college has made a special feature of ‘helping those whose education has
fallen behind schedule as a result of illness or disability. We can provide help for those whose sight, hearing or mobility is impaired and we can arrange tailor made tuition if required" (College Prospectus, 1994, p.13). Every attempt is made to integrate disabled students into all aspects of college life. In addition to this the college has a clearly-stated Equal Opportunities policy and is a “preferred” provider with students from ethnic minorities. For example, 36 per cent of students in 1992/93 had an ‘Indian sub-continent’ background (College Plan 1993-96, p.3).

According to a College Factsheet (1993) 73 per cent of full-time students in 1992/3 were aged 16 to 19 and 65 per cent of full-time students lived in the borough, with 34 per cent travelling in from neighbouring East London boroughs. Each student has a personal tutor and a ‘comprehensive’ range of welfare and counselling services is provided. Facilities at the college site include a ‘Flexible Learning Workshop’, where technical and basic skills can be upgraded, a number of computer rooms, a ‘Learning Resources Centre’, a well-used sports hall, refectory, bookshop and creche.

Students at the college are served by a Careers Guidance Unit attached to the library. This has seven members of staff, though on most days there are likely to be two advisers actually in attendance. The unit houses an extensive careers library and careers-related databases, including the NVQ Database, ‘Microdoors’ (which matches qualifications and interests to career opportunities) and ‘ECCTIS 2000’ (information about 66,000 higher education courses). To some extent the students’ use of the careers Unit depends upon their developing and following an ‘action plan’ and the levels of encouragement provided by personal tutors. The action plan is formulated at the beginning of the year and is part of the Student Record of Achievement. This plan will include a vocational aspirations element and/or higher education plans. Individual students can arrange interviews with careers advisers or can use the unit on a ‘drop in’ basis.

Many of the students who used the Careers Unit seemed already to have their career plans worked out (probably because of the strongly vocational nature of the college). Additionally, it was estimated that about 70 per cent of the student population would enter higher education, so much of the advice concerned application procedures and university prospectuses. It seemed to the unit staff that NVQs and GNVQs were beginning to be accepted as appropriate credentials by higher education establishments. Some frustration was expressed by one member of staff that students were not referred often enough by the personal and course tutors. The feeling was that there was a ‘good system’ in place, but not enough use was made of it.

6.4 - Characteristics of the Sample

In terms of the questionnaire sample the aim was to feature a cross-section of at least 100 full-time students from each of the two colleges (this represents about a 5 per cent sample
of the West Country college and about 10 per cent of the East London college, given their full-time student populations). Since the study is partly concerned with student perceptions of 'new vocationalism' the emphasis is on vocational groups, especially BTECs, GNVQs and NVQs, with additionally one ‘A’ level group from each college used for comparative purposes. Details of the actual groups featured in the questionnaire phase are shown in Table 6.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.1 - Questionnaire Samples by Subject Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Westdown College</strong> (Questionnaires completed between November 1994 and March 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group/Subject</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and Recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin./Secretarial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering and Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering/Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Tutorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL SAMPLE</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Eastborough College</strong> (Questionnaires completed between April and June 1995)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group/Subject</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Admin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering and Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL SAMPLE</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were thus six ‘core’ groups for the questionnaire phase, i.e. subject groups featured in both colleges: NVQ Beauty Therapy, NVQ Business/Administration, GNVQ Business Advanced, BTEC Catering and Hospitality, BTEC Computer Studies and BTEC Engineering/Design. It can be seen that there was a very close match across the two colleges in terms of subjects, groups and levels, indeed a much closer correspondence than might have been anticipated in the early stages of a study featuring two different FE colleges in contrasting locations.

The interview sample consisted of 23 students. Following the questionnaire phase up to four students from each group (aged 16-19) were selected at random. These students were sent a letter, via their tutors, asking if they would be willing to take part in a group interview. A follow up letter was sent if necessary. At Eastborough College the Catering and Hospitality and Business/Administration groups were not approached for interview because most of the students had left the college by the time the interview phase was underway; instead students from GNVQ Information Technology and GNVQ Leisure and Tourism were approached. In all 44 students were asked if they were willing to take part in the interviews: 27 replied positively, 2 replied negatively and 15 did not reply at all (sometimes non-response was due to the fact that the student had left the college by the time the letter was sent). Parental permission was also sought if the students were under 18 years of age. A total of 23 students actually took part in the interview sessions (Table 6.2).

Some of the characteristics of the larger questionnaire sample can be summarised from information provided on the front page of the questionnaire: following a short note about the purposes of the research, respondents were asked to specify their name, age, sex and nationality. 13 respondents out of the total sample of 223 did not provide their name: these individuals nevertheless happily completed the remainder of the questionnaire. Their anonymity, however, meant that they could not be included in the sampling frame for the interview phase since it would be difficult, if not impossible, to contact them.

In terms of age Westdown respondents were on average slightly younger than their Eastborough counterparts, with averages of 18 years 5 months and 19 years 1 month respectively. The average age for the whole sample was 18 years 9 months. It should be noted that the questionnaire samples did include some respondents over the age of 19 years. This was because although Heads of Faculty/Tutors were initially asked for subject groups ‘predominantly aged 16-19’ it was inevitable that some groups would contain a few older students. It would obviously have been unfair, impolite and impractical to have asked these more mature individuals to leave the classroom for the questionnaire completion session and in any case their views provide a useful comparison with those of the younger students. The proportions of the samples aged over 19 years were 6.7 per cent in Westdown College (8 students) and 22.1 per cent in Eastborough College (23
students): taking the sample as a whole, 86.1 per cent of the respondents were aged 16 to 19 years and a further 4.0 per cent were 20 years of age at the time the questionnaire was issued. Table 6.3 provides full details of the age structures of the two samples.

### Table 6.2 - Interview Samples by College and Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Westdown College - Group A</th>
<th>Eastborough College - Group A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charles 19  GNVQ Business (2)</td>
<td>Anthony 18  BTEC Computing (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtis 19  GNVQ Business (1)</td>
<td>Jeff 20  BTEC Computing (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen 16  NVQ Admin/Sec. (2)</td>
<td>Rita 18  GNVQ Info. Tech (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth 17  BTEC Computing (3)</td>
<td>Sandip 16  GNVQ Business (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen 16  NVQ Admin/Sec. (2)</td>
<td>Serena 20  GNVQ Info. Tech (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie 19  GNVQ Business (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary 18  GNVQ Business (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan 18  NVQ Admin/Sec. (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westdown College - Group B</td>
<td>Eastborough College - Group B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela 18  NVQ Beauty Therapy (1)</td>
<td>Jonathan 16  GNVQ Leisure (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma 17  NVQ Beauty Therapy (1)</td>
<td>Phil 17  GNVQ Leisure (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin 16  BTEC Catering (1)</td>
<td>Russell 16  GNVQ Leisure (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martina 17  BTEC Catering (2)</td>
<td>Wayne 20  GNVQ Leisure (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard 17  BTEC Engineering (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger 16  BTEC Engineering (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES:**

(1) Names have been changed to preserve anonymity/confidentiality.
(2) Details of age and group are provided. The number in brackets indicates how many interviews the respondent actually took part in.
(3) Westdown Group B took part in 2 (longer) interviews rather than 3 because of work experience and examination commitments.

Within the college samples there was a fairly even division between the sexes. The sample as a whole included 110 females (49.3 per cent) and 113 males (50.7 per cent) (Table 6.4).
Table 6.3 - Questionnaire Sample: Age Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Westdown</th>
<th></th>
<th>Eastborough</th>
<th></th>
<th>Whole Sample</th>
<th></th>
<th>Cum%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>75.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>86.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>90.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.4 - Questionnaire Sample: Sex Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westdown</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Beauty Therapy and Administration/Secretarial groups (in both colleges) were exclusively female and the Engineering/Design groups (in both colleges) were exclusively male. All other groups were mixed. The majority of the 11 interview sessions featured a mixture of males and females: the exact composition depended upon the random selection of the interview sample and who actually attended the interview session. Eastborough Group B, however, consisted entirely of males and on one occasion Westdown Group B consisted exclusively of female students.

The questionnaire sample had something of an international flavour, with 20 different nationalities declared in all. Not surprisingly, the East London college had the greater range of ethnic diversity. In Eastborough College 77.9 per cent of the sample described themselves as ‘British’ compared to 93.3 per cent in Westdown College (Table 6.5).
Using data provided by the respondents and their tutors a provisional analysis of ethnic characteristics was made. A clear difference in the ethnic composition of the two samples emerged, reflecting the different catchment areas of the student populations. Whilst only 5.9 per cent of the Westdown student sample were from ‘non-white’ groups, the equivalent figure for Eastborough was 42.3 per cent (see Table 6.6). These differences were also reflected in the interview samples: none of the Westdown participants were from ethnic minority groups, whereas four of the Eastborough interviewees described themselves as Black or Asian. Coincidentally, all four of these students were in the same interview group (Group A).

Eastborough College is located in a London Borough which historically has been home to a number of diverse ethnic groups. In addition, it appears that the college has become popular with local ethnic minorities (since incorporation in 1992) on the basis of ‘word of mouth’ and personal recommendations within these groups. This means that, although the ethnic make-up of this college is not radically different to that of other London FE colleges, the ethnic dimension is rather significant here. Factors linked with ethnic
associations may have had an effect on students' outlooks and opinions and this needs to be borne in mind in the data analysis. Further discussion of ethnicity and student perceptions of their courses and colleges is provided in Section 8.4.

6.5 Student Backgrounds

6.5.1 The Questionnaire Sample

The questionnaire was divided into three sections based on the student's past experiences (Part I - Your Background), present experiences (Part II - Your Present Situation) and future expectations (Part III - Your Plans for the Future). From the details provided in Part I it is possible to map out the backgrounds of the 223 students who completed the survey, including districts of residence, schooling histories, qualification levels upon entry to college and employment histories. Since the present study aims mainly to provide details of the students' college experiences these background patterns are summarised only briefly, but they do provide some indications of the students' pre-16 contexts and their aspirations upon entry into the FE sector.

Residential patterns suggest that the Westdown students tended to be more 'local' to the college, with over 80 per cent living in Westdown borough. Just over half of the East London respondents lived in the same borough as the college, with over a third of students recruited from other London boroughs. However, these patterns are not really comparable because of the different characteristics of the two boroughs involved. With better transport facilities and a more compact physical area it is not surprising that greater numbers of the Eastborough respondents came from outside the borough (Table 6.7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.7 - Questionnaire Sample: Patterns of Residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Westdown</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Borough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere in the County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside the County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A similar pattern is revealed in the information provided about schooling at age 11 to 16: 79.0 per cent of the Westdown respondents had attended schools in the Westdown borough whereas only 45.2 per cent of the East London respondents had attended schools in Eastborough. This suggests that Eastborough College was having to work particularly hard to recruit students from outside the immediate locality, though both colleges were being pushed to reach government targets for student numbers and both faced competition from sixth forms in their respective areas. Increasingly the colleges were trying to recruit adults as well as the 16-18-year-old population: Westdown College was actively promoting its ‘access’ courses and Eastborough had a long history of encouraging adult returners onto their courses.

In terms of qualifications upon entry to the college, the Westdown respondents had on average higher levels of GCSE qualifications (Table 6.8). This is, however, at least partly a reflection of the different types of courses on offer at the two institutions and their different local and historical contexts. Taking the sample as a whole, 28.7 per cent had 5 or more GCSE qualifications at ‘good’ grades (grades A-C) and 52.5 per cent of the sample had at least 3 GCSEs of these grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.8 - Questionnaire Sample: School Qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qualifications</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more GCSEs at grades A-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 GCSEs at Grades A-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 GCSEs at Grades A-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSEs, none at grade C or above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey sample as a whole had relatively little experience of job-seeking or training programmes. Only 19 (16.0 per cent) of the Westdown respondents and 25 (24.0 per cent) of the Eastborough students had ever applied for a full-time job and of these 44 who had applied for jobs only 16 had been offered a post. 12 (11.5 per cent) of the Eastborough respondents had applied for 5 or more jobs, suggesting that there was a minority in this sample who had opted for a college course because of failure to find employment at age 16. Only 4 (3.4 per cent) of the 119 Westdown respondents had applied for 5 or more jobs. Similarly, only 10 of the Westdown respondents (8.4 per cent)
and 9 of the Eastborough respondents (8.7 per cent) had ever applied for a place on a training programme such as YTS. Likewise only 10 of the Westdown sample (8.4 per cent) and 4 of the Eastborough sample (3.8 per cent) had applied for a formal apprenticeship. The two samples here reflect the national trend of increasing numbers of 16-year-olds going into post-compulsory education rather than directly into employment or training.

6.5.2 The Interview Sample

As indicated in the previous section, 23 students actually took part in the group interviews. 7 respondents participated in three interview sessions, 8 in two sessions and 8 in one session: attendance depended upon a number of factors including examination commitments, work experience requirements, whether or not details of the session had been passed on by tutors and the motivation of the student to attend. Most tutors did their utmost to encourage their students to attend and overall, given the various commitments of staff and students and the time requirements of examinations, coursework and work placements, the level of participation was pleasing.

Since the qualitative data produced from the interviews have been given special importance in the following sections (because they represent detailed student viewpoints) brief ‘profiles’ of the students who took part in the interviews are provided below (see also Table 6.2).

Westdown Respondents - Group A

**Charles** was aged 19 at the time of the interview. He had left school with several GCSEs, three at grades A-C, and had a spell in another college before commencing the GNVQ Business (Advanced) course at Westdown. He expected to be in a full-time job in a year’s time.

**Curtis** was also aged 19 and had also started (but not finished) a course at another college. He had left school with a good set of GCSE grades (6 at grades A-C), but had changed his mind about possible careers a number of times. Options mentioned included the Royal Marines, insurance broking or the legal profession. He hoped to go on to university upon completing the GNVQ Business (Advanced) course.

**Eileen** was one of three females in the group from the Administration/Secretarial NVQ course. Aged 16 she had experienced part-time employment in a hotel. After college she hoped to enter full-time secretarial employment, but acknowledged that she might have to take temporary positions initially. Eileen possessed 8 high-grade GCSEs.
Elizabeth, aged 17, was the only female in the BTEC Computing group and this group’s only representative in the interviews. Whereas most of the other members of the discussion group were expecting to be in employment in a year’s time, Elizabeth was determined to go to university and eventually into a career in computing as a programmer or analyst. She travelled to Westdown college daily from outside the county and had chosen the course because of her interest in computing. Elizabeth was the best qualified member of this group with 9 GCSEs at grades A-C.

Karen was one of the quieter members of the Admin./Secretarial group. Aged 16, she had 6 high grade GCSEs and has planned to seek employment in a secretarial capacity since secondary school. She had chosen to go to Westdown College because it ‘had a good reputation’.

Natalie chose the GNVQ Business course because it ‘looked interesting’ and because the college was close to her home. She was anxious not to take the traditional A level academic route to a career. Aged 19 at the time of the interview, she was articulate and, by her own admission, was ‘sometimes outspoken’.

Rosemary had chosen the GNVQ Business course because, like Natalie, she wanted an alternative to A levels. She felt she would not have done so well on a more academic programme and wanted a qualification that was ‘more vocational’. Aged 18, she possessed 4 high grade GCSEs. At the time of the interview she did not have any clear idea of what career to follow, but stated that she was enjoying the GNVQ course.

Susan was perhaps the most ‘vocal’ and articulate member of this discussion group. She seemed more mature than her 18 years and was often seen by other members of the Admin./Secretarial group as their ‘spokesperson’. She was well qualified, with 6 high grade GCSEs and stated on her questionnaire that ‘I haven’t got a clue about what I want to do after college’. A spell ‘temping’ seemed to be a possibility.

Westdown Respondents - Group B

Angela. Aged 18, Angela was one of two respondents from the Beauty Therapy group. She travelled from outside the county to the college each day and had 6 GCSEs at grades D-F. She had a part-time job as a cashier and expected to be in full-time employment in a year’s time, though not necessarily in the Beauty Therapy field.

Gemma, 17, was also from the Beauty Therapy group. She possessed 3 GCSEs at grades A-C and chose to do this particular NVQ because the college provided a good deal of information on the subject and the course ‘sounded interesting’. She was unsure about her career plans and felt that she might opt for a training scheme upon completion of the college course.
Justin, aged 16, was very well qualified with 8 high grade GCSEs. He had a clear idea of what he wanted to do upon completion of his education - to work as a chef on a ship or in a restaurant. He enjoyed the BTEC Hotel and Catering course and had found the work experience placement very useful.

Martina was also on the BTEC Hotel and Catering course. Aged 17, her 6 GCSE passes ranged from grade B to grade E. She was enjoying the course which had a local reputation of being ‘hard to get on to’. She worked part-time as a waitress and had ambitions to work in hotel management.

Richard. Aged 17 at the time of the interview, Richard had left school with 3 GCSEs at grades A-C and was determined to eventually work as an engineer, possibly in the Royal Air Force. He had found the BTEC Engineering course useful, but was critical of some of the assessment procedures and of certain teaching styles used by the tutors. He was an articulate and confident member of the discussion group.

Roger was also from the BTEC Engineering group. He travelled to the college from another town in the county and had a farming background. Aged 16, he possessed 8 high grade GCSEs. He had been planning to be an engineer for a number of years, but had recently switched his interest from mechanical engineering towards computer aided design.

Eastborough College - Group A

Anthony. Aged 18, Anthony had experienced ‘social difficulties’ at school, but was now becoming more confident and more articulate. He had joined the BTEC Computing course with a wide range of GCSEs (grades B to E). He was unsure about the precise nature of his career ambitions, but felt that he would like to work with computers in some capacity.

Jeff’s family originally came to Britain from Nigeria. He travelled daily to Eastborough from another London borough: this was partly so that he could avoid ‘friends’ nearer home who tended to divert him from his studies! Aged 20, as well as doing the BTEC Computing course full-time he also worked night shifts at a local supermarket. He hoped eventually to be either a lawyer or a computer analyst.

Rita was a member of the newly set up GNVQ Information Technology group. Aged 18, she had originally wanted to be an air hostess, but now aimed for a job in computing. She had attended school in Tanzania, her family’s home country. She was pleased with the education and advice she was receiving at the college.

Sandip. Aged 16 and from an Asian background, Sandip was articulate and always willing to express an opinion. She had joined the GNVQ Business (Advanced) group with a good set of GCSEs, mostly at high grades. She had heard a good deal about GNVQs and had deliberately opted for this course as an alternative to A levels. By her own admission her
social life was important, but she also worked hard so as to achieve creditable qualifications and, eventually, employment in a business or administrative environment.

Serena, Aged 20, Serena lived with her husband close to the college. Her family was originally from Mauritius. She was well qualified with 2 A levels and a number of high GCSE grades. She was at the time of the interviews looking for employment and would leave the GNVQ IT course if she could find a suitable position. Her experiences of job-seeking led her to express strong opinions about the attitudes of some local employers towards ethnic and gender characteristics.

Eastborough College - Group B

All these students were from the GNVQ Leisure and Tourism (Intermediate) group: the tutor had expressed a desire that they should all be interviewed in the same time slot because of work/course demands. They were therefore treated as one discussion group - but in this group, unlike the other three interview groups, the discussants all knew each other before the interviews commenced.

Jonathan, Aged 16, Jonathan had a number of GCSEs at grades D and E. He was enjoying the course and found the period of work experience very useful. He hoped after college to teach or to be a sports coach, with work in the travel industry as another possibility.

Phil, Aged 17, Phil was a talented sportsman, having played junior cricket at county level. He possessed mainly lower grade GCSEs. Originally he had hoped to be a sports professional, but would now be content with coaching or working in the leisure industry.

Russell, Aged 16, Russell attended school in a neighbouring borough and possessed middle to lower grade GCSEs. He has always been interested in sport (his father was a professional footballer) and he chose his present course because of its sports content. He had experienced a variety of part-time jobs, but was not sure of his career plans other than that he had a desire to work in the sports or leisure areas.

Wayne, Two to three years older than the rest of the group, Wayne was vocal, confident, independent and always willing to give an opinion. He had experienced employment for two years before starting at the college and was active in the local athletics club. At school he had planned to be a mechanic (his GCSEs were at grades D to F) but was now hoping to work in a travel agency or as a sports coach.

These profiles are of course selective in terms of the detail included, but it is to be hoped that they provide a basic picture of the interviewees' backgrounds. Comments made in the interviews provide supplementary indications of the characteristics and personalities of the
respondents. Although there are 23 individuals here we should not lose sight of the common framework within which they were working: all these respondents were in the same age group, all were on vocational courses in a college of further education and the great majority were expecting to enter the world of work, in one form or another, in the next one or two years.

6.6 Local Contexts Compared

This chapter has moved the focus of this thesis from national policies on vocational education and training to local employment and educational contexts. It has also commenced examination of the data by outlining the major characteristics of both the questionnaire sample and the interview sample. In this way the chapter has taken the emphasis from national structures to local contexts and then to the student groups. Thus it should now be possible to see how local structures, including the local labour market and patterns based on social characteristics such as gender and ethnicity, might impinge upon these students' career hopes.

The two research settings have a number of similarities: they are both relatively urban, they have large service sector employment, and they are not dissimilar in size. Beyond these similarities, however, there are a number of important contrasts. The key differences between the two boroughs can be summarised as follows:

* While Westdown is a clearly identifiable town (and also a clearly identifiable travel-to-work area and labour market), Eastborough is swallowed up by the large, urban sprawl of East London. This makes the latter interdependent with other parts of London and less of a self-contained geographical/economic area.

* The social characteristics of the two areas are somewhat different, particularly in terms of ethnic groupings. Over 21 per cent of the population in Eastborough compared to only 3 per cent in Westdown described themselves as belonging to ethnic minorities. The difference is even more significant in terms of the college samples: 42 per cent of the Eastborough questionnaire sample described themselves as belonging to ethnic minority groups compared to just 6 per cent at Westdown College.

* There were also important demographic differences between the two boroughs. Population was continuing to increase in Westdown and Eastborough was still losing population in a process of de-urbanisation.
At the time of the research unemployment rates were increasing in Eastborough, but decreasing in Westdown. In September 1994 the official unemployment rate in Westdown was 6.3 per cent, whereas in Eastborough it was 11.5 per cent. The national unemployment rate at this time was 9.0 per cent. It seems that, by this measure, the Westdown local economy was pulling out of the recession whereas the Eastborough labour market was feeling its (delayed) effects.

In economic terms Westdown was still expanding at the time of the research, whereas Eastborough, according to many indicators, was in decline. The former still had a fairly buoyant labour market, whilst the latter was facing a decline in the numbers and types of jobs available. In terms of the next few years, optimism in the reports of Westdown economic groups and organisations can be contrasted with the rather pessimistic predictions provided by similar groups in Eastborough.
Part IV - Policy as Experienced

Part IV focuses upon ‘policy as experienced’ through a presentation and analysis of the data collected by means of the questionnaires and the group interviews. The opinions, attitudes and beliefs of the young people featured in the study are given a central place in this part of the thesis on the basis that their actual experiences of FE colleges, vocational courses and associated careers guidance activities should throw considerable light upon the strengths and weaknesses of current VET policies and may provide some important pointers for future policy considerations. The three chapters that make up Part IV draw upon both the quantitative questionnaire data and the qualitative interview responses as appropriate. This chapter begins the data analysis by reporting on the findings relating to the young people’s experiences of college life, along with their opinions on vocational guidance offered pre- and post-16. Chapters 8 and 9 explore the data for manifestations of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ respectively and comment upon the relative contributions of these two types of influences on the young people’s experiences.

Chapter Seven - Data Analysis: College Experiences and Vocational Guidance

7.1 Levels of Satisfaction With the College

At all stages of this research a primary concern has been to work with the college staff and with the students in the hope that some of the information generated, even if only indirectly, will be useful to both these groups. Feedback was an important part of the process, including feedback to the students in the interviews and return visits to the colleges to disseminate general findings to the college staff. In passing information to tutors great care was taken to present this information in a generalised (and constructive) way, so as to preserve the anonymity of individual respondents.

One source of useful information in this respect was an open question at the beginning of Part II of the questionnaire which asked the students to explain briefly why they chose their particular college and course options. Some respondents did not answer, but the majority provided at least one reason for their choice of college. These responses were coded in accordance with the list of factors/reasons shown in Table 7.1 below. Respondents could provide as many reasons as they wished, but very few suggested more than two factors, so only the first two reasons suggested by each respondent were coded in this way.
It can be seen that there was a range of factors influencing the students' choice of college, the two most common types of reason being nearness of the college to home and the provision of appropriate courses. Locality was mentioned by a higher proportion of Eastborough students (38.5 per cent compared to 31.9 per cent) and suitability of the course was considerably more important at Westdown (cited by 37.0 per cent of the sample compared to 21.2 per cent in Eastborough). The 'reputation' of Eastborough College was also important: this attracted nearly one in five of the East London respondents, whereas reputation was mentioned by less than one in ten of the Westdown students. The desire to improve skills was twice as likely to have been mentioned by Eastborough than by Westdown respondents. In both samples choosing an interesting or enjoyable course/subject was fairly important: approximately one in four students mentioned this factor at Westdown and just under one in five in Eastborough.

Other very useful sources of opinions were the responses obtained to a question about a variety of college experiences, asking the students to respond by ticking a box in the range 'highly satisfied' to 'not at all satisfied' (Table 7.2).
### Table 7.2 - Levels of Satisfaction with College Experience in Terms of a Number of Factors (Numbers and Percentages, Whole Sample, n = 223)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Highly satisfied</th>
<th>Fairly satisfied</th>
<th>Not very satisfied</th>
<th>Not at all satisfied</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical surroundings, i.e. buildings, classrooms</td>
<td>23 (10.3)</td>
<td>156 (70.0)</td>
<td>40 (17.9)</td>
<td>2 (0.9)</td>
<td>2 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standard of teaching/lecturing</td>
<td>67 (30.0)</td>
<td>128 (57.4)</td>
<td>19 (8.5)</td>
<td>5 (2.2)</td>
<td>4 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The amount of work set</td>
<td>53 (23.8)</td>
<td>135 (60.5)</td>
<td>27 (12.1)</td>
<td>3 (1.3)</td>
<td>5 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of the work set</td>
<td>39 (17.5)</td>
<td>151 (67.7)</td>
<td>26 (11.7)</td>
<td>2 (0.8)</td>
<td>5 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course content</td>
<td>61 (27.4)</td>
<td>135 (60.5)</td>
<td>20 (9.0)</td>
<td>2 (0.9)</td>
<td>5 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of course to life after college</td>
<td>67 (30.0)</td>
<td>120 (53.8)</td>
<td>23 (10.3)</td>
<td>6 (2.7)</td>
<td>7 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational advice and careers guidance</td>
<td>38 (17.0)</td>
<td>126 (56.5)</td>
<td>37 (16.6)</td>
<td>12 (5.4)</td>
<td>10 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before and during the administration of the questionnaires a number of tutors expressed a belief that the students would be critical of their college, one tutor commenting 'they’re a pretty negative bunch, they will be highly critical'. In fact, as can be seen from the figures in Table 7.2, the students were on the whole satisfied with various aspects of their college experience. This was also true in the interviews where any criticisms made were usually expressed constructively. Combining the percentages in the first two columns of Table 7.2 (‘Highly’ and ‘Fairly’ satisfied) we can see that in the case of the first six factors, more than 80 per cent of the student sample expressed satisfaction. Only on the final factor, ‘vocational advice and careers guidance’, does the percentage of satisfied students drop below 80 per cent and even here 73.5 per cent expressed satisfaction.

It was not an aim of this research to directly compare the two colleges, rather the contrasting labour markets and possible subsequent variations in student levels of optimism and pessimism in terms of employment prospects were seen as a main focus. However, the data do permit a basic comparison of college experiences and such a comparison, as presented in Table 7.3 below, may tell us something about the differences between the two colleges.
Table 7.3 - Levels of Satisfaction with College Experience in Terms of a Number of Factors (by College): proportions (percentages) stating that they were 'highly satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied' with these factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Westdown (n = 119)</th>
<th>Eastborough (n = 104)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical surroundings, i.e. buildings, classrooms</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standard of teaching/lecturing</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The amount of work set</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>75.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of the work set</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course content</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of course to life after college</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational advice and careers guidance</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Westdown College achieves higher levels of satisfaction on five of the seven indicators listed in Table 7.3. Only on two of these indicators - physical surroundings and the amount of work set - are there obvious differences between the two college samples. Use of the Pearson chi-square test showed both of these differences to be statistically significant (probabilities 0.016 and 0.012 respectively). The finding relating to physical surroundings is not particularly surprising - many of the Eastborough College buildings are older and are all located on one site: the teaching rooms include some demountable, prefabricated buildings. The library and careers suite, however, have recently been upgraded (the latter provided an excellent informal but attractive venue for the group interviews) and there is a new multi-media workshop. The entrance lobby to the college has recently been refurbished and there are plans to completely upgrade the refectory, which was a main source of student discontent at the time of the research.

More Eastborough respondents complained about ‘the amount of work set’ and this was a popular topic in the group discussions. It is worth bearing in mind, though, that some of the Westdown respondents also expressed dissatisfaction at the amounts of work encountered:

Martina: We get something like thirty major assignments a year. One of our tutors will hand it out... and want it in the next week. It’s impossible to do all of our assignments at once.

Student opinions concerning coursework, examination requirements and forms of assessment illustrate well some of the differences between policy as espoused and policy as experienced. Many respondents were aware that their tutors were actually trying to implement new national qualification systems at a rapid pace and that difficulties often derived from the pace of change and official/political desires to achieve certain targets in relation to education and training. Many positive comments were made about tutor
support and assistance. It was recognised that tutors were mediating between the students and the demands of rapidly introduced qualification frameworks. The student workload would have been much more of a burden had the tutors not played their part in implementing and enacting the new qualification and examination schemes.

7.2 BTECs, NVQs and GNVQs

The recently introduced NVQs and GNVQs are meant to raise the status of the vocational track in further education and, according to much official material, should also place the student at the centre of the learning process. Both of these developments, it follows, should increase the self-esteem of the student and develop the young person’s sense of control over the educational and training process. It is in this sense that the ‘new vocationalism’ in post-compulsory education can be linked with enquiries into the influences of structure and agency in these processes.

The student comments considered in this section provide some indications of the sample’s feelings towards the new vocational qualifications and also provide useful indicators of how policy is being experienced in day-to-day college activities. One of the survey questions, for example, asked students if they thought specified educational innovations were a ‘good idea’ or a ‘bad idea’. One of the innovations mentioned was ‘a vocational (work-based) A level (or GNVQs)’. Taking the sample as a whole, 70 per cent (157 respondents) said that they felt GNVQs were a ‘good idea’: just under 25 per cent (55 respondents) said ‘don’t know’ and nearly 3 per cent (6 respondents) said that GNVQs were a ‘bad idea’ (Table 7.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course/Group (numbers and percentages, whole sample)</th>
<th>A good idea</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>A bad idea</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GNVQ Students (n = 58)</td>
<td>42 (72.4)</td>
<td>13 (22.4)</td>
<td>2 (3.4)</td>
<td>1 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVQ Students (n = 62)</td>
<td>46 (74.2)</td>
<td>13 (21.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>3 (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC Students (n = 84)</td>
<td>57 (67.9)</td>
<td>22 (26.2)</td>
<td>4 (4.8)</td>
<td>1 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Level Students (n = 19)</td>
<td>12 (63.2)</td>
<td>7 (36.8)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals/whole sample (n = 223)</td>
<td>157 (70.4)</td>
<td>55 (24.7)</td>
<td>6 (2.7)</td>
<td>5 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was thus general support for the idea of GNVQs (or ‘applied A levels’ as Dearing called them) even if problems concerning the implementation of such courses sometimes provoked student criticisms. This finding is not surprising given that the great majority of students in the questionnaire sample were on vocational courses (either GNVQs or NVQs...
or sometimes on BTEC courses which were about to change in line with the new qualifications framework) - to have criticised the new courses too heavily would possibly have left students with problems in terms of justifying their own recent course selections.

It is instructive to compare the attitudes of the students by type of course taken, though the numbers of respondents in the A level groups are so small as to make meaningful comparisons rather difficult. Students in the ‘new vocational’ groups (NVQ/GNVQ courses) were more supportive of GNVQs than were BTEC or A level students (Table 7.4). In the case of the former groups more than 70 per cent of the sample (in both cases) felt that GNVQs were a ‘good idea’. For BTEC students the figure drops marginally to just under 68 per cent and for the (small numbers of) A level students it drops to just over 63 per cent. Additionally there are more ‘don’t knows’ in the latter groups, around 26 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

Although overall very small numbers of respondents saw GNVQs as a ‘bad idea’, it is interesting that the two categories of students who are most dubious about this new qualification are, firstly, students taking the ‘traditional’ BTEC vocational courses (many of which were in the process of being converted to NVQs or GNVQs) and, secondly, students in the A level academic track. Since these students, unlike some of their peers, had not experienced GNVQ teaching and studying in practice it is not surprising that there were more ‘don’t knows’. This is one area where further research would be useful: more detail is needed to discover how these students really feel about these developing vocationally-orientated courses.

Some dissatisfactions with BTECs, NVQs and GNVQs were revealed in the group discussions. Often the pace of change or the perceived hasty implementation of the course was the problem, rather than the nature of the qualification itself.

*Rita:* I think sometimes when you make a complaint, the tutors, they’re not going to do anything. There’s someone there above them and then above them again. So anyway, it’s a long process. For example last year we had a problem with GNVQ grading at the end. Some of us had done really good work and we didn’t have a proper grade... it really affected me badly. They ought to come and do it right for us.

*PR:* Was that a problem with the exam board?

*Rita:* The GNVQ - City and Guilds Department. I think they didn’t supply the college with the right materials for grading and the tutors, they were really confused. They didn’t know what to do, how to grade...

Similarly, respondents at Westdown made the following comments:

*PR:* Justin, you thought that GNVQs were not a very good idea. Could you explain that?
Justin: I think... work people were not really looking at GNVQs with any great respect. They thought it was just a useless thing, not really worthwhile.

Richard: Our course [BTEC Engineering/Design] is just changing to a GNVQ next year... That’s happening with a lot of BTECs at the moment... A friend of mine did the computer course and he didn’t get his exam certificates and he went back a year later to get them and they were GNVQ ones instead of BTEC. He wasn’t very happy about it. People think GNVQ is a level down. It’s not, but that’s what most people think.

These types of comments, about a possible lowering of the status of GNVQs and their similarities to BTECs, were also made by some of the Eastborough students:

PR: Sandip, what are your opinions on GNVQs, now that you’ve been doing one for a while?

Sandip: It’s alright. It’s very like A level. It’s not that easy though. Future-wise a lot of people are saying that the universities are going to stop accepting people with GNVQs... it’s going to get kind of confusing. It’s going to be, like, we’ll be a lower course and A levels will still be up there.

Anthony: I think the main problem with GNVQs is that they just chucked out the BTEC National... and just put GNVQs in their place.

7.3 School Careers Advice

This section considers questionnaire findings and interview comments relating to careers advice and ambitions before the age of sixteen. The following section deals with vocational guidance and career adjustments after the age of sixteen. Together these two sections provide some indications of the respondents’ employment hopes and desires, and of how much these have been shaped by educational institutions and personnel. This sets the scene for the discussion of structural and agency influences on employment prospects which follows in Chapters 8 and 9.

The questionnaire sample groups were asked ‘To what extent did you have definite career plans in your final year at school?’ The responses given to this question are summarised in Table 7.5. In the whole sample about one in five respondents had definite career plans at the age of sixteen. A further 46 per cent had a ‘reasonable idea’ of what careers/courses to follow. Rather more Eastborough respondents had definite plans than Westdown respondents, though the difference is not statistically significant.
Table 7.5 - Extent of Career Plans by Final Year at School (Numbers and Percentages, by College Location)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Westdown</th>
<th></th>
<th>Eastborough</th>
<th></th>
<th>Whole Sample</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had definite career plans</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a reasonable idea of what career/courses to follow</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a vague idea of what career/courses to follow</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have any real idea</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is difficult to disentangle individual decisiveness from external advice in terms of career plans. Question 17 from the questionnaire, however, does provide an indication of what types of careers advice had been offered at school and how useful the respondents had perceived this advice to be (Tables 7.6 and 7.7).

Table 7.6 - Types of Careers Help Received at School (Numbers and Percentages, Whole Sample, n = 223)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice on subject options at age 14</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice on subject options at age 16</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed careers advice or specialist careers lessons</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual careers interviews</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice about applying for college/sixth form</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience in an actual workplace</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It can be seen (Table 7.6) that between two-thirds and four-fifths of the sample had received each of these types of careers assistance. Of those who had received these types of help at least three-quarters had found the assistance either ‘very useful’ or ‘quite useful’ (Table 7.7). For example, work experience in an actual workplace had been experienced by 178 (80 per cent) of the 223 young people featured in the sample. Of these 51 per cent had found work experience ‘very useful’ and a further 29 per cent had found it ‘quite useful’. However, 37 respondents (21 per cent) declared that work experience was ‘not very useful’ or ‘not at all useful’, so we should not assume that work placements are always a positive experience for these youngsters. The overall picture is one of broad satisfaction with the services provided by the schools careers services. The statistics, however, will only tell us so much, and there were some interesting, detailed interview comments which helped to elaborate some of the possible negative feelings towards school careers advice strategies.

When asked about the possible influences of teachers and careers advisers at school on making employment plans some of the Westdown respondents complained about the lack of positive advice:

**Susan:** ... You can just say to them, oh I’m going to college and doing A levels and they go, ‘oh, fair enough then’.

**Elizabeth:** They don’t express their opinion. They just say what’s open... they don’t say ‘I think you should do this because...’

**Susan:** You never get told you should do this A level because...
Elizabeth: They say, well you could either go to college or get a job or go on a YT.

Susan: Yeah, and that’s it.

Elizabeth: They don’t say why you should.

PR: Sounds like most of you are describing... they’re there in the background [school careers advisers], perhaps giving a kind of support, but basically you’re left on your own. Is that the feeling you have?

Natalie: Yes, they just left you to it. Gave you all the information and that was it.

In a particularly interesting and animated exchange (a discussion developed by the respondents without any prompting from the researcher) these students went on to explain what the limitations of school careers advice were and how the situation could be improved:

Eileen: We used to have careers interviews, but all they used to talk about was college really. They used to say ‘what college do you want to go to?’ and they would get a list of information about the college. There was never really anything about getting a job.

Natalie: Oh we had a talk from Westdown College, big deal! But it was absolute crap because it wasn’t exactly what everyone wanted. They were just talking about A levels. I mean not everyone could get the grades to go on to A levels and yet we all had to sit and watch this A level talk... They should know you expect a grade and they should know that some people can’t even make A level standard, so why sit you down in front of an A level talk when you’re not even going to get there?... Or you’re not even interested in A levels, you want to do something else. Yet... they don’t support you in what you want to do. They just say ‘right, here’s A levels, you’re going on to college’, that is it! They’ve just got blinkers on all the time I think. They just think you’re going to go on to A levels.

Susan: Definitely. It would be so much better if they could sit down with you and explain all the courses that are available and, you know, sort of help you out and arrange for you to come for an interview while you’re still at school and chat to various tutors.

Natalie: Well they’ve got college experience, haven’t they, and I mean that is so good... Schoolchildren actually come in here... they were on our course downstairs. You know, you see all these little kids and you think ‘bloody little brats, don’t come here... My God, what are they letting themselves in for?’ and, you know, they had experience of it, they had a whole day here and it just seemed such a good idea because you got to know, if you wanted to choose secretarial you’ve got to go into that part and they give you a presentation about it. Which I wish... they did with us... It makes sense. People can decide what they want and then you can go to the presentations and if you don’t like it you can think ‘right... you’ll try something else’. I think that was such a good idea.
Even the well-publicised local Careers Fairs for secondary school pupils attracted criticism:

**PR:** Do they have Careers Fairs locally?

**Susan:** Yeah, they have them at school and they had one a few months back over at the hotel. You can go along if you want to, but... it wasn’t very helpful at all.

**Elizabeth:** I went to one at the [hotel] but there just wasn’t much there.

**Eileen:** Just loads of leaflets.

**Elizabeth:** There didn’t seem to be anyone around on the stands that you could actually talk to!

It should be noted, however, that within this mainly critical discussion concerning careers help from the school and from other sources there were some positive comments:

**Karen:** A careers adviser came to me and said ‘do you want to do a six week course before you start college?’ To help me with this course [NVQ Admin./Secretarial]. They actually came to me once I said I was going to college, so they did help me.

**PR:** It was a kind of pro-active advice?

**Karen:** Yes.

Experience of school careers support seemed to vary from individual to individual, though the impression given from the group discussions at Westdown College is that these students felt that the careers advice offered in their final year at school was too narrow, in particular the traditional A level, academic route was pushed at the expense of other possible avenues. They also felt that advisers tended to sit back and not spell out the full range of opportunities and their implications. These kinds of comments suggest a need for a more ‘holistic’ and ‘pro-active’ careers service (the implications of these comments are discussed further in Section 11.3).

### 7.4 Post-Sixteen Vocational Guidance

The nature of the careers support provided changes as these 16-year-olds move into further education colleges and other post-school settings, as do the perceptions and requirements of the young people themselves. Generally speaking, such support is probably less formal and less structured, reflecting the changing aspirations of the young people and the increasing diversification of their employment and educational needs as
they move towards independence and adulthood.

The following written question was used to try to gauge the extent to which students had changed their career plans since the age of sixteen: ‘Since completing year 11 at school, have you changed your views and wishes about the job or profession you would like to take up?’ Responses are summarised below (Table 7.8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.8 - Change of View About Desired Job or Profession Since Completing Year 11 at School (Numbers and Percentages, by College Location)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over a third of each of the college samples indicated that they had changed job plans since leaving school and a subsidiary question was included that could provide some indication of the direction of changed aspirations. Respondents were asked what they had originally wanted to do, job-wise, and what they now planned to do. The occupations indicated by the respondents were categorised using the Registrar-General’s occupational scale to provide a rough indication of the direction and scope of changed ambitions since leaving school.

Interestingly, the Eastborough sample had been considerably more ambitious than the Westdown respondents in terms of original job desired (at age 16): over 41 per cent of the Eastborough sample cited jobs equivalent to Registrar-General scales I or II compared to only 24 per cent from Westdown. However, both samples had made downward adjustments by the time they were at college: by this point only 28 per cent of the Eastborough respondents and 18 per cent of the Westdown students were aiming for class I or II occupations. Eastborough students had made a bigger adjustment, perhaps partially brought about by their higher levels of original job aspirations. Both samples registered an increase in plans to move into skilled manual occupations (class IIIm) over the same time period. The proportion of Eastborough respondents desiring this kind of occupation increased from 7 per cent at age 16 to 12 per cent by the time the questionnaire was completed. The equivalent increase at Westdown College was from 13 to 18 per cent.

Thus there was some downgrading of employment ambitions by both samples in the first two or three years after leaving school. This kind of finding has been reported in other studies of school leavers’ job aspirations though the exact causes of this lowering of
expectations are difficult to identify. It may be a case of the course tutors and careers advisers 'cooling out' the students in line with the limitations of the local labour market, or the youngsters themselves may have become more 'realistic' as they moved closer to entry to the full-time adult labour market. Whatever the possible causes, these findings need to be treated with caution because over half the students in each of the college samples ticked the 'Don't know/Not applicable' option to the job aspirations question. The proportion responding in this way (for the whole sample) increased from 51 per cent at age sixteen to 56 per cent. Along with some apparent downgrading of employment aspirations there was an increase in the degree of uncertainty about occupational outcomes.

Responses to Question 24 from the questionnaire provide indications of what types of careers advice had so far been offered at college (bearing in mind that some of these students were still on the first year of their college course) and how useful the respondents had perceived this advice to be (Tables 7.9 and 7.10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.9 - Types of Careers Help Received at College (Numbers and Percentages, Whole Sample)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice on options at 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed careers advice or specialist careers sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual careers interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice about applying for Higher Education/University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience in an actual workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.10 - Perceived Usefulness of Different Types of Careers Help Received at College (Percentages of Total Students Who had Received this Type of Assistance, Whole Sample)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very useful</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice on options at 18 (n = 51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed careers advice or specialist careers sessions (n = 56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual careers interviews (n = 58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed advice about applying for Higher Education/University (n = 86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience in an actual workplace (n = 98)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When the figures in Table 7.9 are compared with the figures in Table 7.6 it becomes evident that the respondents had received much less careers help in college than they had in their schools. This is not surprising given that pre-16 advice tends to be more structured and institutionalised. Additionally, as indicated above, many of the students were in their first year at college and comments made in the interviews suggested that they were expecting these kinds of assistance in the second or third year of their course.

Nonetheless some careers officers might be disappointed that less than 23 per cent of the sample had received ‘Detailed advice on options at 18’ and that only 39 per cent had received ‘Detailed advice about applying for Higher Education/University’. Tables 7.9 and 7.10 present findings for the whole sample, but there were some important differences across the two colleges: considerably larger numbers of Eastborough respondents had received all of these services - except one - than Westdown students (the exception was ‘Detailed advice on options at 18’). For example, 33 per cent of the East London respondents had received ‘Detailed careers advice or specialist careers sessions’ compared to 21 per cent from Westdown; 29 per cent had experienced ‘Individual careers interviews’ compared to under 19 per cent at Westdown; and 52 per cent had experienced work ‘in an actual workplace’ compared to only 40 per cent at Westdown.

These differences in careers provision across the two colleges can partially be accounted for by the differences in average ages between the two samples and by the fact that the questionnaire was completed later in the academic year at Eastborough College. However, these factors on their own probably would not explain the differences. It is clear from Table 7.10 that, where these various types of careers assistance were provided, the majority of students (at least 78 per cent) in both colleges found them ‘very useful’ or ‘quite useful’. This may help to explain the broader levels of satisfaction with careers help expressed by the Eastborough respondents in the group discussions.

It was noticeable that Eastborough had a very well organised, easily identifiable and well-staffed Careers Unit which was almost constantly being used by students on a ‘drop in’ basis and in more formal ways. At Westdown it was not immediately apparent where the careers provision was and who was responsible for it. (Additionally a letter from the researcher to the Careers Office in Eastborough resulted in an invitation to visit the office to see the range of services offered to this age group across the borough. A similar letter to Westdown Careers Office received no reply, despite a reminder!).

In the interviews many of the East London students expressed positive opinions about the careers service provided. In the pilot group interview at Eastborough College one of the students, Laura, made the following comments about the Careers Unit:

Laura: I used it before I came to the college when I was working. I came here last year, in about February, and I came to see the lady downstairs one evening. I just ‘phoned up and said I lived in the borough, could I come along?... She really helped me, she was really helpful and since then I’ve used it again to find out about universities... You’re aware right
from the very first week you are here... that it’s there - it’s a facility that you can go and use whenever you want.

The comments of the Westdown respondents concerning careers support post-16 were more mixed:

**PR:** Have you ever been influenced by... careers advisers in making your plans for the future?

**Susan:** What careers advisers? [Group laughter].

**Natalie:** My tutor helped me, on my first course I did, she said ‘why don’t you go for that one?’

**PR:** Do you think they could have done a lot more in terms of careers advice?

**Natalie:** Yeah.

**Susan:** I mean, we used to get an hour a week, if that, talking about careers, but usually it was talking about like, all the boys wanted to talk about condoms. You know because we liked to talk about them in that lesson. Careers never really got a mention!

**Natalie:** Oh yeah, we could have the advice leaflets, don’t forget that!

**Susan:** Yeah, you could have a leaflet if you wanted one.

**Natalie:** ...telling you about secretarial jobs.

**Elizabeth:** You had to find them yourself, sort of read through the whole pile to find what you want.

It is interesting that the Eastborough respondents appeared more satisfied with the careers advice provided than the Westdown students. Perhaps careers staff in the former college, with its associated depressed local labour market, had a greater sense of urgency. Alternatively, it may simply be that there were different types of provision in the two institutions and this led to differing student responses across the two sites. What is fairly evident is that the amount of formal careers advice offered declined after the students left school. In this respect the students became more autonomous in terms of making career plans, but some of the interview comments suggest that there were individuals who wanted more assistance post-16, often in the form of a clearer setting out of options or more detailed explanations of the full implications of course choices.
7.5 Young People, Politics and Educational Change

Both the ESRC 16-19 Initiative and the Anglo-German Studies asked their samples about their interest in and attitudes towards politics. In the present study a number of questions were included on voting behaviour, political viewpoints and opinions on recent educational reforms and developments. These findings allow for a brief comparison of this sample with previous samples from the age group and may also provide some new insights into perspectives on control, authority and political change.

The ESRC 16-19 study found that many young people “held low opinions of all the parties and of most politicians” (Banks et al., 1992, p.150). The viewpoints of these youngsters did not align clearly with party political ideologies and their attitudes were “not organised around political positions” (Banks et al., 1992, p.138). The youngsters on the whole were more interested in the ‘politics of the personal’, i.e. issues of immediate personal concern, including gender and racial issues (p.148). In terms of intended voting behaviour the Labour Party attracted most support, but this was a reflection of the political complexion of the four areas featured in the study (p.159). ‘Environmentalism’, as an ideology, attracted some support and Banks and his colleagues comment that “Ecological movements and the Green Party may well have an increasingly receptive hearing” (p.149). The first Anglo-German study found that German young people were more interested in politics than their English counterparts (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, pp.198-9), but also that levels of youth interest in politics were fairly low in both countries.

The young people in the sample featured in the present study were asked (in the questionnaire) how interested they were in politics (Table 7.11).

<p>| Table 7.11 - Level of Interest in Politics (Whole Sample, n= 223, Percentages) |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very interested</th>
<th>Quite interested</th>
<th>Not very interested</th>
<th>Not at all interested</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings that less than 1 in 20 of the sample were ‘very interested’ in politics and that nearly a third of all the young people were ‘not at all interested’ support the ESRC 16-19 Initiative’s conclusions on this subject and should cause concern to our major political parties. There were no significant differences in levels of political interest across the two college sites.

Another question asked ‘If there were to be a general election shortly, which party would you vote for?’ Responses to this question are summarised in Table 7.12.
Table 7.12 - Voting Intentions in a General Election (By Area, Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Westdown (n=119)</th>
<th>Eastborough (n=104)</th>
<th>Whole sample (n=223)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wouldn't vote</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To a large extent these young people's political opinions reflected those of older people in their areas. In Westdown, which had a Conservative MP at the time, but a Labour Council, the Conservatives attract nearly 11 per cent of the youngsters' voting intentions, compared to just under 5 per cent in Eastborough. Labour received the biggest slice of the intended youth vote in both areas, commanding 27 per cent support in Westdown and 39 per cent in Eastborough (Labour were generally doing well in the opinion polls at the time of the research). The Liberal Democrats were more popular in Westdown, receiving 13 per cent of voting pledges there and less than 5 per cent in Eastborough. Whilst the young people may have been developing an ideology of 'environmentalism' this had not yet turned into significant voting aspirations, with the Green Party receiving less than 3 per cent of voting pledges in both areas. The fact that 31 per cent of the sample chose the 'Don't know' category indicates that a sizeable section of the sample had not yet committed their vote. Some 12 per cent of the sample suggested that they would not vote, indicating that another sizeable minority were disillusioned with the party political system.

An additional question asked respondents how satisfied they were with 'the present government' (at the time of the survey the Conservative Party had been in office for 16 years and John Major was in his second term as Prime Minister). Under 2 per cent of the whole sample said that they were 'very satisfied' with the government, 9 per cent were 'satisfied', 41 per cent were 'not sure', 16 per cent were 'dissatisfied' and 32 per cent were 'very dissatisfied'. Considerable numbers of young people were clearly unhappy with their government and their levels of dissatisfaction were higher than those indicated by older age groups in opinion polls asking a similar question.

Respondents were also asked for their opinion on trade unions in the form of a question which asked 'When you are working full-time, would you like to be a member of a trade union?' 53 per cent of the sample answered 'yes' to this question, 32 per cent said 'no'
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and nearly 15 per cent did not answer.

A further question asked for student opinions on a range of factors linked with employment, skills, earnings and technology. Although not directly 'political' the responses to this question give some idea of how these young people felt about developments in work and employment patterns as they moved closer to the labour market themselves (Table 7.13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.13 - Attitudes on a Range of Economic/Employment/Training Statements (Whole Sample, n=223, Percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) A person must have a job to feel a full member of society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) The most important thing at work is to get ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Only at work can you develop your skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) It's important to hang on to a job even if you really don't like it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Earning high wages is the most important thing about a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) I'd rather have a job which does not interfere with my private life &amp; leisure activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Getting a job today is just a matter of chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) I think training in new technology will help me in the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several important aspects of the sample's orientations towards work and employment are revealed in this table. For example, over a third (36 per cent) were uncertain as to whether 'a person must have a job to feel a full member of society' (suggesting ambivalent attitudes towards the unemployed); a majority of the sample (50.2 per cent, combining the 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' categories) did not agree that you can only develop your skills in the workplace; a majority (nearly 59 per cent) wanted a job that would not interfere with their private life and leisure activities; and a large proportion (over 70 per cent) agreed that training in new technology would be helpful in the future. On these statements - (a), (c), (f) and (h) - there was not much difference between the attitudes of the two samples, but in relation to the remaining statements, as Table 7.14 shows, there were some important differences in the opinions of the two student samples, and these are worth looking at in more detail.
Table 7.14 - Opinions on Selected Economic/Employment Statements (by Area, Percentages of Respondents Stating that they 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' with the Statement)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Westdown (n=119)</th>
<th>Eastborough (n=104)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(b) The most important thing at work is to get ahead</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) It's important to hang on to a job even if you really don't like it</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Earning high wages is the most important thing about a job</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Getting a job today is just a matter of chance</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Greater proportions of Eastborough respondents agreed with these four statements - (b), (d), (e) and (g) (Table 7.14) - than Westdown respondents. The survey data here support a number of points made by the Eastborough students in the group discussions, namely, that it is important to 'get ahead' at work, it is important to 'hang on to a job' even if you dislike it, wage levels are important and getting a job is largely a matter of 'chance' or 'luck'. It would seem that the Eastborough respondents, in an economically depressed part of London, have 'hardened' or 'instrumental' attitudes towards income and employment compared to the Westdown respondents.

A question was also included to elicit opinions on a range of 'new ideas' (with political implications) introduced into schools and colleges in recent years (Table 7.15). These students will have experienced aspects of these innovations although some, such as 'Training Credits', were in the early stages of implementation.

Table 7.15 - Opinions on a Range of 'New Ideas' Introduced in Recent Years Into Schools and Colleges (Whole Sample, n=223, Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>A good idea</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
<th>a bad idea</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The national curriculum</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 'vocational' A Level/GNVQs</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making schools and colleges independent from the LEA</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More mature students in colleges</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Training credits' or vouchers</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated by Table 7.15, GNVQs, more adult learners and 'Training credits' were all fairly popular reforms in the respondents' views (though it must be stressed that the
students here were judging the idea and may have had some negative things to say about these developments in practice. The national curriculum, which had been experienced by the great majority of the sample in their secondary schools, was deemed to be ‘a good idea’ by just under half the sample. The least popular ‘reform’ was ‘making schools and colleges independent from the Local Education Authority’, with nearly half the sample answering ‘don’t know’ and 21 per cent indicating that they thought that this was ‘a bad idea’.

Where time permitted, members of the discussion groups were asked their opinions on the state of education in Britain today and their comments make interesting reading. When asked which educational change they’d like to talk about the two Westdown groups (independently) mentioned the national curriculum:

Richard: I thought it was good, at first I did anyway... But before I left they changed it, didn’t they, and now they’ve changed it again, back to the way we had it...

Martina: It would be alright if they stopped changing it around, because people just get confused with it...

Richard: Now we’ve got SATs for 14-year-olds.

Roger: Yeah, we’re all guinea pigs. Like, everything that came out since GCSEs, we were guinea pigs for. [This idea of being treated as ‘guinea pigs’ emerged as an important theme in some of the discussions and is explored further in Section 10.4].

The second Westdown discussion group focused on the national curriculum and resources as important aspects of educational change:

PR: If you were Minister for Education, what would you do tomorrow to improve British education?

Natalie: Put more money in for books, definitely, and resources.

Susan: I think I’d just like to scrap the national curriculum really, and just say ‘do what you want to do’, and like make more resources available to schools.

Eileen: I think you’ve got to standardise it in a way, over the whole country, because everywhere you go you get a different education.

PR: [It has been suggested] that we don’t compare with the Europeans, we’re not as well qualified. Would you agree with that...?

Natalie: ... They’re [the British] not spending enough on education...I mean, you’ve only got to look at German schools. They go earlier and yet have more time in the afternoon to do what they want.
PR: If you are going to put more resources in... where are these resources going to come from?

Susan: Well, like, not spend so much money on, you know, like, guns and stuff, which we don’t need... and roads as well, like roads and transport... like bus lanes and roundabouts [laughter and comments of agreement from other members of the group].

PR: People are saying standards in British schools are declining, do you think they are right?

[Three Students]: Yes, yeah.

Natalie: We’re prime examples really.

Eileen: But it’s not the school’s fault really though.

Natalie: Well it is in a way, because they’re the ones that taught us.

PR: But if you took the level of qualifications, say two A levels, more and more people... are getting two A levels and that suggests that standards are improving, does it not?

Eileen: Yeah, but they’re getting easier.

Susan: Yeah, they’re getting easier for people to do them.

The theme of ‘resources’ was also brought up in similar discussions with the Eastborough groups, and mention was also made of ‘declining standards’. The following discussion occurred when one of the groups was asked what changes they would make in the college or to the education system in general:

Anthony: Well I think class sizes should be brought down or [the numbers of] teachers in classes should be brought up.

Jeff: More facilities, more computers.

Rita: The trouble is the college has a certain amount of money to do things with and it’s hard; and the PCs are expensive.

Jeff: You might say the college hasn’t got money, but they’ve got money to change the front door [to a new, sliding, automatic doorway]... They should put some PCs in there [indicating towards the computer lab].

Sandip: They really haven’t got a finance adviser at the college.

Jeff: The car parks are too small.
Students in both colleges had been given ‘quality assurance’ questionnaires by a member of staff asking for their opinions on the college and its facilities, but these involved rather restricted ‘tick a box’ type responses and, during the group interviews it became evident that most students welcomed the opportunity that the group discussions provided for airing opinions on such matters. It was evident that they had been given very few opportunities to express opinions on their educational experiences.

7.6 The College as a Supportive Framework

It has been indicated in previous sections (and especially in Table 7.2) that at a time when further education is experiencing tremendous change and increasing workloads for college personnel the student respondents remain broadly satisfied with their college experiences. Whilst the negative comments need to be considered carefully and there is always room for improvement, the findings presented in this chapter are, on the whole, a credit to the college staffs and give some indication of how much effort they put into the processes of educating and training these young people.

It will also be shown (especially in Chapter 9) that the students display significant levels of confidence and optimism, regardless of location or course of study. There are a number of possible explanations for this, but it does seem likely that the colleges are providing important elements of support, direct and indirect, in this respect. It seems that the colleges are providing a sort of protective environment, or a ‘buffer’ between policy as espoused and policy as experienced; which encourages confident and optimistic student beliefs. It should be noted, however, that the majority of these students had not yet experienced on a large scale the ‘harsh realities’ of job-seeking and the prospect of unemployment (only 11 per cent of the sample had looked for full-time employment in the six months prior to the completion of the questionnaire).

Although a small number of tutors were criticised, mainly for setting too much work or for not co-ordinating assignments, there were many positive comments about advice given, with frequent references to approachability and helpfulness and to tutors having a genuine interest in the students. The juncture between policy as experienced (by the student) and policy as enacted (by the tutors and colleges) is perhaps smoother than that between policy as espoused and policy as enacted. College tutors must grapple with the new demands and limiting timescales of government and its agencies and students appreciated, even if only indirectly, the hard work that most of their tutors were carrying out in order to convert wide ranging (structural) policy demands into meaningful (individual) classroom and course work experiences.
Chapter Eight - Data Analysis: Structural Influences

8.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together data from the research process which tend to suggest that these college students had an awareness of the importance of and were affected by structural factors such as locality, gender, race, social class and family situation. The following chapter reports those findings which may provide evidence of an awareness of agency and individual inputs into the school-to-work transition. Of course structural and individual inputs and influences cannot always be clearly separated and despite the thematic distinction made here many of the student comments indicate that both types of influence were simultaneously present in their decision-making processes.

The questionnaire included direct questions about the perceived influence of a variety of structural factors (especially Question 37 on 'Social Characteristics') but it is often difficult to elaborate these coded replies into 'perspectives' or 'feelings' on structural influences. This problem arises partially because it is very difficult to express or to quantify such influences and the young people featured in the survey have probably not had the opportunity to think about such questions previously in an organised way.

To assist with the clarification of these 'feelings' it is helpful to refer to some of the group discussions where there were detailed, interesting and often unprompted conversations about the influence of structural factors, especially gender and ethnicity. This chapter consequently provides a good example of how the quantitative and qualitative data can be used side by side to help construct an overall picture of young people's feelings on external influences in their school-to-work transitions.

8.2 Area Influences

In this section the emphasis is on 'area' rather than on 'labour market'. Though there is some overlap between the two terms, they rarely coincide exactly. A 'labour market' is usually defined in terms of a 'travel-to-work' area, but the latter is not always easy to identify.

Such difficulties apply to the definitions of area/locality used for the two 'labour markets' in the present study. In East London the 'travel-to-work' area is complex (and large) because of the availability of different forms of transport and the proximity to Greater London with its diverse and sizeable employment and sub-employment structures. The 'travel-to-work' area in Westdown is perhaps easier to define, but there are still complications, such as the influence of rural labour markets upon the town's population. In discussing these two areas it should also be noted that there are differences in the
proportions of the two samples actually living in the borough under study - some 81 per cent of the Westdown respondents lived in the same borough as their college: the comparable figure in Eastborough was 53 per cent of the respondents.

As suggested in Section 6.1 there has been a trend in recent years in educational and employment research towards area studies. This has been necessary because under normal circumstances it is impossible for researchers to study all 16-19-year-olds across Britain or even all 16-19-year-olds in FE colleges. Sampling is necessary and geographical restrictions are inevitable. It thus becomes important to justify and explain your choice of area. It is not really satisfactory to study an area purely because of its proximity to the research base or because of convenience of access, though these factors will obviously have some influence upon the research design. Here, as explained in the rationale for the research methodology (Section 3.2), the two localities were chosen for specific reasons. They provided contrasting labour markets and employment structures, whilst maintaining similar frameworks at the college level. In addition, the East London college was chosen because of the relative scarcity of recent youth transition studies in this part of the south-east economy.

Given this stress on area and the differences between the two sampling localities, it is informative to look at what the respondents felt about the area they lived in and how influential they felt the local economy was on their economic prospects. The quantitative survey included a number of questions asking how the young people felt about their locality (usually defined in terms of a borough) and the possible effects of their geographical situation on their job prospects.

One question asked how satisfied respondents were with their ‘local district’ - note that this was usually taken as the district of residence and not necessarily as the district within which the college was located. Responses are summarised in Table 8.1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very dissatisfied</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n=119)</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n=104)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample (n=223)</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly the Westdown respondents expressed greater levels of satisfaction with their residential locality. This is to be expected when Westdown is a relatively new town, with good facilities and pleasant countryside nearby. Eastborough is located in East London and whilst it undoubtedly had pleasant areas it is also located close to areas of urban decay with high levels of social and economic deprivation.
These responses, however, only tell us about students’ feelings of general satisfaction with an area - they do not tell us about economic aspirations associated with that area. Consequently, a further question asked ‘To what extent do you think where you live affects your chances of getting a job?’ Responses are set out in Table 8.2 below.

Table 8.2 - Perceived Influence of Area on Employment Prospects by College (Numbers and Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A big influence</th>
<th>Some influence</th>
<th>A slight influence</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n=119)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n=104)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample (n=223)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although only about one-fifth of the whole sample saw area as having a ‘big’ influence, the Westdown respondents were considerably more likely to see their borough of residence as having a ‘big’ effect on their employment prospects, 25 per cent of respondents choosing this option, as opposed to only 16 per cent in Eastborough. This is a particularly significant finding and may reflect the former group’s awareness of the relative buoyancy of their local labour market.

This finding is supported by the responses to another question, asking ‘Is it more or less difficult to find employment in your area than in other parts of the country?’ (Table 8.3).

Table 8.3 - Difficulty in Finding Employment in Your Area as Compared to Other Parts of the Country (Numbers and Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More difficult</th>
<th>About the same/average</th>
<th>Less difficult</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n=119)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n=104)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Eastborough respondents show a degree of ‘realism’ here, with a much larger proportion of the sample acknowledging that finding employment generally is more difficult in East London. Interestingly though, in responses to other questions, and in the group discussions about prospects of employment as an individual, the East London respondents showed similar levels of optimism to the Westdown students (this point is discussed further in Section 9.3 below).
Clearly the two sets of respondents were aware of their local economic contexts and realised that these could have important effects on young job-seekers generally, even if they did not perceive an obvious impact on an individual basis. In the group interviews students were more than happy to talk about the pros and cons of living in their particular town or district, though they sometimes tended to be more concerned with local facilities than with economic prospects. There was some disagreement within the Westdown groups on the issue of how better off they were in terms of a relatively ‘successful’ local economy. Eastborough respondents also had mixed feelings about job prospects in their locality, reflecting the economic contradictions in their ‘travel-to-work’ area.

In youth research generally there is some disagreement on the complex issue of the relative impact of locality on youngsters’ employment prospects. Garner and her associates, using evidence from the Scottish School Leavers’ Survey, looked at school leavers’ employment destinations in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and concluded that ‘geography does matter’, i.e. comparable school leavers in these different cities had unequal educational and employment chances. However, non-spatial inequalities continue to affect young people in important ways: there are “substantial inequalities within areas, associated with gender, class, ethnicity, education or other dimensions of social differentiation” (Garner, Main and Raffe, 1988, pp.132, 142). We now turn to some of these other dimensions of social differentiation, beginning with gender.

### 8.3 Gender

One question in the survey asked respondents how important they thought various social characteristics (along with family background and qualifications) were in the process of looking for a job. The results are shown in Table 8.4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sex/Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Family Background</th>
<th>Education/Qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westdown</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before looking specifically at gender, there are two particularly important findings from this table which need to be emphasised. Firstly, the East London respondents were much more likely to stress the importance of gender, race and class. This was also true in the
interviews and is not surprising given the multi-ethnic nature of the locality and the special importance attached to equal opportunities in Eastborough College. Secondly, both samples highlighted the importance of education and qualifications: another point that emerged clearly in the group discussions. It seems that whilst both sets of respondents were clearly aware of possible structural influences in the guise of various social characteristics, they placed primary importance on their own educational efforts.

It should be stressed, however, that the question on which Table 8.4 is based asks for the respondent's opinion of how important these characteristics are. If the question had been reworded along the lines of 'how important, in the eyes of employers, are these social characteristics?' then rather different response patterns might have been produced.

From Table 8.4 it is clear that gender was more likely to be seen as an important characteristic by the Eastborough respondents, with nearly 31 per cent of students at that college indicating that they felt it was 'very' or 'quite' important, compared to only 14 per cent of the Westdown sample. It is not evident from the questionnaire data that females felt more strongly about this issue than did the male students. Table 8.5 cross-tabulates the sex of the respondent with the view of gender as an important characteristic when looking for a job: it is clear that at both colleges more males than females saw gender as an important characteristic in this respect.

| Table 8.5 - Respondents Stating that Sex/Gender was 'Very' or 'Quite' Important When Looking for a Job (Numbers and Percentages, by Area and Sex) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Females | | Males | | Totals |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Westdown | 5 | 8.5 | 12 | 20.0 | 17 | 14.2 |
| Eastborough | 15 | 28.3 | 17 | 33.3 | 32 | 30.7 |
| Whole Sample | 20 | 17.9 | 29 | 26.1 | 49 | 22.0 |

It is also instructive to compare male and female levels of optimism in terms of job prospects and avoiding unemployment. Table 8.6 shows levels of optimism, by sex, in terms of the expected likelihood of finding suitable employment upon the completion of full-time education.

| Table 8.6 - Expected Likelihood of Finding Suitable Employment Upon Completion of Full-time Education (Percentages Indicating that this was 'Very' or 'Quite' Likely, by Area and Sex) |
|---|---|---|
| | Females | | Males | | |
| Westdown | 47.5 (n=59) | | 26.7 (n=60) | | |
| Eastborough | 50.9 (n=53) | | 29.4 (n=51) | | |
| Whole Sample | 49.1 (n=112) | | 27.9 (n=111) | |
There is a significant difference between female and male levels of optimism in terms of finding suitable employment: nearly half of the females in the sample expected to find suitable employment upon the completion of their studies compared to only 28 per cent of the males. This may reflect awareness of the fact that male unemployment had been increasing more rapidly than female unemployment rates in the two labour markets featured. In both areas there had been a decline in 'traditional' (mainly male) manufacturing jobs and in 'traditional' apprenticeship schemes. Where the numbers of jobs had expanded, this was usually in the service sector, in the kinds of areas where females were more likely to be employed, such as catering, leisure and office work, though it should be stressed that Westdown in particular still had a sizeable manufacturing sector. Another factor may be experience of part-time work: 70 per cent of the females in the sample had a part-time job compared to just over 50 per cent of the males. Such experience may boost expectations in terms of securing full-time work in the future. Certainly these are issues that merit further investigation.

It is also informative to ascertain whether either of the sexes had a stronger affiliation to their area and whether there were gender differences in perceptions of area influences on job prospects. In response to a question which asked students how likely it was that they would move away from their area to go to live in a different part of the country 46 per cent of the females indicated that they were 'very' or 'quite' likely to move away, compared to 34 per cent of the males. This rather reverses the traditional view that it is the male who travels in the search for work!

Table 8.7 summarises perceived influence of locality on employment prospects by area and sex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8.7 - Perceived Influence of Area on Employment Prospects (Percentages, by College and Sex)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A big influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=111)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that males (in both localities) were more likely to see area as a ‘big’ influence on employment prospects. A similar finding emerges when we look at male and female perceptions of levels of difficulty of finding employment in their area (Table 8.8). In both areas greater percentages of males compared to females felt that it would be more difficult
to find employment in their locality. Male and female attitudes linking individual effort with finding a job can also be compared (Table 8.9).

| Table 8.8 - Perceived Level of Difficulty in Finding Employment in the Respondents’ Area (Percentages, by Area and Sex) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | More difficult | About the same/average | Less difficult | No answer |
| **Westdown** | | | | |
| Females (n=59) | 13.6 | 62.7 | 18.6 | 5.1 |
| Males (n= 60) | 10.0 | 70.0 | 16.7 | 3.3 |
| **Eastborough** | | | | |
| Females (n=53) | 39.6 | 52.8 | 7.5 | 0.0 |
| Males (n=51) | 33.3 | 49.0 | 17.6 | 0.0 |
| **Whole Sample** | | | | |
| Females (n=112) | 25.9 | 58.0 | 13.4 | 2.7 |
| Males (n=111) | 20.7 | 60.4 | 17.1 | 1.8 |

| Table 8.9 - Perceptions of the Extent to which Success in Finding a Job Depends Upon the Individual (Percentages, by Area and Sex) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | It is very much down to the individual | It depends upon both the individual and other factors | It mainly depends on job opportunities in your area | No answer |
| **Westdown** | | | | |
| Females (n=59) | 62.7 | 8.5 | 6.8 | 22.0 |
| Males (n= 60) | 51.7 | 21.7 | 15.0 | 11.7 |
| **Eastborough** | | | | |
| Females (n=53) | 56.6 | 7.5 | 24.5 | 11.3 |
| Males (n=51) | 52.9 | 15.7 | 19.6 | 11.8 |
| **Whole Sample** | | | | |
| Females (n=112) | 59.8 | 8.0 | 15.2 | 17.0 |
| Males (n=111) | 52.3 | 18.9 | 17.1 | 11.7 |

In both colleges more females than males felt that success in finding a job was 'very much down to the individual'. This finding may be linked to other aspects of students' viewpoints. If the females are more optimistic about finding appropriate employment and are more willing to move away from their area of residence then it follows that they may be more likely to ascribe job-finding success to the individual. However, it should be noted that the differences between male and female attitudes summarised in Table 8.8 are not huge and more than half the male sample (Table 8.9) also saw job-finding success as primarily down to the individual.
One other way of considering gender differences in relation to vocational preparation and employment expectations is to look at perceived levels of confidence, experience and skill. Tables 8.10 and 8.11 compare the sexes in terms of experiences of Information Technology and other types of skills.

**Table 8.10 - Level of Experience of Information Technology (IT) (Percentages, by Sex, Whole Sample)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A lot of experience of IT</th>
<th>Some experience of IT</th>
<th>Little or no experience of IT</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=112)</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=111)</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although a greater proportion of males had 'a lot' of experience of IT (34 per cent compared to just under 30 per cent) this is compensated for by the fact that more females had 'some' experience of IT (60 per cent compared to 53 per cent of males), so overall levels of IT experience were probably similar. Greater proportions of males reported themselves as better equipped than females on three of the four types of skills listed in Table 8.11 (though none of these differences are statistically significant). Females outscored males on 'Confidence/decision-making skills', with over 95 per cent of the females stating that they were 'very' or 'reasonably' well equipped in these skills.

There are inevitably dangers in using self-reported attributes such as those presented in these tables. Stanworth (1983, p.44) by comparing student estimates of ability with teacher estimates has noted how sixth form boys over-rated their academic abilities. In the present research, even though the questionnaire was confidential, it would not look good for a male to admit that he had no experience of information technology or that he lacked technical or number skills, especially when that individual is on a technical-vocational college course. It is a possibility here that respondents were providing 'socially desirable' answers and that peer group pressures were working in unseen and indirect ways.

Much of this quantitative data, of course, can only give indirect indications of how these students felt about the impact of gender upon their education and job prospects. For direct opinions on gender differences in modern society, and in the students' own experiences,
the group discussions were a better source of information. Often gender issues arose without any prompting from the facilitator and there were lively discussions within the groups. Perhaps the most interesting of these, illustrating some of the ambiguities present in the students' attitudes, took place in Westdown College in the only all female interview group:

**PR:** Do you think there's any sexism in employment practices?

**Natalie:** I still do think there's a bit. There's bound to be some... We're not really going to get rid of it. I think it's better now.

**Susan:** If it was say... two male managers doing the same interview and there was... a girl and a boy going for a job I think... they would always go for the boy over the girl.

**Natalie:** It does depend on the job as well... If it was a mostly male environment they would have gone for the man.

**Susan** [who is in the Administration/Business group]: Although you hardly get any male secretaries.

**Natalie:** Oh, you get quite a few now, you'd be surprised.

**Susan:** It's still considered as, like, a woman's job is a secretary.

**Natalie:** I mean a lot more men are becoming that now. Because if you think about it there's more jobs in there now than there are builders and bricklayers and that, so they have to turn their skills to something else.

**PR:** Higher level jobs seem to be occupied by men, do you feel strongly about that?

**Susan:** Well, you go to work anywhere, you're virtually guaranteed that your boss will be a man.

**Natalie:** There's a new woman Chief Constable isn't there? She's got a top job, I saw that [on TV] last night. It is getting better gradually.

**Elizabeth:** It can only go slowly anyhow...

**Susan:** I don't think men think now, oh women should be at home, you know, doing the cooking or anything. I don't think a lot of men can accept they've got a woman for a boss, because it's a bit sort of demeaning or whatever.

**PR:** Does this ever affect any of you personally, on an individual level: you think 'I won't apply for that job because a female wouldn't get it'?
**Natalie:** No, I don't see why not. You should just apply for it anyway, whether it states male or female. They shouldn't do that because that's sex discrimination... They're supposed to offer it to everyone... Each should have equal opportunity to get the job.

### 8.4 Race and Ethnicity

The members of this discussion group had similar attitudes towards racism and racial discrimination, but had rather less to say on these topics and gave fewer examples:

**PR:** Do you think there's still racial discrimination?

**Elizabeth:** Yes, definitely.

**Natalie:** I think there's a bit, but like everything else, it's slowly going away. You'll never get rid of it, but... it is going.

**Susan:** But it's definitely still there.

Overall, then, ethnicity was not discussed in a great deal of detail by the (all white) Westdown groups. Questionnaire responses also seem to suggest that race was not a critical issue at Westdown: only 11 per cent of respondents there felt that race was 'very' or 'quite' important when looking for a job (see Table 8.4).

The situation was rather different in Eastborough though: there 27 per cent of respondents saw race as 'very' or 'quite' important in this respect. The topic of racial discrimination aroused considerable passions in one of the Eastborough discussion groups. There were nine regular interviewees in this college, of whom four described themselves as 'black' or 'Asian' (thus reflecting the ethnic mix of the whole college). These four, three females and one male, were (coincidentally) in the same discussion group, along with one white male. These four individuals were generally of the view that although they had not experienced high levels of racism within the college (on the contrary, it was fairly supportive) racial discrimination was widespread in East London.

**PR:** There's a question in the questionnaire... asking you what characteristics are important when looking for a job... Jeff, you said 'race' can be quite important. Is that based on your own experience?

**Jeff:** I've not been out looking for jobs that much, but what I've heard from friends and relations, race is very important - yeah, I think so.

**Sandip:** If you look at society I think it is important, because there is a lot of racial abuse and discrimination...
**PR:** Do you think there is racial discrimination?

**Jeff:** Oh yeah, I think so, I know so. Lots of employers only employ white people. I feel everybody should be given a chance.

**Sandip:** ...discrimination’s always going to be there, whether it’s race or sex, but it has been improved... I don’t think organisations can really afford to discriminate against anyone because, thinking about it, they want profit, so they’ll go for the best - they won’t be able to choose what sex they are, it depends on your qualifications, your education.

**Jeff:** The problem is you cannot prove that [the black person] is the best person for the job. I watched this TV programme... where both people had the same qualifications and the employer chose the white person. They went back to the employer and said ‘why?’ and he said, well, because that sort of job, it’s fixed for that kind of person. It’s fixed for a white person. It [discrimination] is still there. It might not be there generally, but there are low-paid jobs, stuff like that. Most ethnic minorities don’t mind doing it, but when people apply for ‘high’ jobs, like MPs and stuff, you don’t see many ethnic minorities being MPs because when they shortlist them for it they don’t pick them. It’s all got to do with when you’re aspiring to get to the high positions, that’s when the problems start...

At least two of the respondents in this Eastborough group had experienced racial discrimination at a personal level and, in a later discussion, were willing to give examples. These comments were developed from a general discussion about local job opportunities:

**Serena:** I have applied for three jobs. I didn’t get one because I didn’t speak the language. I applied for two just around the corner and I didn’t get those jobs. I want to know why... Maybe it’s because I’m coloured or because I’m a woman.

**Anthony:** My old boss knew someone whose son applied for a job somewhere and they said ‘no, sorry that job’s already been taken’. He got a bit suspicious so he got his friend to ‘phone up with an ‘English’ voice and they said ‘oh yes, there is a job going, can we take your details?’

**Serena:** Each time I go into [a local supermarket where she had previously applied for a job] I see new people, English people, at the checkouts, I never see anyone like me.

**Rita:** That’s right. This incident happened to me in the Summer holidays. There was this job advert in [Eastborough] in a card shop... I went inside for more details of this part-time job. She gave me a paper and pen and said write down your personal information and we will contact you... I was looking around the shop when this other girl, an English girl, came in and said ‘what about this job?’... she said ‘oh, alright then’ and gave it [the job] to her!

**Serena:** This kind of thing forces you to think that there is racism, even if you don’t want to think about it.
It was not surprising that the Eastborough respondents had a greater awareness of racial issues and, in some cases, had actually experienced racial prejudice and discrimination. East London has historically had a diverse ethnic population: 21 per cent of the borough’s population classified themselves as ‘non-white’ and 42 per cent of the college questionnaire sample stated that they belonged to an ethnic minority group. Thus the college had been particularly successful, especially in recent years, in attracting students from the ethnic minorities of East London. This attraction was due to a number of factors including the provision of language courses, a clearly defined (and enacted) set of equal opportunities policies and the strength of ‘word of mouth’ recommendations for the college and its courses. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds opted for the full range of courses from A levels and GNVQs to BTEC First, NVQ level 1 and GCSE courses.

Almost paradoxically, in some ways, the high proportion of students from ethnic minorities at Eastborough College may help to explain their relatively high levels of optimism in terms of job aspirations. One of the tutors pointed out in an informal discussion that many of the students from an Asian background lived in extended families, often with their own family-run business. Some of these students could have expected to be involved with the family business once their education had been completed (though it must be emphasised that many also wished to progress to higher education and to look for work outside their own family context). Where there was a family-run business already in existence the expectation of a job was bound to be higher than if the person was expecting to be at the mercy of the demands of the highly competitive and somewhat restricted local labour market.

It seems that there were structures of racism working against these students, but in some senses their family and peer groups, and even the college itself, were building structures to support them and to counteract negative tendencies towards prejudice and discrimination. This indirect support, in turn, in some cases may have helped to encourage individual levels of optimism despite racial inequalities in employment and recruitment patterns. While the racial dimension of a local job market is undoubtedly important we should not underestimate the resourcefulness and the capabilities of ethnic minorities at both community and individual levels.

**8.5 Social Class**

In the group discussions the respondents had very little to say about social class. It is difficult to assess whether this was because they did not see this topic as important or whether it was because of a lack of prompting on the part of the facilitator. In terms of managing the discussion, ‘class’ was treated in exactly the same way as ‘race’ and ‘gender’: that is, if these topics were raised by the respondents then they were followed
up and further opinions were sought. With race and gender, as can be seen from the previous two sections, following up was not really necessary, because the respondents had plenty to say on these issues based on their own attitudes and experiences.

It is possible that social class was not discussed in detail because it was not as easily identifiable (both physically and conceptually) to the students as race and gender. While the respondents did not use terminology obviously associated with social class, several did talk about economic differences and potential wage and salary levels. The students also had some awareness of how well off/badly off they were in financial terms. Question 14 in the questionnaire asked the respondents how well off they were at the time of the survey compared to their situation a year previously. Responses are summarised in Table 8.12 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Better Off</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>Worse Off</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 119)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 104)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 223)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not surprising that nearly 40 per cent of the sample saw themselves as better off, given that a year previously many of the respondents would have been at school: after starting at college they would be much more likely to have a part-time job, providing some independent income. About one in five of the sample saw themselves as worse off and one in three as in the same position, financially, as a year ago. Of course this does not directly tell us much about the students' class position: the dimensions of class will probably become much clearer when these individuals have finally settled into full-time work.

Questions about political views and attitudes to trade unions may also, indirectly, tell us something about the social class perspectives of the respondents, though with the wide variety of factors affecting voting behaviour and the possibility of 'class dealignment' in recent years, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions. There were apparently more potential labour voters in Eastborough than in Westdown (39 per cent as compared to 27 per cent) (see Table 7.12) but trade unions had very similar levels of support (54 per cent of Westdown and 53 per cent of Eastborough respondents indicated that they would like to join a trade union when they are working). With apparently higher levels of gender and racial awareness in the East London borough, one might expect a greater level of class awareness there too. Responses to the question on social characteristics (Q.37) provide
some support for this view: 30 per cent of Eastborough respondents indicated that they felt that class was 'very' or 'quite' important when it came to looking for a job compared to only 18 per cent of Westdown respondents (see Table 8.4).

In the group discussions the topic of social class was only occasionally mentioned and even then it was only discussed in indirect ways. The most prominent class-related comment in the entire series of group interviews was probably the claim made by one of the Eastborough GNVQ leisure students that 'the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer'. Several of the students said that they did not see themselves as part of a social class: the phrases 'working class' and 'middle class' were not used at all, though some respondents did talk about the 'well off' and the 'not so well off'.

In the light of this limited and rather patchy evidence on the importance of social class to these young people it is very difficult to reach any firm conclusions. Certainly they did not themselves choose to describe their attitudes and experiences using social class terminology, whereas gender, race and associated phrases were used freely and fairly consistently. It may well be that having not yet had experience of full-time work and consequent processes of occupational socialisation, a class identity had not yet been developed, but it may also be the case that these students saw social class terminology as outmoded and only indirectly relevant to their own life experiences. It seems that structural patterns of class inequality were not recognised by the students on an individual basis: if this is the case then the survey data and the interview responses would appear to support the individualisation thesis. Social class structures have not gone away, but they are undergoing change and are taking on new forms. The individualisation thesis may contribute to the development of a new terminology to describe these new patterns of economic differences and experiences.

8.6 Family Background

The East London sample was slightly different to the Westdown sample in that the youngsters in the former area experienced more extended family situations, due partly to the importance of such families in Asian cultures, and more single parent settings. Despite these differences, the overall impression, derived from both types of data, is that the relationships between these students and their families tended to be based on support and encouragement, usually without too much pressure on the students to follow a particular pathway after college. Many respondents expressed a view that whilst parents would often advise and encourage they were never forcibly pushed in a particular direction and on the whole they were allowed the freedom to make their own decisions. Parental attitudes towards the possible education or employment of their offspring at age 16 are summarised in Table 8.13.
Table 8.13 - Parental Attitudes Towards the Employment/Education of their Children at Age 16 (Both Samples, Numbers and Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanted me to stay in education</td>
<td>111 (49.8)</td>
<td>99 (44.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted me to leave and enter training/employment</td>
<td>9 (4.0)</td>
<td>10 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not care</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>4 (1.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left it up to me</td>
<td>79 (35.4)</td>
<td>75 (33.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>23 (10.3)</td>
<td>35 (15.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these figures it can be seen that around a third of parents left decisions about further education/employment to their children while nearly half expressed a desire for their sons or daughters to stay in education. It is notable that less than 1 in 20 parents wanted their son or daughter to take up employment or join a training scheme at age 16: such a pattern would not have been evident ten or twenty years ago when many more parents would have encouraged their children into full-time employment at the earliest opportunity. The proportions are similar for both samples, although a slightly higher percentage of Eastborough parents wanted their 16-year-old to stay in education.

The great majority of the sample (91 per cent) were still living at home with one or both parents at the time of the survey. A question about whether or not the students had arguments with their parents and about what the sources of such arguments might be, revealed that on the whole these young people got on well with their mothers and fathers. The issue that was most likely to cause arguments was ‘helping in the home’, 15 percent of the young people admitting that they ‘often’ had arguments about this topic. Performance at college, job plans and personal appearance caused relatively few inter-generational conflicts. This finding is supported by the results from a question asking about levels of satisfaction with ‘family life’ - 86 per cent of the sample reported being ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their family life.

It has already been shown (Table 8.4) that less than one-fifth of the sample felt that family background was important when looking for a job. It would seem that families do have an influence, but often an indirect one. This suits the young people at a time when they are striving to establish their own adult identity and commensurate levels of independence. Support from the family is usually there if they need it, but at the same time they are largely allowed the freedom to ‘make their own way’ to their educational and occupational destinations.

Both the ESRC 16-19 Initiative and the Anglo-German Studies reported similar findings with regards to young people and family life. Evans and Heinz (1994, p.144) found “a high level of satisfaction with family life”. The family may assist the young person in the
transition to work, but at the same time may contain economic limitations. In the Anglo-German Studies it was discovered that young people in Trajectory I received most material support from their parents, while those from Trajectory IV received least (Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.149):

Our investigation demonstrates that the family is still an important factor in the reproduction of socio-economic differences. Furthermore, an individualised transition seems to be possible only if there is some material and emotional support - at a distance - by parents (Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.151).

8.7 Peer Group Influences

Similar comments apply to friendship networks and peer groups. 96 per cent of the questionnaire sample indicated that they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their friendships. Peers were sometimes influential in illustrating to the individual what options were open to them at the ages of 16 and 18. When the respondents were asked to give reasons for their particular choice of college and course friends were often mentioned: ‘I already knew people there’ or ‘my friend recommended the course’ were typical comments.

In the Westdown group discussions mention was made of the activities of friends who were not at the college and it was acknowledged that peer pressures sometimes had to be resisted:

Susan: Well I get a bit upset when I see all my friends driving around in their flashy cars and everything because they’ve been working since they were 16. And they say to me ‘oh, when are you going to finally get a job?’, you know. Just because they’ve got a job doesn’t mean I have to go out and get one.

Given that the proportions of 16-year-olds who leave school and go directly into employment in Westdown are considerably higher than the national average it is not surprising that these college students experienced such peer pressures in this town.

Other than the comment made above not much was said about the peer group in the group discussions, though it was clear that the respondents could sometimes be influenced by their friends and peers. It was also clear that the college provided an important social setting for many of the students, some individuals stressing that ‘leisure’ and ‘socialising’ were as important as work.

The peer group, like the family and the college staff structure, seemed to be used as a support network. Friends were there if you needed them and could provide useful information about course choice, work experience and job possibilities. Groups of friends
were sharing information and experiences in ways which would assist the transition of individuals into higher education or the workplace. However, the peer group had other functions too, not the least of which was the provision of a leisure and social network. Much research has been carried out on youth cultures and youth leisure patterns, but not so much on the peer group as a source of advice and support during educational/economic transitions. This is yet another area where further research would help us to develop a more detailed picture of the social structures and groups shaping youth transitions.

8.8 Summary: Comparing Samples

This chapter has examined data gathered from the research process which tends to indicate that the respondents were aware of and influenced by a variety of structural environments. It is clear that there were a number of important structural influences operating upon these students’ school to work transitions. Both samples, for example, showed an awareness of how area influences, or local economic characteristics, could (and did) affect their job aspirations. The questionnaire findings suggest that the Eastborough respondents were ‘realistic’ in this respect - many acknowledged that finding work in East London is more difficult than in other parts of the country. The Westdown respondents were aware that their job prospects, in a local economy that was still expanding, were probably better than they would have been elsewhere. This is not to say, however, that the East London respondents were unduly pessimistic - indeed responses to further written questions along with a number of interview comments suggest that in some ways they were at least as optimistic as their Westdown counterparts. This apparent contradiction is considered further in the next chapter.

In terms of family and peer group influences the two samples seem to be very similar. Many respondents acknowledged that these social groups could be influential, but they were mainly in the background - they provided support ‘if you needed it’. Parental attitudes and patterns of family life were similar across the two boroughs, though there were more single parent families in East London.

Data on attitudes towards ‘social characteristics’ including gender, ethnicity and social class, reveal interesting contrasts between the two samples, though we must be careful not to overemphasise these differences. The evidence suggests that the Eastborough sample attributed greater importance to each of these characteristics in terms of their perceived effects on job applications and employment prospects. Here the socio-economic and demographic contexts of the two student samples are influential. The Eastborough sample, living in a multi-ethnic borough with a wide variety of socio-economic groupings, with localities ranging from suburbs of expensive detached houses to run down, almost ‘inner city’ areas, have experienced a larger range of cultural styles and are more likely to have experienced racial or sexual discrimination. The amount of time given in the group
discussions (by the respondents) to race and gender issues confirms the importance of these topics to the East London students. This is not to say that the Westdown respondents saw these issues as unimportant: rather the data collected here suggested that the effects of structural characteristics and social inequalities were most prominent in the responses of the Eastborough student groups. In both boroughs the concept of ‘social class’ was not stressed as much as gender or ethnicity, but this may have been due to a reluctance to use the terminology associated with social class, and economic difficulties and status differences were discussed.

There is no evidence that structural influences are going away. The nature of the impact of these influences may be changing and the degree of their influence may vary across different parts of the country, but they are always there as influences. Sometimes social characteristics can have an immediate impact, as when an individual is denied employment because of his or her race, colour or sex, but more often these characteristics, or group influences such as those encountered in the family and the peer group, remain ‘in the background’. Family and friendship influences are often, though not always, supportive and could be called upon as a resource when needed by the individual. This suggests that even with the presence of these structural factors, these young people still saw themselves as navigating their way through the transition to work or to higher education. Often plenty of scope remains for individual choice, though the degree of choice will vary according to individual circumstances. The next chapter examines the questionnaire and interview data for manifestations of individual decision-making and the influence of agency upon the school to work transition.
Chapter Nine - Data Analysis: Agency - Making Your Own Decisions

The findings reported in the previous chapter all suggest that the students featured in the questionnaire survey and in the group interviews were aware of a variety of structural influences and that these had varying levels of impact upon their school to work transitions. Very often though these students seemed to assert and reassert their individuality and to talk in terms of making their own decisions, independent of the family, the peer group and other structural influences. This chapter brings together some of the questionnaire findings and interview data which provide support for notions of individual agency. Agency here refers to those aspects of the decision-making process in school to work transitions which are predominantly individual, creative, pro-active and may involve resisting external pressures.

As noted previously, structure and agency are not distinct, opposing concepts, rather they should be seen as ideal types at each end of a continuum. Decision-making behaviour is likely to involve elements of both, especially where such behaviour is complex and, as is the case here, is based upon at least sixteen years of schooling and family upbringing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the two types of influence. What is possible, though, is to examine the data collected here to see how important individual agency is and has been to the young people featured in this study. Specific questions on individuality, self-confidence, responsibility and independence were used to try to bring out student perspectives on these issues. In addition levels of optimism/pessimism were considered on the basis that if these young people were optimistic, whatever the state of their local labour market, then they must possess a degree of expectation in terms of overcoming negative structural factors such as high local unemployment rates and the impact of various forms of discrimination.

9.1 Finding a Job: Individual Effort and ‘Luck’

One question, particularly relevant to this kind of issue, asked 'when it comes down to finding a job, to what extent does success depend upon the individual?' The responses to this question are presented in Table 9.1 below.

It can be seen that well over half the respondents in each of the localities indicated that they felt that finding a job was 'very much down to the individual'. An underlying attitude of a majority of the sample was that whether or not a young person obtains employment is very much affected by personal, individual factors. This finding does not necessarily mean that the respondents ignore 'other factors, such as family background', but only a minority in either sample chose those categories that gave these factors a major influence.
Table 9.1 - Opinions on the Extent to Which Success in Finding a Job Depends Upon the Individual (Numbers and Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Westdown</th>
<th>Eastborough</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is very much down to the individual</td>
<td>68 (57.1)</td>
<td>57 (54.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It depends on both the individual and other factors, such as family background</td>
<td>18 (15.1)</td>
<td>12 (11.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It mainly depends on job opportunities in your area</td>
<td>13 (10.9)</td>
<td>23 (22.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>20 (16.8)</td>
<td>12 (11.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was a strong and fairly widespread belief in individualism and in the potential for 'bettering oneself'. Success in the labour market, even where the unemployment rate was as high as 15 per cent, was still seen as primarily being down to the individual by a majority of the sample. Since gaining qualifications was an important part of this belief (see Section 9.2) it is evident that some form of 'work ethic' was prevalent in these students' outlooks. The idea of a 'work ethic' cropped up several times in the group discussions. Where students talked about their leisure lives they would frequently add, 'but I work hard at college' or 'I make sure that I get the work done first'. It was emphasised that tutors would help with college work, but 'whether you did it or not was down to you'. Many of the young people seemed to enjoy this element of responsibility for completing work and for building up a portfolio of achievements.

It would be interesting to know why respondents in each of these two settings took this view that individual effort was paramount. It may be that, after a period of about fifteen years, some elements of the 'new vocationalism' have worked in the sense of inculcating work attitudes (whether or not this was desired by educationists). Beliefs in the need to work hard, to better oneself via the achievement of qualifications, and to be competent in a range of work-related skills were all evident in the student responses. In the interviews several of the respondents adhered to a 'ladder of opportunity' view, believing not only that your point of entry into the labour market is shaped by individual effort (and the possession of qualifications) but also that once you have entered a workplace hierarchy it is possible to work your way up through individual effort and further education or training.

Before leaving Table 9.1, however, we should also note that the 'labour market effect' appears to be stronger in Eastborough where just over 22 per cent of the sample indicated that local job opportunities were the dominant factor, as compared with just under 11 per cent in Westdown. There seemed to be a minority of students in Eastborough who recognised that however hard they worked local job opportunities would still be restricted and limited in a number of ways.
It was not always possible to explore in the group interviews why there was such an emphasis on individualism and self-achievement. Such an emphasis did emerge in discussions at both college sites, but it was not always easy to identify where this emphasis came from. It was as if the students were in the process of forming opinions on the factors influencing their employment prospects and, in the absence of experience of the job market, relied heavily upon individually-based factors. They were occasionally hard pressed to explain why well qualified people sometimes end up unemployed. An example can be taken from the Eastborough all-male discussion group:

**PR:** How would you support your statement that [finding a job] is very much down to the individual? What do you mean by that?

**John:** Given the effort you have put in, the confidence you have in yourself.

**Wayne:** If you've got the qualifications, well I mean it is down to individual luck on the day, if you get a job.

**John:** Put the effort in, put yourself out.

**PR:** This question of 'luck' is quite interesting...

**Wayne:** Well, yeah. I've known [employing] organisations that have had a hat. They've got five or six people and pulled one out.

**PR:** Would you not accept that there are people who make the effort, get the qualifications and then don't get a job? Now why do you think that happens?

**John:** Luck.

**Wayne:** Luck, again.

The scenario presented here seems to be as follows: in college you have to work as hard as you can to achieve the best possible results you can, you must use all your abilities to the full. If you have done this then, once you start applying for employment, whether or not you get the job depends largely on 'luck' or 'being in the right place at the right time'. In other words, individual effort operates until you experience a setback or a failure, when an external factor ('luck') is brought into the equation. A reference is made in the above discussion to 'luck' as being based, for example, on random selection from a set of names in a hat, but, in relation to employment and recruitment, this is a concept that deserves further exploration.
9.2 The Importance of Qualifications

It has already been shown (in Table 8.4) that large majorities of both samples saw education/qualifications as important when it comes to looking for employment. A further breakdown of these responses, by college, is shown in Table 9.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Quite Important</th>
<th>Not Particularly Important</th>
<th>Not at all Important</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n = 119)</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n = 104)</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen that well over 90 per cent of respondents in each of the two samples saw education/qualifications as ‘very’ or ‘quite’ important in the job seeking process. Only a very small minority of students saw qualifications as ‘not particularly important’ or ‘not at all important’. Eastborough respondents were more likely to select the ‘very important’ category, perhaps reflecting the greater degree of scarcity of employment opportunities and the consequent perceived increased need for certificated qualifications in the East London labour market.

Of course the type of education received and the level of qualifications obtained depend upon a whole complex of structural factors as well as on individual effort. Home background, social class, gender, ethnicity, quality of teaching, locality and a host of other factors have been shown to have at least some influence on educational achievement. However, in written responses to other questions and in the follow up group discussions these students stressed again and again the importance of individual effort. The need to work hard for qualifications and to ‘better yourself’ was one of the most prominent topics in the unstructured sections of the group interviews. There were strong suggestions that these students generally believed in the idea of a ‘meritocracy’ and that if you ‘failed’ (in terms of obtaining qualifications) then this was probably your own fault and down to a lack of effort and determination. Again, the presence of these attitudes, desirable or undesirable as they may be to educational theorists and researchers, seems to indicate that at least some aspects of the ideology of the ‘new vocationalism’ have worked their way into these students’ belief systems.

Answers to Question 39 in the questionnaire, on what the students expected to be doing in one year’s time, provide some indications of the expectations of these students as they related to their FE courses and associated qualification levels. These responses are
summarised in Table 9.3 below.

Table 9.3 - What Respondents Expected to be Doing in a Year's Time (by Area, Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>At University</th>
<th>At College of FE</th>
<th>At 6th Form College</th>
<th>In a Full-Time Job</th>
<th>Other Categories</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n = 119)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n = 104)</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample (n = 223)</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking the sample as a whole, just over one in seven students expected to be at university in twelve months time. Around 44 per cent expected still to be at a college of further education (this is not really surprising given that about this proportion of the sample were on their first year of a two or three year course at the time of the survey) and just under a third expected to be in full-time employment. ‘Other categories’ included part-time work, being on a training scheme or an apprenticeship, in social or community service and being ‘out of work’.

Looking at the two samples separately, an important difference emerges in these 12-month expectations: a much greater proportion of the Eastborough sample expected to be at university (23 per cent as compared to only 8 per cent of Westdown students) and, conversely, a much greater proportion of the Westdown sample expected to be in full-time work (38 per cent compared to 25 per cent of Eastborough students). These differences can to some extent be accounted for in terms of the relative ages of the two samples and by the fact that the survey was carried out later in the academic year at Eastborough, but these factors only provide a partial explanation. It does seem that the Westdown sample had a greater tendency to use their qualifications to find employment at the age of 18 (in a local labour market where more such jobs were likely to be available), whereas greater proportions of the Eastborough sample were either delaying entry into their (less buoyant) labour market by planning to go on to university, or were simply more ambitious academically. Certainly, whether the plan was to go to university or into full-time employment, levels of optimism were high: no individual, in either of the two college samples, ticked the category ‘I expect to be out of work in twelve months time’.
9.3 Levels of Optimism

The belief in the importance of individual effort was often accompanied by a degree of optimism on the part of the students in terms of their own job prospects, whatever the state of their local labour market. This was one of the most interesting (and in some ways perplexing) findings of the research. This degree of optimism is prevalent in responses to a number of questions on prospects of employment and unemployment. For example, respondents were asked 'how likely do you think it is that you will find suitable employment when you complete your full-time education?' and a summary of their replies is provided in Table 9.4.

### Table 9.4 - Perceived Likelihood of Finding Suitable Employment Upon the Completion of Full-time Education (Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very likely/Quite likely</th>
<th>Possibly</th>
<th>Unlikely/No chance</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n = 119)</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n = 104)</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A related question asked respondents how confident they were about avoiding unemployment. The findings arising from this question (Table 9.5) also support this view of young people as optimistic, whatever their locality.

### Table 9.5 - Respondents' Levels of Confidence Relating to the Statement 'I Will Avoid Unemployment' (Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very confident</th>
<th>Reasonably confident</th>
<th>Fairly doubtful</th>
<th>Very doubtful</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westdown (n = 119)</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastborough (n = 104)</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar proportions of the two samples expressed themselves as being either 'very' or 'reasonably' confident that they will avoid unemployment: the respondents also expressed similar levels of confidence on a range of other job-related factors.

It is interesting here that the Eastborough students, in their depressed labour market with higher than average unemployment rates, are at least as optimistic as their Westdown counterparts. (There are parallels here with a finding reported by the authors of the first Anglo-German Study that four-fifths of their sample of young people in Liverpool were
confident that they would not become unemployed - these youngsters were in this respect more optimistic than their counterparts in ‘expanding’ labour markets in both Germany and England: Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991, pp.178-9). Perhaps there is something about living in a city neighbourhood that encourages individual optimism despite an economically-depressed environment. Alternatively, it may be that these levels of optimism occurred because of the nature of the sample - whether they lived in cities, towns or villages these were young people with most of their lives in front of them and it was natural that they should take on an optimistic outlook at this stage of their lives.

Another possibility, as discussed in Section 7.6, is that the colleges were providing a protective environment which supported and encouraged confident and optimistic student beliefs. The colleges were supportive but the economic environment outside the further education context will be more competitive and these young people may have to adjust their aspirations when they leave college. When this happens, by ‘objective’, external measures, the Eastborough youngsters are going to enter a more difficult economic/employment situation than the Westdown sample and more of the former are likely to be unemployed, consequently the East Londoners will have to make more dramatic adjustments in their expectations when they enter the labour market despite the similar levels of optimism expressed while at college.

There may also be discrepancies between individual and general opinions: that is, when asked ‘if you are going to be successful in employment terms?’ young people are bound to give an optimistic response - not to do so would be an admission of personal failure. This type of finding is not new in youth transition research. Furnham notes how individual success in avoiding unemployment is frequently attributed by respondents to internal factors such as personal attributes and abilities, whereas general failure (or actual experience of unemployment) is usually attributed to external factors such as government policies and the state of the labour market (Furnham, 1991, p.138). It would seem that in terms of finding employment the majority of the students featured in the present study had more of a belief in an internal locus of control based on individual achievement than on external, structural factors, but of course this attitude may change as their experiences of employment/unemployment unfold. Whatever the explanation for these levels of optimism there are some important issues here and possible explanations are discussed further in Section 11.5.

Confidence on the part of the East London respondents was also evident on an individual basis in the group interviews, though there was also a degree of realism and a realisation that it was going to be difficult to find a suitable job at an appropriate level:

PR: Tell me about jobs in this area... I’ve researched in two places, one is here and one is in the West country, in a town just off the M4 which is growing. The people aged 16 to 19 I spoke to there are very confident about getting a job, there are lots of jobs around. Most of them can expect to get either a reasonably good part-time job or a full-
time job. Now the unemployment rate in this area is moving towards 15 per cent... so you should, in theory, be more pessimistic on the whole. Do you think you are pessimistic?

Anthony: I think there isn’t much chance of getting a job without the necessary qualifications, because there’s just so many other people wanting one.

Jeff: We all need to better our qualifications.

Sandip: There’s more of a trend going towards part-time work, isn’t there? Retail professions and jobs mainly for females. I don’t know, I feel pretty confident, but I know if I do get a job it won’t be a good job, it will be like, normal standard, because you can’t really get very good jobs anymore.

Jeff: Living in this borough, I would be pessimistic about it. But getting out of this place, out of the city itself, or even going to another country or a different area, I would be optimistic.

Anthony: But this is the place where people from other places come. If they can’t get a job round their area they come and get a job in London.

PR: Yes, there are certain things about London, aren’t there? The bright lights and more artistic and sporting jobs, and that kind of thing, which seem to attract people.

Sandip: Yeah, if there’s a very high unemployment rate up North - down here, you could be alright.

These comments display an interesting mixture of optimism and pessimism. It seems that some of these individuals are reasonably optimistic about finding employment but realise that they have lowered their expectations in terms of the types of work they would like to do. The comments also show an awareness of changes that are taking place in the local and national labour markets, for example, acknowledgement of the movement towards more part-time work and service sector employment. The mixture of pessimism and optimism contained in some of these discussions is a reflection of changes that were taking place in the local youth labour market.

9.4 Self-Confidence and Independence

The respondents’ levels of self-confidence in relation to employment issues support the suggestion that they have experienced significant degrees of independence in their decision-making processes. Some indirect indications of independent decision-making were present even before the age of 16: two-thirds of the questionnaire sample had either a ‘reasonable’ or a ‘definite’ career plan in the final year at school, 32 per cent reporting that they had only a ‘vague idea’ of what to do or that they ‘did not have any real idea’.
Throughout the questionnaire data there were indications that these students were confident with a range of different types of skills and were capable of using their initiative and of working on their own. It has already been noted that 32 per cent of the sample had ‘a lot of experience’ of using Information Technology, with a further 57 per cent claiming ‘some experience’ of IT (see Table 8.10). Additionally, 84 per cent of the sample expressed a belief that they were ‘very well equipped’ or ‘reasonably well equipped’ in terms of technical skills. There were similar proportions taking this view in relation to basic writing and number skills (84 per cent), social skills/relating to others (88 per cent), and confidence/decision-making skills (89 per cent). These self-reported skill levels remained high even when the sample groups were divided by sex or area (see Table 8.11). Obviously the acquisition of these skills has been aided by the work of college tutors and others, but there seems to be no doubt that the respondents at these two colleges regarded themselves as confident and competent in a range of skills and tasks.

The students expressed a belief that they had at college been given a chance to use their own initiative: over a third of the sample (34 per cent) stated that they ‘often’ had a chance to use their initiative, with a further 58 per cent indicating that they ‘sometimes’ had this opportunity. Additionally 41 per cent of the sample had ‘often’ been able to ‘set their own goals/targets’, with a further 58 per cent indicating that they had ‘sometimes’ been able to do this (for data on these and other indicators of ‘independence’ and ‘responsibility’ see Table 9.6).

This level of confidence extended into a reasonably optimistic long-term view of job prospects. Respondents were asked ‘How confident are you that in 10 years time you will have the kind of job that you really want?’ Nearly 29 per cent said that they were ‘very confident’ that this ambition was going to be realised, with another 58 per cent stating that they were reasonably confident about this prospect: 11 per cent were ‘fairly doubtful’ and less than 1 per cent were ‘very doubtful’.

Another factor which may have contributed to attitudes of independence was involvement in part-time work: 60 per cent of the questionnaire sample had a part-time job at the time of the survey. Part-time work provided a wage (though admittedly probably not a very high one) which would have allowed a degree of financial independence from parents and others. Often part-time jobs also provided a sense of social contact and experience of an ‘adult’ work environment, sometimes leading to further employment openings. For example, one of the GNVQ Leisure and Tourism students featured in the interviews worked in a local sports and leisure complex and had, just prior to the first interview, been offered a full-time, permanent position there. He indicated that he was going to accept this offer even though it would mean that he would not complete his college course (the course tutor informed me that this happened regularly with students on this type of course). Other examples of part-time jobs (experienced by individuals in the interview groups) were as follows: cashier, chambermaid, babysitter, grocery assistant, warehouse assistant, shop assistant and waitress. Not very exciting
positions, admittedly, but these activities were seen by the young people as a source of extra income for clothes and leisure activities and as a way of establishing adult status (and levels of self-confidence) in the world beyond college and the family. It should be noted that the figure of 60 per cent of respondents in part-time work may have masked local labour market differences: in Westdown 77 per cent of respondents declared part-time employment compared with only 41 per cent in Eastborough.

Another question asked respondents if they possessed any skills which had not been recognised in formal qualifications, such as 'mending things, hobbies and dealing with people'. This was an additional way of finding out what skills may have been developed outside the college setting. Some 43 per cent of the sample indicated that they had skills which had 'not been recognised in formal qualifications' and took the trouble to list these skills, often in considerable detail. Examples given included technical skills, helping people, charity work, sporting skills and musical or artistic abilities. There may be a wealth of talent here which is largely unrecognised and which has not been reported by educational researchers! Even at the age of eighteen an individual may have had experience of very useful non-formal skills which is perhaps not fully taken account of in the formal education system. These experiences, especially where they may have linked to jobs or skills required in workplaces, undoubtedly helped to boost the levels of social confidence expressed by these young people.

9.5 Taking On Responsibilities

The students were also asked how often they had experienced a range of different 'responsibilities' at college. The findings for a selection of these are shown in Table 9.6 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9.6 - Frequency of Experience at College of a Number of Types of 'Responsibility' (Percentages, Both Samples, n = 223)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a chance to use your initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been able to make decisions for yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been given responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed new skills and abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set your own goals/targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had to work to a deadline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is remarkable that despite the fact that a large proportion of the sample were in their first year at college over 90 per cent of the students reported 'often' or 'sometimes' experiencing each of these responsibilities. Comments made in the group interviews about perceived levels of responsibility within the college environment supported these findings. In this, as in many other contexts, the students were generally very positive about their college and their tutors' attitudes.

The colleges appear to be providing a framework where individuality and initiative are valued and where independence in decision-making is encouraged. Within this framework, students are supported in various ways, but are also 'left to get on with it' and encouraged to make their own informed decisions about coursework, assignments and future plans. This notion of the college (and the family) providing guidance, but not taking over the decision-making responsibilities of the young people, is illustrated in the following interview comments:

**PR:** How much of what you've done in the last couple of years has been your own decision, and how much of it has come from other people?

**Phil:** That's a very good question...

**John:** I've had help from other people, like parents.

**PR:** So you've taken their advice, but ultimately it's been your decision?

**John:** Yes.

**Wayne:** I didn't... I've just done what I wanted to do. Mind you, I was working anyway, so I mean, I didn't have to ask my mum or dad if I could do this or that.

**PR:** Right, so in theory you've had control over choosing a course and going to college?

**Wayne:** Yeah, I just told them I was going to do it.

**PR:** (To the group) This word 'control', do you feel you've been in control, or do you feel sometimes you've been pushed perhaps by other people?

**Russell:** In control I'd say.

**Phil:** In control. Just taking advice from parents and friends, but mainly in control.

**Russell:** They give advice, but it's up to us. They're not going to push us.

**Phil:** They know they can't keep us in cotton wool for long, we've got to start learning our own ways, start being responsible.
PR: Do you feel that attitude [of responsibility] has come from the college as well?

Phil: Yeah, like we're responsible for the work we do and we've got to meet deadlines and we've got to be responsible in how we set our work out and get it in on time.

Wayne: I mean it's not like at school where, you know, you're taken every step of the way... you're told what you're going to do. I mean at college it's left up to you, whether you're going to achieve or not.

These students had experienced high levels of responsibility both in college and during spells of work experience. It has been reported elsewhere that one of the strengths of FE colleges in the UK has been the way in which their staffs genuinely treat the students as adults:

Some young people from the two English towns did sometimes complain about the content of what they did at college. However, they were invariably very positive about how they were treated as adults, and this was often vividly contrasted with how they were treated at school. This is perhaps one of the advantages of a voluntary system: tutors in further education (FE) colleges know that they have no 'hold' over students; although individual staff may sometimes act in authoritarian ways, the whole ethos and environment is geared to treating students as adults (Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994, p.95).

Some of the respondents in the present study also complained about their treatment by teachers in their final years at school. Also several of the Westdown respondents indicated that they had left the sixth form college in the town because 'the atmosphere wasn't right', meaning that they had not been given enough responsibility there and had not been given the required degree of adult status.

In the group discussions respondents were keen to give examples of their experience which had helped to develop their self-confidence - the following comments were made by students on the GNVQ Leisure and Tourism course with reference to their work experience with young children in sports centres:

PR: What do you feel more confident about as a result of doing the course?

Wayne: Coaching kids.

PR: Is that a responsibility element?

Phil: It taught us a lot about ourselves, about whether we could cope with it. Most of us found that we could and we enjoyed it.
Wayne: You have to know what you’re talking about as well. You can’t just waffle on, because, with kids, they can see right through you. Well, they did with me anyway. [General laughter].

Similar comments about levels of confidence and responsibility, and about the ways in which family members and college personnel guided but did not push these young people, were made in the other group discussions. Several students suggested that they were aware of what was going on around them and that they would take advice if necessary, but ultimately they would take and be responsible for their own decisions: “We’re not turning a blind eye to anything. We know what’s happening, but we’re also going our own way” (Rita).

9.6 Summary: Comparing Samples

What emerged from an overview of all the data on these experiences of vocational further education at two college sites is an image of the student of the mid-1990s as confident, reasonably independent and capable of making his or her own decisions, but with a kind of support framework in the background based upon the college and course structure and assistance from family and peers. Rita’s comment reported at the end of the previous section encapsulates this situation very well: this was only one of many similar comments, made by both sets of respondents. The students were very determined to go their own way and, as far as possible, to map out their own future, whilst at the same time acknowledging that there were a number of sources of support and advice available if needed.

College materials, including prospectuses and college charters, stressed the need for and the importance of the independent student: much was made of the fact that the students would be able to make choices and to take responsibility for their own learning, but with a college support framework, including various forms of counselling, in the background. The questionnaire data revealed that the great majority of the students were self-confident and exercised considerable degrees of autonomy in terms of decisions made and skills possessed. The group discussions indicated that many of the respondents would take advice where necessary, but ultimately felt ‘in control’ of their transitions in a way that meant success or failure was down to their own individual efforts.

There will be exceptions of course. Undoubtedly some students will lack confidence and a sense of initiative. Some individuals will be given the wrong advice or not enough advice on careers and future options. Some will be forced into routes that they do not wish to follow because of undue pressure from other individuals, such as tutors or family members. Some, despite their feelings of confidence and optimism, will discover that finding suitable employment in their locality is much harder than they realised. But having
said all this, the questionnaire sample has covered a comprehensive range of courses and subjects in two different labour market environments and the overall pattern of confidence, optimism and independence in student outlooks remains strong. Many of the students gave an impression of 'realistic optimism', as opposed to 'wishful thinking', and of independence without over-confidence. They were going to work hard to achieve their qualifications: the acquisition of qualifications, whether these were vocational or academic, was seen as the most important determinant of their ultimate position within the labour market. It is also noteworthy that these outlooks were present in all sub-divisions of the sample. The students were generally confident and optimistic regardless of sex, area, or type of course. Students taking 'vocational' courses were just as optimistic as those taking A levels and NVQ level 1 students were just as optimistic as those taking GNVQ Advanced courses.

Bigger differences might have been expected across the two areas, but there are no major differences in these attitudes across the two samples. Although the rather depressed labour market of Eastborough did produce a degree of 'realism' in the responses of the East London students, their overall attitude remained forward-looking and optimistic. This is perhaps a characteristic of young people who live in urban areas with a tradition that encourages such youngsters 'to stand on their own two feet' as early as possible. No doubt some of these individuals will experience setbacks and disappointments in the future, but for the moment they, along with the Westdown respondents, are enjoying the challenge of taking on adult responsibilities, making decisions on a day-to-day basis and navigating their way into work or higher education.
Part V - Discussion and Implications

This part reconsiders and reflects upon the research strategies used in this study and upon the data produced. It also presents some practical and theoretical conclusions. Chapter 10 reconsiders the methodology used, particularly the issue of whether group interviews were more advantageous than individual interviews and whether a multi-method, pragmatic approach was appropriate. The concluding chapter (Chapter 11) considers the policy implications of the findings for various groups of people, including 'vocational track' students and educationists who work in the FE sector. It also pulls the findings together and considers their theoretical implications, looking at ways of accounting for the levels of individualism and optimism discovered in the two student samples.

Chapter Ten - New Methodologies for New Research Questions

10.1 Reconsidering Methodology

Some of the research questions outlined in Section 1.1 have been considered by previous researchers in one form or another. However, the central aim in this project of trying 'to assess the degree of control which young people feel they have in the transition from school to work', based upon manifestations of structure and agency, is a relatively new one. It has included an attempt to empirically investigate one aspect - the control aspect - of individualisation theory, as applied to youth transitions.

Such a goal, involving a new vocabulary developed from writings on individualisation, requires at least an element of innovation in research methodology. This chapter reassesses the research techniques used and reconsiders how a relatively new strategy in educational research, the ethnographic group interview, was used to try to achieve this research goal. It reconsiders the limitations and strengths of the group interview technique as compared to other strategies, particularly the individual, face-to-face interview. The chapter considers the methodology in retrospect and in doing this draws upon the students' comments about their research experience. It concludes by suggesting some possible methodological issues, concerns and approaches for future youth research.

By 1990 there was a large body of survey data on young people's transitions from school to work (Wallace and Cross, 1990, p.2). This collection of databases was expanded in the early to mid-1990s and now includes the Youth Cohort Survey (Courtenay, 1988), the Scottish School Leavers Survey (Raffe, 1984; 1988a) and of course the data from the ESRC 16-19 Initiative (Banks et al., 1992) and the Anglo-German surveys (Bynner and Roberts (Eds.), 1991; Evans and Heinz (Eds.), 1994). These databases provide a very
useful resource for researchers interested in youth transitions and it is important that they are maintained and developed further so that a broad, up-to-date, developing statistical picture of youth transitions is always available.

These statistical findings mapped out very well what was happening to young people as they moved from school to employment, unemployment, training, or further/higher education in the 1980s and early 1990s, but a great deal has happened since then. More training schemes have been introduced, employment and unemployment patterns have changed (along with the nature of work itself) and, in particular, there have been significant and far-reaching reforms in further education, mostly associated with vocational education and training. Not surprisingly youth researchers have not been able to keep pace with these changes and many of these areas are under-investigated at present. Considering the scale of change in the FE system very little research has been done in terms of how these developments have been perceived by the young people who are supposed to be benefiting from them. Nor has there been much activity to assess and evaluate the possible public benefits or problems arising from these policy developments. The data presented in the previous three chapters, in this respect, simply ‘scratch the surface’ in terms of national (and international) evaluation needs. Much more work needs to be done in all areas of post-16 experience, using the young person’s perspective as a starting point, in order to enrich our understanding and to aid our evaluation of all of these developments.

The survey data described above, valuable though they are for youth researchers, need to be complemented as far as possible with in-depth, qualitative findings. As quantitative databases have increased in volume, and as new research questions have arisen, often centred around the subjective attitudes or perceptions of the young people themselves, so the need for ‘new paradigm’, mainly qualitative, research techniques has increased. A range of methods could be used including group interviews (as used here), semi-structured or unstructured individual interviews, participant observation or ethnographic research, case studies, video diaries, biographical records and personal construct psychology.

The requirement for innovative ways of finding out about youth perspectives makes the need for researcher collaboration even more important than it has been in the past. Not only do youth researchers need to exchange information on youth transitions and associated issues, but there is also a need to compare research experiences, to develop a better understanding of the different research strategies, their strengths and weaknesses and their possibilities in terms of uncovering and describing attitudes and experiences relating to individualisation and manifestations of structure and agency.

The remaining sections of this chapter show how the use of semi-structured group interviews with young people, along with other, more well established strategies, within what may loosely be called an ‘ethnographic framework’, provides one example of a new
approach that could be developed further to improve our understanding of young people’s subjective experiences.

10.2 Strengths and Weaknesses in Retrospect

Several writers recommend that, upon completion of the necessary fieldwork, it is useful to reflect upon the way in which the data were collected and to consider ways in which the research design, data collection and analysis processes could have been improved. It is also useful to consider what other research methods could have been utilised and whether or not similar findings would have resulted from the use of these alternative techniques. Such reflexivity is particularly recommended with qualitative or ethnographic work (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, pp.ix, 19-21) and may aid the validity and the reliability of the data produced. This section begins such a reflective activity by considering the strengths and weaknesses of the overall research strategy in the light of the fieldwork, data collection and analysis phases of the research.

The ‘information gathering’ phase was as successful as might have been expected. Much information about the colleges was collected through their prospectuses, course notes, development plans, careers advice leaflets and quality assurance documentation. Further information about training and education for 16-19-year-olds in the locality was collected through visits to the careers offices and the local Training and Enterprise Councils. Labour market reports provided excellent summaries of the state of the local economies, with their associated employment patterns. Taken as a whole this information provided a good overall picture of the institutional opportunities available to young people in the area. This data aided the process of triangulation in that young people’s opinions and experiences could be mapped against the ‘official’, institutional context, including the range of courses available and their content.

The main disadvantage with these materials was the usual one that applies to official documentation - that they were all from an official, organisational perspective. These documents were mainly about policy as enacted rather than policy as experienced, they were mainly concerned with institutional and economic patterns rather than individual experiences. The prospectuses were designed to ‘sell’ the colleges and their courses and the careers service documents were designed mainly to show what was being done for young people in the locality. This is not to say that these documents were overtly biased - they were reasonable and fair descriptions of the colleges and their localities - but they could not have been used on their own as a data source. Used in conjunction with other sources of data, including the interview material, however, they were very helpful indeed. Obviously more contextual information could have been gathered and more detail could
have been provided on the institutional settings experienced by the students, but time limitations prevented this. In any case, informal discussions with tutors, the 'key informants' and senior members of staff helped the process of building up a picture of VET policy as enacted by the colleges.

The questionnaire survey was certainly successful in terms of building up detailed statistical data on the students and their experiences. The use of two large student samples meant that not only was a substantial amount of useful data generated, but also meaningful comparisons across groups and geographical locations were possible. This meant that a degree of generalisation was possible from these findings, especially as staff at the college agreed that the student groups surveyed were a good representation of the range of courses at the college, in terms of subject types, levels of qualifications and student characteristics. The statistical data also usefully related to the interview data in two ways: firstly, it provided possible points of stimulus/interest for the group discussions and, secondly, it could be used to confirm (or deny) the popularity and representativeness of individual student viewpoints, as expressed in the interviews.

Perhaps the main problem with the questionnaire phase was simply that too much data was generated and this led to a degree of difficulty in managing and analysing the data. Although much information was gathered on a whole range of topics, some directly related to the young people's VET experiences, some going beyond this into politics, leisure and family life, there was, in hindsight, possibly too much information to absorb given the aims of the research. Although there were very few complaints from respondents filling in the questionnaire, a smaller range of questions might have produced more focused data. In particular, some of the more detailed questions about experiences of employment and job applications could have been replaced with further enquiries about levels of optimism and feelings of independence, autonomy and control in the experience of vocational further education. Some information on these issues was collected, and they were certainly explored reasonably thoroughly in the group discussions, but often inferences had to be made from the indirect information supplied via the questionnaire. This difficulty arose partly because of problems in defining 'agency' and 'control' which in turn made the task of designing and wording appropriate written questions all the more difficult.

The group interviews also produced much data - but this was always the intention: to generate detailed descriptive, biographical data based on the subjective experiences of FE college students. The technique of group discussions can be fairly demanding and was not without its difficulties. Obtaining access to the respondents had to be worked at and arranging the group meetings and setting up the rooms was also time-consuming. Sometimes the early stages of the interview were difficult in the sense that it took time to 'break the ice' - whilst the researcher was trying to encourage active input from the
respondents, they in turn were sometimes expecting the facilitator to 'dictate' the course of the discussion, rather as if the session was a one-to-one interview. Such difficulties, however, did not persist for long, and in general the discussion soon flowed, especially in the later stages of the meeting and later in the series of interviews.

Listening to the interview tapes and reading the transcripts occasionally suggests that the interviews could at some points have been better managed. For example there were a few occasions when a student started to say something interesting about a particular topic or issue and this was not followed up or prompted further, possibly because other students then interjected on a different line of discussion. Having said this, the researcher had only limited experience of group interviews before the start of the project (a small-scale study with groups of 15-year-olds on 'Gender in the Classroom') and some inexperience in handling these situations was bound to manifest itself. Group interviews are complex interactions and frequently snap decisions have to be made about which line of discussion to pursue - there were bound to be some imperfections in the way the discussion was managed and similar problems can occur in the use of other methods, including individual interviews and participant observation.

The important point is that a good range of topics was covered in these discussions, detailed accounts of college experiences were provided and the respondents were given a good deal of space in which to express their feelings and opinions. A detailed reading of the literature on group interviews, on their strengths and limitations, and on ways of conducting them, undoubtedly aided this phase of the research process. Possible problems were anticipated and a number of useful devices for the conduct of the interviews were developed before the sessions took place. This helped to facilitate maximum interaction in the groups with a consequent increase in the quality and quantity of data produced.

In some ways there may have been too much interaction and too much data generated. Occasionally there was a lack of focus and it may be that in some sessions too large a range of topics was raised, but this partly arose from the attempt to allow the respondents to express topics of interest to themselves. In retrospect, if a similar type of research project was attempted again, it might be helpful not only to slim down the questionnaire, but also to restrict, where possible, the 'discussion guide' in terms of the number of broad topics covered.

Having said this, the decision to place the group interviews at the centre of the research process was in many ways vindicated. These discussions produced much more meaningful data than would have been possible from questionnaires alone or from individual interviews. The group interviews were successful in that they provided a 'natural setting' for the expression of student viewpoints, they were creative and stimulating, and they were flexible, allowing new lines of enquiry to be followed and old ones to be confirmed or refuted (for a fuller account of these advantages of group discussions as compared to
individual interviews, with examples from the present study, see Section 10.4).

In Section 4.2 it was argued that, for a number of reasons, a multi-method or pragmatic research approach was most appropriate given the aims of this investigation. Much of the current literature supports this use of 'mixed methods' and the breaking down of the quantitative-qualitative divide. On reflection, there were undoubtedly a number of benefits from an eclectic research scheme, but the mixing of methods may have brought some difficulties too, including the need for the researcher to develop a large range of investigative and analytical skills. It may also have been that the quantitative and qualitative data could have been incompatible, but this does not seem to have been the case. There were some discrepancies between the interview data and the questionnaire findings, but this was to be expected given the small size of the interview sample and the prominence given to individual viewpoints in reporting the group discussions.

In fact the mixing of methods considerably aided the process of triangulation. Using different techniques facilitated both method triangulation and data triangulation. By these means different perspectives on the same topic could be considered. For example, 'official' views on an issue could be compared with unofficial (or student) viewpoints. This kind of comparison has been applied throughout this thesis in the considerations of policy as espoused, policy as enacted and policy as experienced. The chapters presented here have considered all of these perspectives on policy, though the methodology was particularly concerned to elicit opinions on policy as experienced, i.e. the student viewpoint, because of the previous emphasis (and publicity) given to official policy statements.

As an example of this, take a range of different viewpoints on college funding. The official (national) line, expressed in the 1994 White Paper and elsewhere, is that there is a demand-led element of funding which will encourage the efficient growth of FE colleges (DTI, 1994, p.38, para.4.27). The college principals, who were enacting this policy, took the line that they were doing the best they could with the resources available. The Principal of one of the colleges took this slightly further and argued, in the College Plan for 1994, that his college was not receiving as much funding as comparable institutions of a similar size. The students (and some of the tutors in informal conversations) were clearly not as positive about the new types of funding and the supposed link with efficiency. Some suggested that while the numbers on FE courses were going up the level of funding was not increasing proportionately. There were genuine concerns that money was not always being spent on the right things or that there was not enough funding in terms of some types of college resources. Hence the Eastborough respondents' comments that 'class sizes should be brought down' and that there should be 'more facilities, more computers'. Similarly, some of the Westdown students suggested that 'They're not spending enough on education' and that we should 'not spend money on [things] which
we don’t need’. Of course these are only individual comments, but the mood of the student groups suggested that most, if not all, of the interview sample at the very least sympathised with these statements.

This type of comparison was only possible because the use of a range of different methods and data sources allowed a variety of perspectives to be looked at. It might be argued, however, that more in-depth data could have been obtained and that the whole research process could have been more ‘ethnographic’. In other words, there could have been even more involvement with the students extending into their out-of-college lives, rather in the way that Willis (1977) went around with his ‘lads’ from ‘Hammertown’ for an extended period of time and that Riseborough (1993b) explored the culture of his YTS trainees. There were two main reasons why such a ‘full blown ethnography’ was not attempted: firstly because of limitations in time and (especially when two sites and several groups had to be covered) and, secondly, because the research topic - student experiences of vocational FE - was very much to do with (mainly public) college experiences and, whilst broader (to some extent, private) aspects of these young people’s lives did need to be considered, the relevant data could be produced mainly from a college/institutional setting. With participant observation much time and effort would have been spent collecting data which would not have been directly relevant to the aims of this study. In any case the data obtained from a variety of sources and from a number of visits to the colleges and their localities do constitute a kind of ethnographic picture (see Section 10.3).

10.3 Ethnography and Further Education

In Section 4.3 it was noted that Hammersley and Atkinson took a liberal interpretation of the word ethnography, stressing that it involves “participating... in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time... [and] collecting whatever data are available...” (1995, p.1). This is exactly the way ethnography has been used in the present research - to collect whatever data are available on the research aims. Since student perspectives have been placed at the centre of the project, the ethnographic interviews were particularly important, but other forms of data gathering were used too, including extended visits to the college sites.

Ethnographic studies in educational settings are actually quite rare. There may be several reasons for this, perhaps one of the most obvious being that the researcher tends to be considerably older than the research subjects (except in adult education) and this precludes participation as a pupil or student, though often participation as a teacher or lecturer may be possible. The most well known ethnographic or participant observation
studies of schools are probably those that have looked at the effects of streaming and banding and consequent patterns of polarisation in pupil groups. Hargreaves (1968) worked as a secondary school teacher in his study of 'academic' and 'delinquescent' groups in 'Lumley' Secondary Modern School. Lacey (1970) adopted a similar strategy in his study of 'Hightown Grammar' and Ball (1984, 1985) also (partially) acted as a teacher in his work at 'Beachside' Comprehensive School. Together these studies contributed towards the development of a theory of 'polarisation' based on the division of pupils into groups by perceived ability levels—the studies collectively have been used as an example of how theory-building is possible from ethnographic research.

Ball's reflections on his participant observation techniques are particularly illuminating. He notes how definitions of participant observation can roughly be divided into 'hard-line' and 'soft-line' positions based on levels of participation and amounts of shared activity (Ball, 1985, p.25). He suggests that his own work with pupils at Beachside should be placed on the 'soft-line' side of the definition as he was an 'observer-as-participant' rather than a 'participant-as-observer' (Ball, 1985, p.26). Similar comments could be applied to the present study: there was no attempt to pose as a lecturer (though the researcher was sometimes mistaken for one) and the college visits were based mainly around observation rather than participation. The interview sessions involved participation in the group discussions, but hopefully only in a way that would prompt and facilitate the expression of student opinions and ideas on VET and on feelings of control in the transition from school to work.

Ethnographic studies within FE Colleges are almost unheard of. Notable exceptions, however, are the previously mentioned studies by Bates and Riseborough. These were carried out to provide supplementary ethnographic data in a follow-up to the (mainly quantitative) ESRC 16-19 study. Bates studied 16-18-year-old 'care girls' on a YTS programme training mainly for jobs as care assistants in homes for the elderly and a group of BTEC fashion designers (Bates, 1993a, 1993b). Riseborough used ethnographic techniques with a BTEC Hotel and Catering group and a male YTS group training to work in the building industry (Riseborough, 1993a, 1993b). All of these studies are thought-provoking and add an extra dimension to the quantitative data previously produced on this age group, suggesting that further ethnographic research in these types of contexts would be very useful.

The methodology presented in this thesis was influenced by ethnographic approaches such as those used by Bates and Riseborough, but with an emphasis on group interviews. The group interview is a primary technique, but not the only one: the overall data-collection process was based on a 'pragmatic' view of possible research strategies rather than the assumption of the existence of a fixed dichotomy of quantitative and qualitative techniques. This was not a deliberate attempt to include from the outset a 'quantitative'
and a ‘qualitative’ method so as to claim a multi-method approach: rather these research strategies, existing information, a structured questionnaire and ethnographic group interviews, were chosen because of their perceived suitability and appropriateness in terms of the research aims of the project.

In this respect the devising of the overall research process was influenced by a number of methodology texts which argue for a pragmatic approach (see Section 4.2). It will already be evident that the research outlined here is not presented as an equal combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Rather, as suggested in Chapter 3, there is some emphasis on qualitative methods and findings because of (i) the previous existence of considerable amounts of quantitative data in the fields of youth transitions and vocational education and training; and (ii) the need for a new approach to find out about the ‘lived realities’ of the youngsters featured in relation to their feelings of control and manifestations of structure and agency in their school to work transitions.

In some respects all of the methods helped to build up an ‘ethnographic picture’ of the students’ experiences and their college settings. The information gathering phase of the project was necessary so as to set the student viewpoints in their institutional, local and national contexts. It was also necessary as a way of accessing the colleges via two key contacts or ‘informants’. This phase involved not only the examination of college documents, such as prospectuses and course brochures, but also meetings with significant personnel in the boroughs (including careers officers and education liaison personnel in the TECs) and several day-long visits to the college sites. It was on these visits that expression of some of the viewpoints of tutors and Heads of Department and other personnel were informally encouraged. Gradually the researcher was able to build up his knowledge and understanding of the local environment and the college framework and to acquire a level of familiarity with the physical and social settings of the investigation. It is partly in this sense that the word ethnographic is used to describe the research process: while there was no ‘total immersion’ into college life, and the researcher did not act as a member of staff in the college, there was a deliberate attempt to develop a full (or ‘holistic’) understanding of the college settings through a series of informal visits and conversations.

The questionnaire inevitably produced a more formal type of data, but even this stage involved some researcher participation in the classroom settings. The questionnaires were, in every case, completed with the researcher present. Respondents were encouraged to ask questions if necessary and to talk to each other if they felt that discussion was helpful. Following the collection of the completed questionnaires there was nearly always some discussion with the students and the tutor about their course and college experiences. These frequently provided useful pointers for the possible content of the interview sessions.
The interviews themselves were the most important part of the ethnography. The aim was to have as little structure as possible in these sessions in order to let the students 'set their own agenda'. In practice the first interview with each group was semi-structured with a fairly significant input from the researcher, usually involving prompting questions (see Appendix 3 for the contents of the Interview Schedule).

By the second and third interviews, however, much less researcher input was necessary: in all four groups interaction became livelier, students raised their own topics for discussion and frequently exchanged ideas and examples. There were occasional attempts to guide the discussion towards issues of structure and agency in decision-making processes, but overall it is clear from the tape recordings that researcher involvement in the later interviews decreased as the 'research relationships' (between researcher and students, and between students and students) developed. That such relationships did develop is indicated by some of the comments made by respondents towards the end of the final interview sessions (and after their completion). Some students expressed regret that there would be no more meetings of the group and commented upon how they had appreciated the opportunity to air their views and to exchange ideas and opinions with their peers.

All of this confirms something previously stressed in Chapter 3 - that student opinions are very rarely placed at the centre of educational research. Where they are given primary importance then both researchers and respondents can benefit, with possible useful policy spin-offs. The majority of these students clearly enjoyed the experience of being put together in an informal group with the opportunity to 'let off steam' and to make positive comments about their college and course experiences. There may also have been a 'consciousness-raising' aspect to the interviews, though this is difficult to assess without a follow up procedure.

An attempt was made in the group interviews, based on recommendations made in the limited literature on such techniques, to act as a facilitator rather than as an interviewer. The format of the discussions was made as informal as possible, usually with chairs in a circle or an oval shape. The tape recorder, used only with the permission of the participants, was placed away from the main group, with a long lead allowing for the positioning of a small but sensitive microphone in the centre of the group. This unobtrusiveness was noticed by at least one student who exclaimed, at the end of an interview, 'Oh, I forgot that thing was there!'

Thus, although the researcher was by no means involved in the full range of college (and out-of-college) experiences with the students, the interviews and other aspects of the inquiry were ethnographic in the sense that there was a focus on allowing the respondents 'to speak for themselves' and to describe their day-to-day experiences in a relatively unstructured, informal, natural environment. Although there were time limitations on the
project, the combination of visits to the colleges, questionnaire sessions with the groups, written communications and a long series of one-hour plus interview sessions, meant that there was a considerable amount of contact with the students, certainly much more than would have been possible in single face-to-face interviews. It is in this sense that the research has been presented as a kind of ethnographic study of the students’ experiences of VET and feelings of control in youth transitions via a further education context.

10.4 - Individual Versus Group Interviews

The face-to-face interview, along with the questionnaire or survey, appears to be the most popular research technique used in investigations involving young people. One-to-one interviews were used in both the ESRC 16-19 Initiative and in the Anglo-German Studies, with the interviews taking place in the young person’s home in both instances. There can be no doubt that this has been a very common and, on the whole, relatively successful, way of eliciting young people’s views on a wide range of issues.

The time is now right, however, for the increased use of new methods in the field of youth research. Thus the present study embraced a commitment to group interviews, using informal groups of between three and seven students, with the interviews actually taking place on college premises. It has been argued that this relatively under used technique is an innovative and appropriate way of encouraging young people to express and elaborate their views on certain topics. Whilst there may be some disadvantages to this kind of strategy, it is a technique which takes advantage of the diversity and creative elements in peer exchanges: interview extracts in previous chapters have illustrated how rich and detailed data can be generated from this type of interview situation.

Towards the end of each of the final interview sessions, by which point ‘research relationships’ had been developed to their fullest extent in the time available, questions were included concerning how the respondents felt about working in a group and whether they would have preferred a different format for the expression of their opinions. There was an in-built ‘quality control’ to provide some assessment of the effectiveness and applicability of the group interview as a research tool. All the student comments in relation to the group interviews and their experiences of the research process, with one possible exception, were positive. Of course there is always a danger that respondents in this situation might ‘say what the interviewer wants to hear’, but the general openness of the group discussions and the frankness of student comments made concerning other issues, suggests that these students would and could have been critical about the methodology if they had wanted to be. Overly supportive (and overly negative) comments by an individual towards the researcher and the research process would probably have been
picked up and challenged by other members of the group.

The following discussion uses some of the comments made by the respondents to summarise and illustrate the possible benefits of using group interviews as compared to individual, face-to-face interviews. The main advantages of group interviews in retrospect are as follows:

1. The groups provided a *natural setting* for the expression of opinions.
2. The groups provided a *creative framework* for the exchange of ideas.
3. Group discussions were *iterative* and *flexible*.
4. The use of group interviews had a number of *practical advantages*.

(1) *The Group as a Natural Setting.* Students nowadays spend much of their time in groups of varying sizes, including tutor groups and subject groups. The pedagogical requirements of the new vocational qualifications, including NVQs and GNVQs, may actively encourage group work and student-centred learning. The students in these samples will also have, in all probability, experienced group work in their final years at school, particularly in some GCSE subjects and in areas such as Personal and Social Education. The respondents on the whole were comfortable in groups: in many respects to them the group is a *natural setting*. This is something which educational researchers have not taken full advantage of until recently.

The group discussions took place in college venues at times appropriate for the respondents. Individual students did not normally know the other students in the group (except in Eastborough Group B) but they very soon acquainted themselves with each other. Although the first interview sessions were slightly formal because researcher and students were in the process of getting to know each other, the second and third interviews were largely informal and relatively unstructured, so that major parts of these later sessions were ‘natural’, free-ranging discussions, with occasional guidance from the facilitator. The atmosphere was undoubtedly more ‘naturalistic’ than it would have been in one-to-one interviews where, despite the possibility of rapport, barriers often remain between interviewer and interviewee based on age differences, appearance differences and perceived status inequalities. Such differences become less important in a situation where students predominate, both numerically and in terms of verbal input, and where the physical set up of the discussion reduces and eliminates the effects of such barriers.

*PR:* Would you have preferred one-to-one interviews or would you prefer this kind of situation?

*Phil:* I prefer it this way...
Jonathan: Yeah, you’re never put on the spot...

Wayne: It would be like an interrogation, wouldn’t it? Question after question and you’d have to think of the answers.

Phil: If you can’t think of something, you’ve got a group to take over.

Wayne: It would have been harder to have thought of answers individually.

Only one individual in all of the groups (23 respondents in total) expressed a preference for an individually-based interview situation. As the following discussion shows, she was in a minority, even within her own discussion group:

PR: Do you think this [a group] is a good way of asking people things, or would you have preferred, for example, one-to-one interviews?

Rita: I think it’s a good way because at the same time we share our ideas...

Sandip: I think I prefer individual interviews.

Rita: At the same time it gives you the confidence to talk to people...we did not know each other initially.

Anthony: When I first came to the college I was a very quiet individual...now I’m more confident because of things like this.

Sandip: I’ve always been loud [laughter].

The members of Westdown Group A stressed the artificial nature of one-to-one interviews with an ‘outsider’ and noted how they felt more relaxed and comfortable in a group.

PR: I’ve chosen to do this research in a slightly unusual way, that is to speak to you in a group. Many people would do it in an individual interview...How do you feel about being in a group?

Natalie: You’re less pressured, aren’t you?

Eileen: You feel more relaxed...You’d be more nervous. If it was a one-to-one you’d be a lot more nervous, definitely.

Susan: I think less people would do this if it was just one person...It would seem silly if it was just one person. You’d think ‘what am I doing sat here with a strange bloke who I’ve never met before talking about my life?’
PR: Could there be an element that perhaps you might not say something because it might look silly in front of a group, whereas you might say that in an individual interview?

Natalie: Yeah, but then in a group you sort of laugh it off you know. If you’re on your own you think ‘Oh my God, I said that stupid thing’... I feel so silly saying it in front of him, you know, oh no, and you sort of regret that, but in a group you laugh it off, or they can come to your rescue...It’s a lot more relaxed as well. You’re not pressured into thinking ‘God, what does he want me to say next, how am I going to answer?’

It was suggested, however, that despite the relaxed nature of the groups, there were some topics that were not really appropriate for discussion in such contexts:

PR: It might be different if it was a different topic, talking about something a bit more controversial or personal.

Susan: Yes. If it was something... really like personal, like, your sex life or something since the age of 16, then obviously you would not want to sit in a group and talk about it...

PR: Whereas people are happy to talk about what their work plans are?

Susan: Yes, I mean basically we’re all here [in the group] because we’re all going to do the same thing when we leave college...

(2) Groups as a Creative Framework. One of the reasons for selecting group interviews as a suitable research technique was their potential as a stimulating environment for the expression of a range of ideas and viewpoints. It is clear from the amount of data generated and from the nature of the respondents’ comments that this strategy was justified. There were many instances of conversations or discussions unfolding on the basis of respondents developing ideas from the substantive comments of others in the group. Also the viewpoints expressed are given a meaning and a framework by the group - they do not exist as separate, isolated, individualised comments from one-to-one meetings - making the process of data analysis easier in some respects. In these senses it might be argued that, under certain conditions, group discussions are heuristically more useful than single interviews. The respondent is much more likely to discover other viewpoints because of the peer input involved.

These points can be supported and illustrated by reference to a number of student comments taken from several of the group discussions:

Eileen: You can sort of help each other...

Susan: Someone says something and you think ‘Oh yes, I never thought of that!’
Natalie: You get ideas off each other. It’s like working in a team. You feel more comfortable.

Rita: I mean, from my point of view I learn from other people when they say something... I think 'why is he or she thinking this way?'... It makes me think.

Anthony: Also, with group interviews, when someone says something it can trigger something in someone else.

Wayne: ...Yeah, I mean like somebody saying something might jog someone’s memory to say something.

Phil: You can like have an argument together, saying who’s right and who’s wrong.

At least three of the above statements suggest that comments from other members of the group can provide inspiration for something to say. The importance of comments ‘triggering off’ ideas, ‘jogging your memory’ and ‘getting ideas’ off each other was stressed.

It is in this way that group discussions are creative: they have to be facilitated in the right way, there must be good or at least respectful relationships between the participants, and the research topic must be an appropriate one, but once these conditions are satisfied the creative potential for the expression of diverse viewpoints is almost unlimited. Individual interviews can also facilitate creative dialogues, but with just two participants (and with one of these possibly dominating proceedings) it is doubtful if respondents can experience the same levels of inspiration and stimulation in their conversations.

Some of the respondents saw the group discussions as an opportunity to express themselves and stated that they would be more honest and open in a group situation:

Natalie: If I’m in an [individual] interview I don’t exactly tell the truth all the time. I sort of tell them what they want to hear. But when you’re in a group you can’t do that. You’re more open because there’s other people there and you think ‘right, this is my chance to get my point across’, there’s more people to listen to you.

Section 3.6.1 indicated that there are several possible dangers with the use of group discussions and some of these limitations are reconsidered in the next section. Potential problems mentioned previously included the possibility of a ‘hothouse’ effect and the possibility of ‘dominant’ (or very restrained) participants in the discussions. Another problem concerned analysing the interviews: if group discussions are more creative they will also be more complex. However, as suggested earlier, analysis may be assisted by the nature of group interactions: the discussion exists within a (usually) meaningful framework negotiated by the group. There are still a number of strands to be brought together,
especially where the discussion has been broad-ranging with a diverse range of opinions, but this may, in some respects, be easier than conducting a qualitative data analysis on large numbers of individual interview transcripts.

(3) Group Interviews as Iterative and Flexible. Not only has the whole research process used in this project been iterative, but the group interviews themselves can be described as iterative. This applies to the whole process in the sense that each type of data collected raised questions and possibilities relating to the next phase of data collection: in particular considerations of the questionnaire responses led to further questions that could be used in the group interviews. The flexible research design allowed adaptation at each phase in the light of information collected in the previous phase. For the first session with each interview group a summary of the individual members' questionnaire responses was drawn up in the form of a chart. Anything deemed interesting, relevant, controversial or unusual by the researcher was highlighted for further discussion. Of course individual interviews can and often do build upon quantitative data collected previously, but these do not usually take place as a series of interviews with a group context in which to frame further questions and responses.

The group discussions were also iterative in the sense that students could be asked to elaborate in the second or third session on comments they made in an earlier discussion. This happened quite frequently, sometimes on the prompting of the researcher and sometimes at the request of the respondent. One-off face-to-face interviews do not normally allow such opportunities for reappraisal, feedback and reconsideration of the viewpoints expressed. Respondents are permitted to reflect not only within the discussion (time being made available, for example, when others are making points) but also across several discussion sessions.

The relatively unstructured nature of the interviews did allow for a great deal of flexibility. The only real constraints were, firstly, the need to try to keep discussion relative to the research topic (though structure and agency in youth transitions can be very broadly interpreted) and, secondly, the need for an element of comparison across the discussion groups and the college settings. Beyond these constraints flexibility was applied in all sorts of ways. Interesting issues could be explored immediately and new lines of inquiry could be opened up. An example of a topic of interest raised by the respondents will illustrate how this flexibility operated and was beneficial to the research process. This example comes from a discussion at Westdown College (Group B) concerning the impact of educational reforms on the respondents' school and college careers. What emerged strongly from this discussion, about the National Curriculum, SATs and GCSEs, was a feeling on the part of the students that they had been treated as 'guinea pigs' and that the pace of policy change had had a negative effect on their educational experiences:
PR: The National Curriculum... it came in in 1988. Would anybody like to say if they thought that was a good idea or a bad idea?

Richard: I thought it was good. At first I did anyway. Because they'd like give you a sheet and tell you what you were going to work through for the year. But before I left they changed it, didn't they, and now they've changed it again, back to the way we had it... it is easier when you have tests instead of coursework.... Basically we were mucking about... if we'd had tests I think we'd have done much better.

Martina: It would be alright if they stopped changing it around, because people just get so confused with it, especially at that age.

Richard: Now they've got SATs for 14-year-olds.

Roger: Yes, we're all guinea pigs. Like everything else that came out since GCSEs we were guinea pigs for. We didn't know whether it was going to be a good idea or not.

PR: You actually felt like you were guinea pigs did you? You felt like people were experimenting?

Roger: Yes. The only advantage was we were told that the marking [of GCSEs] wasn’t going to be so strict, because they would prove it was a good idea, so it was slightly easier..

This extract shows how, despite the initial prompting of the facilitator's question on the National Curriculum, students did indeed raise their own issues for discussion, with this section of the conversation moving between GCSEs, SATs and coursework. Whilst there was an aim to elicit student responses on their educational experiences, these fairly vociferous complaints about being treated as 'guinea pigs' were slightly unexpected (subsequent reading of the literature, however, revealed that the phrase 'guinea pigs' has been used before by students in this age group - see Bell and Howieson, 1988). In the next part of the discussion the students made similar statements concerning NVQs and GNVQs, commenting on their rushed implementation and about employers' failures to recognize GNVQ certificates (see Section 7.2). A whole range of genuine discontents had been opened up by one straightforward question on the National Curriculum and the flexible nature of the interview context allowed for exploration of these feelings in further detail.

(4) Practical Advantages in the use of Group Interviews. Section 3.6.2 discussed a number of possible practical advantages in the use of group discussions as a research technique. In retrospect a number of these advantages did apply and aided the research process considerably. The group interview was a way of contacting a relatively large
number of respondents in a short space of time: this is one reason why the technique has been widely used by market researchers. Time was an important factor in a research project that had to be completed in under three years, including design, planning, background reading, fieldwork, analysis and writing up. Although setting up the group interviews required a good deal of time and effort (in terms of travelling to the colleges, arranging and booking venues and contacting tutors, parents and students) once they were in place the demands of the research process eased somewhat. In all eleven group interviews took place lasting a total of over thirteen hours. A total of 23 students took part in the interviews with many individuals attending two or three sessions. Had all the students who attended the sessions been interviewed individually rather than in groups, then 47 individual interview sessions would have been required: 47 hours of interviewing, along with the time required to set up these meetings and to transcribe the dialogues, would have placed impossible time demands upon the researcher. Whilst in individual interviews the respondents might have had more of a chance to express their detailed individual views, against this there is some evidence, discussed above, that the groups produced detailed exchanges of viewpoints which some of the respondents have stated would not have been possible in individual face-to-face meetings.

10.5 Innovation, Reliability and Validity

In reconsidering the methodology used in this project some attention needs to be given to notions of reliability and validity. It is not easy to apply the notions of reliability and validity to a study where a multi-method approach has been used and where one of the main methods, the group interview, has been used in a particular educational context for the first time. Reference has already been made to these concepts in earlier chapters and the previous section has outlined the rationale for the use of group as opposed to individual interviews. This section makes an assessment of the reliability and the validity of the evidence produced during the course of this investigation into young people’s aspirations and feelings of control in their transition from college to the labour market. It will be argued that, although there have been some difficulties, there are several ways in which the research strategies used in this project have assisted the aim of producing reliable and valid data.

Hammersley (1992, p.67) provides the following technical definition of ‘reliability’: it refers to “the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions”. To put this in a slightly less technical way, questions about reliability ask ‘would the same results have been produced if the project had been conducted by other researchers or if similar
projects had been carried out by other researchers elsewhere? There are some difficulties in answering this question, mainly because little research of this kind has previously been carried out in FE colleges, despite the scale of change in vocational education and training in this sector in recent years.

Obviously many more studies will need to be carried out before firm conclusions can be made about the reliability of the data produced here. It should be pointed out, though, that there are several ways in which the reliability of the data produced in the course of the present project may have been enhanced. Firstly, the questionnaire is a follow-up survey to one featured in the Anglo-German Studies, and so the two sets of findings can be compared. There were no major inconsistencies between the two sets of survey findings. Similarly, many of the results presented here are consistent with the findings of the ESRC 16-19 Initiative. Certainly the data outlined in these chapters includes some new findings, but these are largely derived from the students’ very recent experiences of VET reforms, changes which were not in place when the previously mentioned studies were carried out.

Secondly, the size of the questionnaire sample (n = 223) and the fact that it was used across a spread of different subject groups in two different locations may also assist its reliability as a research instrument. Indeed, one of the conclusions developed from the survey data was that the similarities between the two sets of responses (from Westdown and Eastborough) were perhaps more remarkable than the differences. This suggests that to an extent students’ experiences of national VET policies will be similar whatever type of labour market they are located in.

Whilst there were some similarities across the interview groups, sometimes the discussions took very different directions and each group seemed to have its own distinctive character. The unstructured nature of the ethnographic group interview and its limited previous use in educational contexts makes it difficult to assess the technique’s reliability - in each discussion students may say something different or choose to emphasise a different line of enquiry. Having said this, even though a range of different groups was featured, certain topics did keep surfacing (e.g. criticisms of GNVQ courses and comments about the ‘partial’ nature of careers advice). The fact that these topics were raised independently by four different groups, with randomly selected participants, does suggest that they are important to these young people.

Having a series of discussions may also have improved the reliability of the data generated from this technique:

Because the focus group approach inherently involves conducting a number of sessions, it is possible to assess the reliability of the data... by comparing statements within and, more important, across sections. This advantage in assessing reliability is an important difference between the focus group approach and other qualitative research strategies (Knodel, 1993, p.50).
Knodel suggests two other ways of improving the reliability of focus group data: (1) by using a team of researchers, which 'substantially facilitates reliability' in the interpretation of the data; and (2) by constructing an overview grid, making detailed comparisons of responses possible (Knodel, 1993, p.50).

A team of researchers was not used in the present project, though it has been shown that a number of individuals assisted in the generation and collection of data and in verifying or refuting the findings. For example, the key informants were able to comment upon the data as they were produced, tutors could make their own observations in relation to the issues raised, especially where feedback was provided, and the students in the interview groups had several opportunities to develop, deny or confirm previously expressed opinions and attitudes. The concept of an overview grid was used and this greatly facilitated data analysis and may have helped in the assessment of the 'internal reliability' of the data. The columns of this grid were based on the four different discussion groups - Westdown A and B and Eastborough A and B. The rows of the grid were based on topics or themes, mainly, but not exclusively, taken from the discussion guide. These general themes included 'structure', 'agency', 'skills', 'college experiences' and 'educational issues'. Each of these themes could then be broken down into sub-themes, for example 'agency' was broken down into several categories including 'independence', 'responsibility' and 'decision-making'. In line with grounded theory some of these categories 'emerged' from the data, but others were developed from the research design. The overview grid made cross-group and cross-college comparisons much easier and helped to simplify what was initially a complex data analysis process.

According to Hammersley, validity "refers to the accuracy with which a description of particular events... represents the theoretical category that it is intended to represent and captures the relevant features of these events" (1992, p.67). In other words, 'did the research measure or describe what it was supposed to have measured or described?' and 'were the data interpreted appropriately and accurately?' Validity involves assessing the truth of the claims made by the researcher: these claims include judgements about the 'plausibility, credibility and centrality' of the issues presented (Hammersley, 1992, p.78). Ethnographic researchers, particularly those advocating the use of ethnomethodology, tend to try to improve the validity of their findings by providing as detailed a description as possible. The presentation of the findings in as much detail as time allows and in the forms expressed by the respondents themselves means that alternative interpretations of the data can be made. This is why much of the data reported in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 are presented in considerable detail, frequently in the form of verbatim quotations from the interviews. The comments were analysed and particular interpretations were made, but hopefully an awareness was maintained of the possibilities of alternative explanations. The use of different policy dimensions has undoubtedly helped to maintain such an awareness.
throughout the entire research process.

Student comments have been given a central place in the study, however, because their interpretations of VET policies have been under-expressed in the past and have not had well-publicised, official outlets. The research has included an element of ‘respondent validation’ “whereby the ethnographer submits a version of his or her findings to the subjects themselves” (Bryman, 1988, p.79). For example, an open question encouraged critiques of the questionnaire and, as mentioned above, interviewees could reconsider and reinterpret previously made comments. The iterative element of the research meant that categories and descriptions could be brought more clearly into focus or modified in the light of further comments from the respondents.

Linked to validity is the problem of generalisation: “The key problem is that focus group samples are usually both unrepresentative and dangerously small” (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p.14). The researcher who relies on a single case study (or a study of two colleges/labour markets) may have difficulties generalising from his or her results. However, an awareness of this problem has led to certain ‘safeguards’ being built into the research process, not the least of which is the use of group interviews in conjunction with a questionnaire - or methods triangulation. The use of multiple sources of evidence - data triangulation - overcomes the danger of relying on a single, possibly biased source, and also increases the possibility of generalisation. Student, tutor and official perspectives have all been taken into consideration and these viewpoints have been collected using a range of different methods, including quantitative and qualitative techniques. Where inconsistencies have appeared these have thrown light upon different aspects of VET policy, or have shown how young people may be more active in the transition to work than some of the relevant literature suggests.

Generalisation is also possible because the findings presented here take into account previous investigations in this field. It is important, especially with ethnographic research, to build upon previous findings and to anticipate possible future applications of the research issues and techniques used. Some qualitative researchers see generalisation as a matter of ‘fit’ between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study” (Schofield, 1993, p.221). It is for this reason that ‘thick description’ is important - the students’ feelings and viewpoints have been presented in some detail in these chapters so that comparisons can be made. An assessment can be made, if appropriate, in terms of whether or not students in other FE colleges, on other vocational courses, or even in other educational and non-educational contexts, have similar attitudes and opinions.

Thus it is argued that the research presented here has been as ‘rigorous’ as time and resources have allowed. This rigour derives from the rationale behind the choice of two differing research sites, careful planning and design of the research process, the use of
triangulation of methods and of data sources, and as full a presentation of the data as has been possible within the constraints of the study. Sometimes, where problems linked to reliability and validity have occurred, they are mainly due to the newness of some of the techniques and the settings used. The further use of group interviews in educational contexts and further research into changes in further education, particularly those affecting vocational students, will help to answer some of the questions posed in these chapters. Further cross-national and international comparisons will help in this respect. Longitudinal and biographical studies will also provide a great deal of useful information. In addition the possibility of 'backward looking' studies, whereby an adult's occupational history and the way in which he or she went through school, college and training into that occupation, is examined, should also be considered.

Difficulties have also arisen because to a certain extent a new terminology relating to youth transitions is now in use. Terms such as 'individualisation', 'career trajectory' and 'transition behaviour' are all relatively new and are still being developed. The concepts of 'structure' and 'agency' are not new, but they have not really previously been applied to youth transitions in the way that they have been here. We have a new vocabulary but have not yet fully developed or articulated the meanings of the terms in this vocabulary. We cannot measure things which are not yet clearly defined or fully conceptually developed. In this sense, much more research, both theoretical and empirical, is necessary and international comparisons would be particularly helpful in assisting this process of developing and confirming the new set of concepts relating to school to work transitions that now exists.
Chapter Eleven - Discussion: Practical and Theoretical Implications

11.1 Practical and Theoretical Implications

This thesis has examined young people's experiences of vocational further education courses in two FE colleges located in contrasting labour markets. This examination has taken place with a number of research aims in mind. For convenience these can be divided into research questions with predominantly theoretical, practical or methodological implications.

The primary research aim, to assess the relative contributions of 'structure' and 'agency' to young people's transitions to work, has important implications for social and educational theory. The study has been empirical in the sense that it has used student experiences of vocational further education as a primary source of data on this issue, but the findings relate to a number of conceptual concerns central to youth transitions theory. Linked with this, mainly through the notion of individual agency, has been the aim of trying to assess the degree of control which young people feel they have over these transition processes. The concepts of control, individualism, agency and structure, it has been argued, are important dimensions in the 'individualisation thesis' and in this respect the research has constituted an attempt to verify (or refute) the existence of individualisation processes in young people's everyday lives.

The practical research aims have been derived from these theoretical ambitions and in this respect have been secondary, but nonetheless important, aims. These have involved describing the contribution of the two FE colleges to the preparation of these young adults for the world of work, and to consider the practical impact of the 'new vocationalism' on these 16-19-year-olds' experiences and aspirations. It was inevitable that an exploration of these students' feelings and perspectives about their courses and learning experiences would produce viewpoints on the usefulness and appropriateness of recently developed aspects of post-16 vocational education, including NVQs and GNVQs, and the possible relevance of these viewpoints to policy-makers could not have been ignored. The student opinions imply the need for practical measures that could improve the quality of their college experiences.

To link the theoretical and the practical aspects of the project a distinction has been drawn between three different dimensions of policy: policy as espoused (by government), policy as enacted (by colleges and other mediating institutions) and policy as experienced (by the students). This three-fold distinction has also provided a useful way of linking national VET goals with individual, personal experiences of preparation for work.

The methodological aim of the thesis has been to take some preliminary steps towards the development of research strategies which have the potential to take into account the diversity of individual and structural dimensions in young people's school to work transitions. It has been argued (in Chapter 10) that the use of a combination of
quantitative and qualitative techniques in this investigation has considerably assisted this aim. Also the use of ethnographic techniques, including the group interview, has helped to provide an interesting and relevant account of these students' personal and subjective experiences.

The practical implications of the project's findings are considered in the following three sections of this chapter. These pull together some of the points made in the data analysis sections as they relate to policy matters. The practical implications for policy-makers at national and local levels are considered, along with the implications of these findings for individual students. The remaining sections of the chapter consider some of the theoretical aspects of the findings. Section 11.5 considers how student levels of optimism, which can be seen in some respects as evidence of feelings of personal control, might be explained through various forms of youth transitions theory. Section 11.6 summarises the main theoretical implications of this evidence, suggesting some possible ways forward for the developing and expanding literature on youth transitions with its associated 'new vocabulary'. In particular the discussion of the relative influences of 'structure' and 'agency' is linked with the 'individualisation thesis'. Section 11.7 revisits the individualisation debate and the ambiguities of this concept are highlighted in the context of the findings of this project. The suggestion is made that the approach taken here, applied to other areas of education, training and work, may help to verify or refute the existence of individualisation processes in young people's everyday lives within these settings. This in turn may assist the development of youth transitions theory and may also provide practical pointers as to how those individuals undergoing such transitions may be assisted at various levels of policy.

11.2 Implications for Policy-Makers

Throughout this investigation it has been argued that, since the student's perspective has not been included to any significant extent in previous (or official) discussions of vocational education in FE, the data produced from the student samples featured here - students who have experienced the full impact of new vocationalism - may be particularly useful in terms of providing practical pointers for future VET policy. This is partly because in the past there has been something of a gap or a 'cultural distance' between policy-makers and policy-implementers (Corson, 1991, pp.84-6) with possibly a further gap between those implementing the reforms and those (the students) on the receiving end of them. These comments are particularly appropriate to further education which has been "the cinderella of the system, neglected and undervalued by politicians, with little contact with and experience of non-advanced further education" (McGinty and Fish, 1993, p.3). Where reforms have been introduced the policy process has usually been "top-down, non-consultative, backed by assertion rather than research" (Hyland, 1994, p.103).
One aspect of national policy which the students featured in this study were clearly aware of was its 'short-termism'. They had experienced a number of changes in fairly rapid succession in their school and college careers. Without prompting many students in the interview samples used the expression 'guinea pigs' (for examples of this see the discussion extracts in Section 10.4, p.215). It seems that the government's attempts to appear 'radical' and 'innovative' by introducing an ongoing series of new ideas were treated rather sceptically by some of the students and college staff. While some of these ideas were met with approval, there were also objections and students did not like the feeling of being the subject of educational 'experiments'. The Westdown respondents were particularly vociferous on this issue and the Eastborough students also showed an awareness of their 'guinea pig' status. Several students suggested that some aspects of late secondary and further education (such as the national curriculum) had been changed around so much and so frequently that there was now a state of ongoing confusion. Comments were also made, by tutors and students, about the haste with which some NVQ and GNVQ courses had been introduced, and about problems with moderation and obtaining course materials.

Thus the 'short-termism' of several national reforms was noticed by students in the sample, as was the incoherence of some aspects of national policy. Whilst the students were reasonably satisfied with their standards of tuition, with the courses provided and with most of the college facilities, they also complained about the fact that what they were doing was not understood and, sometimes, not appreciated by outside bodies. A common complaint was that employers did not understand and did not recognise the value of the NVQ qualification. Two of the interviewees also argued that universities were not accepting the GNVQ qualification in the way that they should have done, continuing to look down on vocational as opposed to academic/A level students.

Some of the student comments suggested that the new vocationalism actually widened the vocational-academic divide. A number of the Westdown respondents, in the discussion groups, had changed courses (from A levels to a GNVQ course) and were clearly disappointed that (a) they had been inappropriately advised; and (b) their new course did not have the same level of status as their previous studies. An officer at the local Training and Enterprise Council, when interviewed, provided support for this view when he commented that "Youngsters tend to stay on the academic route until they fall off it. Very few choose the vocational route in a positive way". Recently, the Dearing Report has attempted to address this problem by stressing the parity of the three proposed tracks - academic (A levels), applied (GNVQs) and vocational (NVQs) (Dearing, 1996, p.74, para.9.27), however contradictions in official policy remain, and perhaps always will until the A level 'gold standard' approach is abolished. An examination designed for the 'most able' 20 to 30 per cent of the age group is always going to have serious implications for 'less able' students taking alternative routes.
Much of the literature on vocational further education, especially that relating to the curriculum, has stressed the need for a broad-based education, including technical education, but also embracing social skills, the arts, languages, personal development and creativity, and student comments have echoed these claims for the importance of a 'liberal' education. Several respondents emphasised the importance of social and life skills, teamwork and decision-making. Many, whilst not being complacent about the requirements for traditional-style vocational skills, also stressed the need for personal and social skills.

These broad skills are deemed by some writers to be the true skills necessary for future work and social roles, and such definitions have often been taken from 'humanitarian' visions of the purposes of education, such as Russell's claim "that the primary purpose of education is to elicit and fortify whatever creative impulse man may possess" (quoted in Chomsky, 1991, p.19). Even (then) Prime Minister James Callaghan, in his Ruskin College speech in 1976 (often quoted as the start of a new emphasis on the vocational purposes of education) stressed that: "The goals of... education... are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in society and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other, but both" (Callaghan, 1996, p.202, my emphases). The need for a broad approach has also been acknowledged by Dearing:

Education is about developing all the talents, abilities and faculties of young people. It is about developing them as human beings and about preparing them for citizenship and parenthood as well as for the world of work (reported in Times Educational Supplement, 29th March, 1996).

Previous attitudes of government and employers towards further education and training have often been based on a limited view of what skills were needed for the future, in work, citizenship and other areas, and large elements of this view have been maintained in the competence-based approach to educational and training qualifications. The students featured in this project want choices within an all round education, with a curriculum that includes the relevant technical skills, but which also takes account of social and life skills. Some aspects of the new vocationalism sound impressive, with an emphasis on 'quality', 'standards', 'competence' and 'achievement', but these words are just labels used by politicians and others: it seems that labels, images and language (in a public relations type framework rather than a truly educational one) may be being used to mask limitations in the skills and abilities being passed on to vocational students in the 16-19 age range.

The student experiences reported here were located in a period of considerable change and unrest in the FE sector. Group sizes were increasing as colleges strived to recruit the necessary target numbers of students and new funding arrangements meant that many colleges faced financial difficulties. Funding issues in FE were not a primary concern for the young people taking part in this research, though it has to be said that some did raise
the topic and several showed at least an indirect awareness of how influences of ‘the market’ and ‘competition’ were having an effect on their college experiences. The Eastborough interview respondents, particularly, expressed some dissatisfaction with levels of resources (see Section, 10.2, pp.204-5). Additionally, the fact that a large proportion of the questionnaire sample had part-time jobs (over 60 per cent) indicated that many felt that they needed to put in extra hours of paid work in order to fund their studies and their leisure activities. This seems to have become the norm for 16 to 19-year-old college students. Some of the students, along with a number of their tutors, could see the problems that might arise in their own college from a reliance on ‘market forces’ to shape FE provision. Hyland has commented that:

The history of short-lived schemes during the period of the new vocationalism - YTS, TVEI, school compacts, and the like - is symptomatic of this misguided reliance on the promotion of an ‘enterprise’ culture and a market-forces model of VET as a panacea for all our industrial and educational ills (Hyland, 1994, p.77).

Of course policies relating to FE and to education generally have to be enacted within an economic context. First class provision of vocational education and training is not a great deal of use if there are very high rates of unemployment beyond the college gates. Education policies need to be developed in conjunction with economic policy.

To sum up, the data provided by the student samples featured in this research suggest that national VET policies need to take a longer-term perspective and need to be based on a more coherent qualifications and assessment framework. Colleges, students and employers are looking for a period of stability and consolidation, with clarity in the meanings and levels of post-16 qualifications. Vocational courses should be given genuine parity with academic courses, and this will not happen where a minority take an ‘academic’ route and have better employment prospects and life chances as a result of following this option. Additionally, the findings suggest that plans should be made at national level for broad courses for all post-16 students encompassing a wide range of skills. The funding and organisation of courses and colleges needs to properly take account of the requirements of these developments and of the needs of all types of students.

11.3 Implications for Further Education

The college stands at the intersection of a great many threads in the personal and career development of individuals. It has the potential to provide continuity between different phases of education, personal life and employment. It is also at the interface between many aspects of commercial and community activity (McGinty and Fish, 1993, pp.14-15).
As this quotation suggests, the FE college has a very important role to play in assisting the young person in his or her transition to work, and indeed its role goes beyond this, helping the individual in a personal and social sense as well as in terms of employment prospects. The college is not the only institution involved in this transition, but placed as it is between national organisations, industry and the individual student, it is in a position to assist young people in a variety of ways.

It was stated in Section 7.6 that the evidence from the questionnaire surveys and the group interviews suggested that the students featured in the present research were 'broadly satisfied' with their college experiences. The fact that many of the students were optimistic and felt in control, to some extent, of their transitions, was at least partly due to the efforts of the college tutors and to the way in which the college acted as a kind of supportive framework. In general, the students were allowed a great deal of independence, but advice and support were available where necessary and both the colleges had excellent counselling services. There is always room for improvement, though, and the rest of the discussion in this section suggests some possible practical improvements that colleges in the FE sector could make in the light of the student comments which have been summarised in the data analysis chapters.

The 'successful' college tries to take account of all the influences impinging upon students' educational activities and employment aspirations. It is clear from the student comments presented in previous chapters that, in their perceptions, both structural and agency factors are operating. From the college's viewpoint, structures include the national and local economies, the local community and patterns of race, sex and social class distribution in the area. Agency, from the point of view of the college, includes the student's need for independence, autonomy and for the maintenance of an environment in which individual decision-making can be made confidently and purposefully. These requirements are particularly important for individuals in this age group who are striving to establish their adult status in society at large. It is not always easy to achieve a balance between national and local needs on the one hand, and the needs of the individual student on the other.

In recent years the latter set of needs has increasingly been served by the development of 'individualised learning' modes and 'learner-centred' courses. Often, though not always by design, these modes of learning were part of the 'new vocationalism', and it is in this way that reforms in VET have been linked with the assessment of the relative influences of structure and agency in youth transitions. It does appear that young people in these colleges do experience feelings of agency and independence, though it is difficult to determine whether these stem from developments in VET, from the individuals themselves, or from some other source. What is certain is that most youngsters in this age group enjoy their independence and opportunities for decision-making and FE colleges should allow for and, indeed, positively encourage this. The Further Education Unit (FEU), and subsequently the Further Education Development Agency, have encouraged
the development of 'The Flexible College', which is primarily a learner-centred institution. This approach, including the use of 'action plans', 'records of achievement' and similar methods of involving students in planning their futures and making decisions for themselves, needs to be continued and expanded. Learner-centredness must be reflected in actual day-to-day experiences, not just in college prospectuses and course outlines.

Some of the students complained about 'the amount of work set' and, occasionally, about the ways in which their courses were administered (see Section 7.1, p.148). These complaints, to a degree, arose from the pace at which changes were made in the curriculum, and in courses and qualification systems, and this was the responsibility of government departments and national organisations rather than of local colleges. However, the colleges could do more to co-ordinate courses and to ensure that the workloads of students are reasonable and manageable. More could be done, too, to develop the study skills of students. These are the broad-based skills that young people and employers will need in the future.

Responses to a question on 'levels of satisfaction with college experience' revealed that the factor which caused most dissatisfaction was the provision of 'vocational advice and careers guidance' (see Sections 7.1 and 7.4 and Tables 7.2 and 7.3). It should be stressed that over 73 per cent of the whole questionnaire sample were 'highly satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied' with the provision of these services, but the fact that nearly 30 per cent of Westdown respondents and 23 per cent of Eastborough students were not satisfied may cause some concern for those involved with careers advice and guidance for this age group. Students are happy to 'navigate' their way through the education system into work, but the relevant authorities and organisations must provide the appropriate maps so that a sense of direction is maintained. The relevant authorities must do as much as possible to alert students to the types of terrain that lie in front of them and to the possible consequences of decisions about which way to go.

The group discussions provided good opportunities for elaboration of this type of complaint (another example of the way in which the quantitative and qualitative approaches worked well together). Two points emerged strongly from these exchanges. Firstly, the point was made forcefully by some students that they did not have all their options made clear to them at the age of 16. This was why some respondents had changed institution and/or course after the age of 16. These students had been told simply that 'if you want to do A then you have to follow route B', they had not been told of other outcomes or occupations apart from A, nor had they been told about other routes to work apart from B. Typically, some had been pushed into the 'academic' track without a full explanation of the possibilities of NVQ or GNVQ courses. A second complaint was that sometimes careers material and advice was presented to students in a less than serious manner, almost on a 'take it or leave it' basis. Tutorial sessions that were meant to be discussions on employment, careers or higher education degenerated into irrelevant conversations and piles of leaflets were provided so that 'you could have a leaflet if you
wanted one’ (see the extracts in Section 7.4, p.159). The tone and usefulness of such sessions depended largely upon the attitude of the personal tutor. Some careers talks and local careers fairs were also criticised as being unhelpful at times.

It should be reiterated that the majority of students in the sample were more than satisfied with the careers advice provided. Eastborough College, in particular, had an excellent, mainly pro-active Careers Guidance Unit. Also some of these criticisms applied to external organisations rather than to the colleges themselves. There were also inevitably some students who had only themselves to blame for not taking or seeking advice at the appropriate time, but from the strength of these comments, and the frequency with which they were made, colleges (and schools) could undoubtedly do more to help. Educational institutions need to make students more aware of the range of options open to them, especially at critical times in their educational ‘careers’, and they also need to highlight to students the full implications of their decisions about courses, subjects and types of qualifications. As more and more options and pathways have been introduced, so the need for competent, relevant and broad-ranging advice has increased: “The post-sixteen free-for-all will be attractive to many but most people will require counselling and guidance in order to make an informed choice of education and training programme” (McGinty and Fish, 1993, p.119).

Both the colleges featured had good reputations in respect of equal opportunities and in terms of providing for students with learning disabilities. The integration of students with disabilities and special needs was an obvious and well-appreciated feature at Eastborough College. In general these issues have increased in importance as the numbers of students staying on in colleges have risen and as the colleges have increasingly had to compete with each other and with other institutions in the post-sixteen sector. There is a danger that certain types of student will be left out and that there will be a polarisation of advantaged and disadvantaged students both within and across college sites. All sections of the student population need to experience a sense of ‘agency’ and control. More research needs to be carried out on provisions for ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘low achieving’ students and equal opportunities must exist in practice as well as in mission statements. Alongside increased participation colleges should have a policy of ‘inclusiveness’. “A philosophy of inclusiveness... assumes that a college will attempt to provide for as wide a cross-section of educational needs in the local population of young people and adults as is possible within existing staffing and resource limits” (McGinty and Fish, 1993, pp.47-8, 90, 104).

Linked with the requirement for equality of opportunity is a need for the maintenance of good links with the local community. The students and tutors who took part in the research reported here all showed a keen and often detailed awareness of their local environment. The characteristics, both negative and positive, of the local economy and the range of local employment opportunities as they related to college leavers were clearly understood within these two institutions. Both had established significant ongoing links
with the community and with local employers. This was something which the colleges wanted to take further and, in drawing up plans in the future, all FE institutions will have to take full account of the changing needs of the local population.

11.4 Implications for Young People

The data presented in Chapter 8 suggest that the young people featured in this project were very much aware of a variety of external, structural influences upon their personal, social and economic development. Family influences were sometimes mentioned and the young people were also aware of the employment opportunities (or limitations upon these) presented by their local labour market. The students also frequently displayed a recognition of the possibilities of racial and sexual discrimination. This was especially true of the Eastborough respondents who were able to provide a number of practical examples of such discrimination from their own experiences in the locality.

Chapter 9, however, has shown that the students were also very concerned to display their individuality and independence. They were aware of various dimensions of the outside world and of the possible impact of these upon their own educational and employment 'careers', but were also keen to stress that, to a considerable extent, they could create their own pathways and opportunities and move independently down those that had been created for them. There is a good deal of evidence that a sense of 'agency' existed in these students' perceptions of how they coped with further education and life beyond the college. The students featured, on the whole, had high levels of self-confidence, were reasonably optimistic, and displayed a certain resilience towards problems created by their external environment.

Evidence for these traits can be found in both the questionnaire data and in the group discussion transcripts. In the former, for example, a large proportion of the sample indicated that they were confident that they would avoid unemployment (nearly 83 per cent of the sample were 'very' or 'reasonably' confident that they would avoid this situation), around two-thirds of the sample had either 'definite' career plans or a 'reasonable idea' of what they wanted to do in terms of employment, and well over 80 per cent expressed 'high' or 'reasonable' levels of skill in relation to a range of technical and social activities. Some 56 per cent indicated that they had 'often' been able to make decisions for themselves at college, with a further 41 per cent indicating that they had 'sometimes' been able to make their own decisions (Table 9.6, p. 194). Chapter 9 provides further examples of comments on levels of responsibility, confidence and independence.

In the group interviews, too, the students were keen to express their independence. Many acknowledged help from other people, but also stressed that they felt in control:
- I've just done what I wanted to do.
- ...taking advice from parents and friends, but mainly in control.
- They give us advice, but it's up to us.
- ...at college it's left up to you, whether you're going to achieve or not.
- We know what's happening, but we're also going our own way.

Comments such as these were made in all four of the discussion groups (see Section 9.5 for further examples). From the students' own perspectives they exercised relatively high levels of control and independence in their transition from school to work via college. The majority of the sample appeared to be confident and reasonably optimistic about their social and economic prospects. The possible factors behind and explanations for these outlooks are discussed in detail in the next section.

The fact that these students were aware of external factors and, at the same time, keen to express their own sense of agency and independence, shows that these young people were going through a complex transition process: "The orientations, expectations and potential achievements of the student are a dynamic and complex interweaving of personal, ideological, cultural and social structural factors" (Branson, 1991, p.95). Given that the structural influences are not likely to go away in the short term, though they can be 'resisted' and sometimes overcome at an individual level, the main implications of these findings for young people in FE (and other settings) are that they must do their utmost to develop their (already impressive) levels of confidence and responsibility. They must make maximum use of the range of educational and employment opportunities available to them.

Such possibilities have partly been created by the increased influence of 'learner centred' modes of education, though sometimes this label has been applied inappropriately to educational reforms and one suspects that increased levels of student autonomy have come from the students themselves rather than from the mechanics of any particular policy initiative. The increase in the number of options and types of courses available to students, and in modes of learning and studying, means that there is probably more scope for personal decision making between the ages of 16 and 19 than there was in previous years. There are also now more decisions to be made outside college, about part-time or full-time employment, relationships, friendships, family situations, leisure patterns and so on. The relevant institutions must help to provide frameworks for decision making and the young people themselves must take every opportunity to use their initiative and levels of independence. In other words, active individualisation should be encouraged - there is plenty of evidence that young people are willing to take on their own responsibilities and that this is what they desire.

What all of this shows is that the 'partnership' between the college and the individual student is more important than ever. Within the experience of college life there are many
ways in which students can exercise responsibility and initiative: in terms of choosing subjects, choosing types of courses, managing projects, presenting work in various formats, including group work, and completing a 'portfolio' of work and a record of achievement. As Dearing has noted, the National Record of Achievement "records achievement and has potential for further developments in helping students to take greater responsibility for their learning and in preparing them to manage their life-long learning as adults" (Dearing, 1996, p.41, para.6.1). He continues:

a vital competence that should be mastered during the later stages of statutory education is the management of one's own learning. This includes setting personal objectives, monitoring performance, reviewing work plans in the light of achievement, and reviewing both short-term objectives and long-term aspirations (Dearing, 1996, p.42, para.6.7).

Of course the possibilities of exercising these types of autonomy are dependent, to an extent, upon the student's social characteristics, background and level of school qualifications. This is the way in which structure interacts with agency. There is a danger that some students, for example those with 'special needs' of one sort or another and those who might be described as 'low achievers', might be denied an appropriate framework for independence and decision making. These types of student are entitled to independence as much as any other category of student (a point recognised by both the colleges featured in this study) and should they be denied access to certain colleges or to certain types of courses then it will become impossible for them to navigate their own way through the post-sixteen transition. This may be becoming a serious problem for further education, especially given the situation of competition between different institutions that has been encouraged by government, and it is an issue which needs further investigation.

11.5 Explanations for Student Levels of Optimism

One of the major findings of this study has been that the young people featured here have, on the whole, maintained high levels of optimism, in terms of job aspirations, along with a sense of personal independence. Similar levels of optimism existed in the two localities despite the differences in their unemployment rates and in their short to medium-term economic prospects. Whether they lived in a 'depressed' East London borough or in a buoyant labour market in the 'M4 corridor', youngsters in the 16-19 age group were primarily optimistic, at the individual level, about their job prospects.

This was an important finding with significant theoretical implications and explanations are needed as to (1) why reasonably high levels of optimism were maintained despite the difficulties in finding suitable jobs that were prevalent for school and college leavers in
these areas; and (2) why the East London respondents, who were by all accounts in a relatively depressed labour market at the time of the fieldwork, continued to be at least as optimistic as their Westdown counterparts. Several possible explanations, taken from a range of different subject disciplines, are considered briefly in this section. This discussion is by no means comprehensive, but it hopefully provides some pointers as to why the student samples managed to maintain an optimistic outlook in terms of employment prospects. It also suggests that youth transitions theory still has work to do in terms of providing explanations of how these young people experience and shape their transitions to work.

One possible explanation is that these young people were optimistic because they had been 'socialised into' a belief in choice. A decade or more of 'enterprise culture' has led the majority of these FE students to believe that there are employment opportunities available and that they will succeed economically if they make the individual effort required. This approach can be associated with the view of a 'ladder of opportunity' and the notion of a 'meritocracy'. In some senses, if this explanation is correct, then, as suggested previously, the ideological aspects of the new vocationalism, based on enterprise culture, have successfully been transmitted to this cohort of young people. Whether this is desirable or not is a separate issue. Certainly, it is no good believing in choice while at college and then finding out after you have left that your options and opportunities are severely limited because of high levels of unemployment and a depressed local economy.

Some of the comments made by students in the group interviews might, at first sight, appear to support this type of explanation, especially the discussion about 'putting the effort in' (see Section 9.1), but it would be mistaken to take this as strong evidence of an ideology of 'individualism' or of 'enterprise'. Some of the students' viewpoints could certainly be described as individualist, but they were not promulgating an 'ideology of individualism'. Their comments about 'luck' and 'effort' should not be taken in isolation, but need to be complemented with their discussions concerning race, sex and area influences. The fact that they put their own success or failure down to themselves as individuals does not mean that they believe in a culture or a system based on individual effort alone, nor does it mean that they are unaware of the structures operating upon their age group's economic opportunities. This particular type of socialisation-based explanation, like broader versions of socialisation theory, assumes a simple reproduction of dominant ideas and ignores complexities and resistances beyond the basic process of socialisation into work. For many of the students who took part in the group discussions individual effort was important, but so were qualifications and a range of other factors.

A broader and perhaps a more longitudinal view is necessary. An alternative explanation suggests that the students may be optimistic now, but they will not be so in a few years time when they will have experienced the realities of the labour market. There is a 'time lag' which will bring about a readjustment in their expectations. This was precisely what
Wallace found in her longitudinal study of school leavers on the Isle of Sheppey, an area with high rates of unemployment. She asked a sample of 119 young people what sorts of jobs they were looking for and then returned five years later to find out what occupations they were actually in. One year after leaving school, at 17 years of age “most young people still held some hope of finding rewarding employment that would lead them toward excitement and adventure and would introduce them to a world of new and interesting people” (Wallace, 1989, p.359). Five years later, however, having experienced the problems of trying to find work on the Isle of Sheppey and beyond, it was clear that these young people had shifted their job expectations downwards:

By this time, the downward trend in aspirations was confirmed, and many had finished up in worse jobs than the ones they had originally intended to do: 51% had been downwardly mobile in relation to their original expectations... it was evident that they had come to accept whatever work they were in. They were less critical of employment and more likely to accept factory jobs (Wallace, 1989, pp.361-2).

There was some evidence that this kind of downgrading process was beginning to happen to the Westdown and Eastborough respondents: many had made downward adjustments in the type of job they aimed for since leaving school (see Section 7.4, pp.156-7). In the absence of a longitudinal study it is not possible to say whether this downgrading of job aspirations will continue in the next few years. Also much may depend upon what happens in the local and national labour markets.

Another relevant factor may be the importance young people placed upon their social and leisure contexts, as well as upon their job aspirations. We have already seen that the two colleges in many ways provided a kind of supportive framework. Additionally these youngsters may have been confident partially because of the existence of support networks provided by friends, peers and family members. Although the students frequently asserted their own independence they also regularly acknowledged help from these groups of people. When asked if their leisure experiences were as important as studying, many of the interview respondents said ‘yes’, adding that ‘you need a balance’ between the two. This did not mean that they were complacent about achieving qualifications, such goals were important, but so too was the need for an active leisure life and socialising with one’s friends. College activities and the young person’s social life often overlapped and it was sometimes stated that college was ‘a good place to have a laugh’. Some of the young people’s levels of confidence may have overlapped with or boosted occupational expectations. Many of these young people were confident in general, not just in terms of skills developed and qualifications expected.

A third type of explanation might take this point further and attribute the respondents’ levels of optimism and confidence to the psychological make-up associated with this age group. At this age and in these circumstances young people had to have reasonable levels
of confidence and high expectations: not to have taken this view would have been an admission of personal failure. An individual about to enter the labour market (for a period of forty years or more) is bound to be hopeful and expectant. Additionally, group dynamics may have been operating in the interview sessions: it might be surmised that an admission of a strong possibility of unemployment is less likely within a group than in a one-to-one situation. Also these young people were beginning to experience the rights and responsibilities of adulthood and they would have been looking forward to the prospect of paid, full-time employment, the main way in which our society confers full adult status. It would have been unduly negative to have expressed concerns and worries about the new manifestations of adulthood that they were experiencing in this relatively exciting phase of their lives.

Furnham, in a review of the literature on youth unemployment, has shown how a psychological approach may help to explain these types of outlooks. Attributions about getting a job are frequently internal (i.e. to personal qualities and abilities) rather than external (e.g. to environmental or structural factors) and:

Confidence, perseverance and qualifications were all considered to be primary factors responsible for success in finding employment... Yet failure to get a job was rarely attributed to the personal shortcomings of the job-seeker himself. Thus, these results tended to support the well-established, attributional finding that success is attributed to internal factors and failure to external factors (Furnham, 1991, p.138).

This kind of finding 'fits' well with the comments and answers provided by the Eastborough and Westdown respondents. Many did attribute success to individual effort and levels of qualifications, whilst at the same time expressing the opinion, for example, that an unemployed person was not really to blame for his or her situation.

Interestingly, the view seemed to be that unemployment was something that happened to somebody else. None of the group interviewees raised the possibility of unemployment at a personal level and only eight individuals in a questionnaire sample of 223 felt 'very doubtful' about avoiding unemployment, four in Westdown and four in Eastborough. This is surprising given that the unemployment rate in the East London region was 15.4 per cent at the time of the survey.

It is almost as if some individuals were having 'fantasies' about their future work possibilities. There were a number of students who had very high professional, media, artistic or sporting aspirations, especially in the East London sample, much higher than their level of study/course would suggest as appropriate (Wallace also found that two individuals in her sample wanted to be 'rock singers'!, 1989, p.355). The proximity of the City and the West End may be important here. There is a very large labour market within travelling distance, with, theoretically, a vast array of possible occupations, including
music and media industries and a number of sporting and leisure enterprises. Some people were going to acquire jobs in these areas even if competition for them was fierce. There was also a feeling at the time that some of these high profile industries were (physically) moving into East London. For example, some of the media organisations of Fleet Street had now relocated in Canary Wharf, in the heart of the Docklands development.

This leads on to a geographical explanation of these students' levels of optimism. Both sets of respondents lived in predominantly urban areas with a large labour market (but also with a large labour supply). While the hunt for work would undoubtedly be competitive at least there were vacancies to be aimed for and these could be in a diversity of occupational areas. In this respect it was not unnatural that these youngsters should have high expectations. The existence of 'dead end' training schemes and low-paid, low-status jobs was less obvious in these two urban areas than would have been the case in a rural labour market (see Turbin and Stern, 1985). In a village, with a restricted travel-to-work area and an agricultural hinterland, the limitations of local job opportunities, unless you are prepared to move away, are obvious for all to see, and unemployment rates can be just as high in rural areas as they are in urban localities.

This type of explanation has been used by Church and Ainley to explain continued high levels of job aspirations in East London despite increasing unemployment levels. Their five-year study (1981-86) involved 150 school leavers from a comprehensive school on the Isle of Dogs: "The changes in the employment structure of the docklands and Tower Hamlets might be expected to have significantly altered young people's aspirations for work and led to a general lowering of their sights and a lack of motivation" (Church and Ainley, 1987, p.80). But data for the school leavers who left in 1986 rather than in 1981 show that this age group had aspirations that were 'often higher' than those of earlier school leaver groups:

So rather than lowering their aspirations, some respondents had transferred them to other areas of work upon realizing the limited opportunities in traditional manual work, and others had targetted them towards particular occupations. The maintenance of aspirations in spite of rising unemployment requires some explanation (Church and Ainley, 1987, p.82).

One explanatory factor for this situation, according to Church and Ainley, was that although the docklands labour market was very depressed "the City and the West End of London represent relatively buoyant labour markets compared to other urban areas and the perceived, but not necessarily real, job opportunities in these areas... maintain the aspirations of some interviewees" (1987, p.83). This type of explanation could also be applied to the Eastborough student sample.

Further explanations of these levels of optimism and high job aspirations, despite an apparent worsening of economic conditions, are possible, and a new emphasis on agency,
as well as structure, in youth transitions should assist the development of such explanations. The subjective viewpoints of these young people, whatever may happen to them in the years after leaving school or college, are important and need to be elaborated further.

11.6 Controlling the School to Work Transition

Beck has argued that studies of individualisation and related processes “all point to one central concern, the demand for control of one’s own money, time, living space, and body” (1992, p.92). This comment about the importance of personal control is supported by the findings of the present study. External factors are clearly important in shaping people’s career outcomes and other aspects of their lives, but so also are the outlooks, attitudes and aspirations of the individual. At the very least a belief in personal control was a central part of self-identity for many of these young people.

It was evident that what the respondents wanted, more than anything, in their transitions from FE to work or Higher Education, was personal control over this transition process. These youngsters accepted that they might make mistakes in their educational and occupational choices, but what many of them wanted was the opportunity to make these choices, even if their chosen options did not work out as planned. There were many instances of these students being prepared to take on their own responsibilities: they were aware of the demands as well as the privileges of adulthood. They wanted information and guidance about possible choices, but realised that ultimately decisions about courses and careers were down to the individual. With choices came an element, usually a strong element, of control.

Many seemed to feel that they did have a significant degree of control in this respect and others expressed anger when certain factors (such as racism or sexism, or the lack of good advice) created situations that were beyond their own control or restricted their individual options. A minority of students in the interview sample had come up against major structural barriers in their college to work transitions. In particular, one of the Eastborough respondents, who was actively looking to leave college for full-time work, felt that she had experienced both sexual and racial discrimination in her job applications. Her anger at these unfair and discriminatory aspects of ‘factors beyond her control’ was evident in the group discussions. She had not, however, given up her individualism to the negative structural factors that had blocked her path to work. She continued to apply for jobs and persevered with her college studies, believing that other options would present themselves in the near future. Racism and sexism had not destroyed her optimism.

The majority of students in the interview sample had not had such negative experiences of the external world of employment and training. They were insistent that they were in control, though they would take and seek advice from others where appropriate. Many
of the students' comments about careers advice and help suggested that they saw themselves as ‘navigating’ their way towards the workplace, with help here and there from some quarters, but mainly making their own way towards their occupational destinies. There may have been realignments of job aspirations and some downgrading of work expectations, but these were subtle and often gradual shifts. On a day-to-day basis these students maintained a belief in choice and autonomy, underpinned by a strong desire to achieve the best qualifications possible.

One difficulty here relates to the issue of whether or not these young people, in the 1990s, were experiencing a greater degree of choice than previous youth cohorts. We need to assess whether or not there really is more scope for choice in the 1990s than there was in, say, the 1960s or 1970s. Roberts and other ‘opportunity theorists’ pointed out as far back as 1968 that, although there were restrictive ‘opportunity structures’, young people did have ‘some scope for choice’ (Roberts, 1968). It was possible that individuals could “sometimes change the boundaries of the occupations to which they had access” (Roberts, 1995, p. 110) but in general the scope for choice was very limited and career destinies were still very predictable.

It would appear though that student outlooks of the 1990s are rather different to those of the 1960s and 1970s, when transitions to work were generally much simpler and more direct. Twenty to thirty years ago such transitions were not complicated by a vast range of vocational courses, qualification frameworks and training schemes - the need for ‘navigation’ on an individual basis was less pressing when routes and destinations were simpler and clearer. The research conducted at that time emphasised socialisation rather than individualism and outcomes rather than risks. It is, however, difficult to assess whether this historical difference is due to actual changes in student experiences (and outlooks) or whether it is due to the way in which youth transitions were investigated in the 1960s and 1970s. Since little attention was given then to student outlooks, we cannot be sure what these were. Very few studies placed the student viewpoint at the centre of the research process and even those that did (for example Willis, 1976) emphasised structures, usually class, race or gender-based structures, rather than possible aspects of individualisation.

It would seem from the data presented in previous chapters that young people in the 1990s have a very strong belief in personal choice: they can do more than push boundaries around, they really believe that they are shaping their own destinies. It would also appear that the range of opportunities has increased considerably, so that post-school options now include sixth form, further education, vocational tracks, academic tracks, mixed tracks, training in education, education in training, full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employment, unemployment, leisure and other possibilities. Sometimes these options are constrained, not least by local labour markets, and in some respects options have contracted, but generally young people seem to have a greater belief in choice than they had ten or twenty years ago. In any case agency is not the same as
choice. Agency involves making choices possible, or at least cultivating a belief that choices are possible. Agency is more active and stems from the individual, choices often come from outside and are presented to the individual. Current debates on this issue are more than just a restatement of the choice versus opportunity debate of the 1960s and 1970s.

What is interesting in the explanations of student optimism presented in the previous section, and in the comments made by the Eastborough and Westdown respondents, is the intermingling of subjective and structural factors. It seems that the manifestation of an awareness of structures takes place through the subjectivity of the actors. In other words what we have found in the data presented here is not a direct acknowledgement of structural influences, but an indirect one mediated by personal experience. The interface between structure and agency is very difficult to define and is not easily pinned down, but it appears to be an important aspect of the outlooks and attitudes of students in FE colleges about to enter the labour market.

This interface has not been considered in detail previously because of the tendency to look at youth transitions in terms of 'opportunity structures' and structural outcomes. External factors have been examined at the expense of internal, subjective elements. New terms need to be emphasised in the vocabulary attached to youth transitions. A new emphasis on biography, agency and individualisation will complement previous approaches and will help us to build up a picture of how structures are experienced at a personal level. The interface of structure and agency rests in personal, individual, biographical experience, which in turn is based upon a combination of subjective viewpoints and experience of external, structural factors. This interface is clearly an important aspect of the individualisation thesis. We now turn to an assessment of this thesis in the light of the evidence presented in previous chapters.

11.7 Conclusions: Individualisation and Young People’s Experiences

In Chapter 2 it was suggested that the individualisation thesis has helped to broaden out the discussion of young people’s transitions in contemporary society. The research presented in this thesis has suggested that we need to recognise further that young people’s experiences are not exclusively shaped by socialising and structural influences, but are also influenced by elements of subjectivity, choice and agency. It was argued that much of the research literature previous to the work on individualisation and ‘risk’ had failed to explain or account for young people’s expressions of autonomy, optimism and control in the school to work transition.

It was also suggested, in Chapter 1 (p.13), that the current project, in some ways, has constituted an attempt to empirically verify the existence of individualisation processes in young people’s everyday lives. This section summarises how the findings presented in
previous chapters may assist this aim and considers whether the data would refute or confirm an ‘individualisation hypothesis’. It also outlines some of the strengths and weaknesses of the individualisation thesis in the light of the present project.

If individualisation was not occurring then we would have expected the young people featured in this study to have placed a primary emphasis on structures and external factors as influences in their school to work transitions. Detailed and frequent comments on the importance of gender, race and class along with some emphasis on the effects of unemployment, the labour market and other external economic factors would have been necessary to refute the individualisation hypothesis. Students would not have stressed individual decision-making and personal responsibility.

While there were comments made about the effects of social structures and external economic factors, these were rather limited in both numerical terms and in terms of scope. The students had a realistic view of the potential effects of the local labour market and acknowledged that personal characteristics could have effects on career aspirations, but personal responsibility and the importance of ‘effort’ and the acquisition of qualifications were stressed all the way through the data collection process. What emerged from the data was a pattern of personal responsibility and control, with some discussion of external factors. The mix of emphases varied from student to student, but a majority of the interview respondents stressed individualism and agency in the transition to work and a majority of questionnaire respondents attached more importance to factors within the individual’s control (such as achieving qualifications) than to factors external to the individual.

If individualisation is defined as the process “whereby individuals need to map out their own routes through a confusing array of opportunities and take increasing responsibility for the risk of failure in this process” (Wallace and Cross, 1990, p.5), then there does seem to be evidence, from both the questionnaire and the group interviews, that the young people at Eastborough and Westdown Colleges were experiencing such a process. The questionnaire included a number of questions relating to individualisation processes and the findings from these are illuminating. For example, Question 35 asked ‘When it comes to finding a job, to what extent does success depend upon the individual?’ Some 56 per cent of the sample (n = 223) indicated that ‘It is very much down to the individual’: less than 14 per cent said that ‘It depends on both the individual and on other factors’, and only 16 per cent thought that ‘It depends on job opportunities in your area’, with 14 per cent not answering the question (see also Section 9.1, especially Table 9.1). This is strong support for the belief that the individual must take on the major responsibility for his or her transition to work.

The finding relating to the importance of qualifications (Question 37) may also, to some extent, provide support for the individualisation thesis. Nearly two-thirds of the sample indicated that they believed that ‘Education/qualifications’ are very important when it comes to looking for a job. This finding needs to be considered in conjunction with the
much lower proportions stating that various social characteristics were 'very important' in this respect: sex/gender 5.8 per cent; racial characteristics 8.5 per cent; social class 4.9 per cent; and family background 4.0 per cent. Between 40 and 53 per cent of respondents said that the latter social characteristics are not at all important when it comes to looking for a job (see also Sections 8.3-8.6, especially Table 8.4). These statistics can, in some ways, be seen as a strong critique of those who emphasise structural factors at the expense or personal/individual factors in youth transitions theory. Of course 'qualifications' are in some ways a product of social background, and achievement levels in examinations are clearly linked to social class and other factors, but it is interesting that in the eyes of these respondents the importance of the one factor that you, as an individual, do have control over, was emphasised at the expense of four socially ascribed characteristics. This finding, again, fits with the youngsters’ perceptions of themselves as ‘mapping out’ or ‘navigating’ their own educational and career paths.

The question about the impact of area influences on job opportunities (Question 32) also produced an interesting response: only 21 per cent of the sample felt that area was 'a big influence on employment prospects', 41 per cent of the sample indicated that area had 'some' influence and 35 per cent stated that, in their opinion, it only had a 'slight' influence. Clearly these students did not see area as a primary influence on their job prospects and since they also denied that a variety of social characteristics were 'very important' we can assume that individual effort was seen as being of central importance. It would seem that these students were willing to take on responsibility for their own progressions into work and were, on the whole, not attributing their job prospects to 'external' factors or to 'forces beyond their control'.

Comments from the group discussions also lend some support to the individualisation thesis. Many of the students described how they had taken their own decisions about college, work and possible career destinies. They had listened to and taken the advice of others, but ultimately they had been 'in control' and their success or failure was seen as their own responsibility. There was some discussion about the part that 'luck' played in finding employment, though this was something that largely applied to other people: there seemed to be an underlying belief that 'you made your own luck'. There were also some strong comments about racism and sexism from one of the Eastborough groups and this was an indication (possibly the only clear indication) of a recognition that social structures could be important. This does not, however, negate the individualisation thesis, since this approach has always recognised that structures do exist and can have an impact. The strength of the individualisation thesis is its assertion that as well as considering structural influences we also need to take account of individual agency and decision-making choices. The latter types of influence have become more relevant in the context of the diversification and fragmentation of post-sixteen options in the realms of education, employment and training.
To sum up, the data generated from the questionnaires and the interviews do tend to provide support for the individualisation thesis. 'Being in control' and taking responsibility for one's own actions on an individual basis were important to the young people featured in this study. Their comments suggest that considerations of individual agency do have a significant place in youth transitions theory and may help to explain why high levels of optimism persist in this age group despite the somewhat pessimistic tone apparent in much of the literature in this area.

The term 'individualisation', as was argued in Chapter 2, has taken the theoretical debate on youth transitions some way forward. It has at the very least created an awareness of what might be happening to young people and has pointed a way forward for research in this field: "Individualization is an example of a word that needed to be coined before people could become aware that it was happening all around them" (Roberts, 1995, p.113).

Having said this, the individualisation thesis still presents a number of problems, mainly deriving from the fact that it is still theoretically underdeveloped and empirically under-researched. It is easy to say that structure and individual 'voluntarism' are both important aspects of young people's lives. What is more difficult is to show exactly how these influences operate, how they vary, and how these variations can be explained.

There are also problems with the terminology used to describe and define the dimensions of individualisation: it is because of the ambiguity of concepts related to the individualisation thesis that a number of qualifications have had to be made during the reporting of the findings of this study. In the present context individualisation has been defined in terms of agency, choice, responsibility, independence and decision-making, but these terms, on their own or in combination, may not fully represent 'individualisation'. They have perhaps helped in clarifying the components of individualisation and have provided a useful and interesting way of assessing the possible occurrence of individualisation processes in young people's day-to-day lives, but much more work needs to be done.

It might also be helpful to map out the factors which have brought about individualisation and increased personal decision-making. There are many possible relevant factors including new technology (encouraging the 'individualisation of learning'), extended transition periods, new forms of learner centred pedagogic techniques, new types of student-centred courses, increased self-confidence in young people, the expansion of social and life skills education, more sophisticated forms of careers advice and counselling, and pressures to become 'adult' earlier stemming from a possible 'disappearance of childhood'.

It should also be noted that these findings relate only to young people in further education: they do not tell us about manifestations of individual personal control (or the lack of them) in the workplace or other non-FE situations. It may be that processes of individualisation are strong while the individual is at school or college, where many
options are available, student independence is encouraged, and a suitable supportive framework exists, but weak in some workplaces or during periods of unemployment or training, where fewer choices may be apparent and external factors are dominant. This suggests not only that further research on individualisation and choice is necessary, but also that it will be necessary to investigate such processes within a range of different institutional frameworks and structural settings.

The theoretical concepts linked to individualisation need to be refined and possibly redefined, with control and autonomy at the centre of any such scheme. Further empirical work, particularly in ethnographic and qualitative forms, will be necessary to clarify and elaborate the subjective viewpoints of young people experiencing individualisation processes. The present study has sought to make a contribution to these requirements through a provisional exploration of such processes, from the students' perspective, in a further education context.


Further Education Unit (1994b) 'Managing Transition', London, Further Education Unit.


ix


Smithers, A. (1995) 'Able to Dribble, But Not to Score?', Times Educational Supplement, 10th February, p.11.


This questionnaire is part of an attempt to find out the feelings and views of young people about the ways in which schools and colleges may help to prepare them for the world of work. The information provided will be strictly confidential.

Thank you for your assistance, Peter W. Rudd
Dr Karen Evans
Department of Educational Studies, University of Surrey.

PART I - YOUR BACKGROUND

1. FIRST NAME ........................................ Surname ........................................

2. AGE ........................................ YEARS ........................................ MONTHS

3. SEX (Please tick) MALE ☐ FEMALE ☐

4. DISTRICT/TOWN/VILLAGE OF RESIDENCE ........................................

5. WHAT IS YOUR NATIONALITY?
BRITISH ☐ OTHER (Say what) ☐

6. SCHOOL(S) ATTENDED (at age 11-16)

7. WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DID YOU OBTAIN WHILST AT SCHOOL?

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8. WHAT ADDITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS HAVE YOU GAINED SINCE YOU WERE 16, IF ANY?

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9. HAVE YOU EVER APPLIED FOR A FULL-TIME JOB?
(a) YES ☐ (b) NO ☐

If YES How many jobs did you apply for? ..................
How many jobs were you offered? ..................

State briefly the jobs you applied for ..................

10. HAVE YOU EVER APPLIED FOR A PLACE ON A TRAINING PROGRAMME?
(a) YES ☐ (b) NO ☐

If YES, how many applications did you make? ..................
How many places were you offered? (Please circle)

0 1 2 3 4 More ☐

And did you accept one of these places?
(a) YES ☐ (b) NO ☐

11. HAVE YOU EVER APPLIED FOR A FORMAL APPRENTICESHIP?
(a) YES ☐ (b) NO ☐

If YES, how many apprenticeships did you apply for? ..................

12. HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING DIFFICULTIES?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>More Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Had to repeat an examination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Had to change a course because you couldn't meet the standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Been obliged to leave a training scheme or apprenticeship before completing the training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Been made redundant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Been sacked from a job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. WOULD YOU SAY THAT, GENERALLY SPEAKING, YOU ARE FINANCIALLY BETTER OFF, WORSE OFF, OR ABOUT THE SAME AS A YEAR AGO? (Please tick one)
(a) Better off ☐ (b) Worse off ☐ (c) Same ☐ (d) Don't know ☐
10. To what extent did you have definite career plans in your final year of school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Which of the following did you experience at school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. How satisfied are you with your college experience? In terms of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. What are the main reasons you chose this college and these particular course options?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. How long have you been at this college?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. How current are college courses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currentness</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. How close to home is this college?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Do you have any career ideas that did not have any real ideas after graduation or work experience to follow?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. Why aren't you looking to leave your parents' home?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. How do you expect your performance at college to work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. How do you expect to leave your parents' home?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leave Reason</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. Please explain why you chose this college and these particular course options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22. How satisfied are you with your college experience, in terms of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23. How satisfied are you with your college experience, in terms of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(a) The National Curriculum (compulsory subjects for 11-16 year olds) | [ ] | [ ] | [ ]
(b) A 'vocational' (work-based) A level (or GNVQs) | [ ] | [ ] | [ ]
(c) Making schools and colleges independent from the Local Education Authority | [ ] | [ ] | [ ]
(d) Here mature students in colleges | [ ] | [ ] | [ ]
(e) Vouchers or 'training credits' for students to use on colleges/courses of their choice | [ ] | [ ] | [ ]

26. ARE YOU CURRENTLY IN A PART-TIME JOB?
(a) YES [ ] (b) NO [ ]

If YES, please answer questions (a) to (g) below:
(a) What is the job called? [ ]
(b) What kind of work do you do? What are your tasks and responsibilities? [ ]
(c) What is the firm/organisation called? [ ]
(d) What does the firm/organisation make/do? [ ]
(e) How big is the firm/organisation? What is the approximate total number of employees?
   1-25 [ ] 26-100 [ ] 101-500 [ ] 501 and over [ ]
(f) How long have you worked there?
   Years [ ] Months [ ]
(g) Why did you want to work part-time (in addition to being at college) e.g. additional income, useful experience, to help parents...

27. In what ways have you looked for work? (Tick all those that apply)
(a) Been to the careers office [ ]
(b) Visited Jobcentre [ ]
(c) Looked through newspaper adverts [ ]
(d) 'Phoned or visited employers [ ]
(e) Asked family [ ]
(f) Asked friends [ ]
(g) Asked people at work [ ]
(h) Any other way? Please say what [ ]

28. WE WISH TO ASK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT), WHICH INCLUDES MICRO-COMPUTERS, ELECTRONICS, MODERN OFFICE AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS FACILITIES
(a) Do you consider yourself to:
   (i) - have little or no experience of the use of IT [ ]
   (ii) - have some experience in the use of IT [ ]
   (iii) - have a lot of experience in the use of IT [ ]
(b) Where did you get most of your experience of IT? (Tick all that apply)
   Home [ ] Training centre [ ]
   School [ ] Work [ ]
   College [ ] Somewhere else [ ]

29. DO YOU HAVE ANY SKILLS WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN RECOGNISED IN FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS? FOR EXAMPLE, MENDING THINGS, HOBBIES, DEALING WITH PEOPLE
(a) YES [ ] (b) NO [ ]

If YES, please give details
   [ ]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>(a) not at all</th>
<th>(b) not important</th>
<th>(c) moderately important</th>
<th>(d) extremely important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>factor one</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factor two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factor three</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factor four</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factor five</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I expect to be:

39. What do you think of the job that you would like to have?

33. How likely do you think you will find suitable employment when you graduate from your full-time education?

**Note:** The text is filled with various symbols and appears to be a form or questionnaire, but the specific content is not legible due to the nature of the symbols used.
YOUR VIEWS ABOUT JOBS AND TRAINING

41. PEOPLE HAVE VERY DIFFERENT OPINIONS ABOUT MANY THINGS. HERE IS A LIST OF OPINIONS. Read each one and put a tick in the box that best describes your own opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) A person must have a job to feel a full member of society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) The most important thing at work is to get ahead</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Only at work can you develop your skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) It's important to hang onto a job even if you really don't like it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Earning high wages is the most important thing about a job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) I'd rather have a job which does not interfere with my private life and leisure activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Getting a job today is just a matter of chance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) I think a training in new technology will help me in the future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YOUR SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

43. WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO CONSIDER SOME ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE AT THE PRESENT MOMENT. FOR EACH ONE, PLEASE INDICATE HOW SATISFIED YOU FEEL ABOUT IT.

Very satisfied | Satisfied | Not sure | Dissatisfied | Very dissatisfied
---|---|---|---|---

(a) The work you are doing now (including college work) |  |  |  |  |
(b) The local district you live in |  |  |  |  |
(c) Your standard of living - the things you can buy and do |  |  |  |  |
(d) The way you spend your leisure time |  |  |  |  |
(e) Your present state of health |  |  |  |  |
(f) The education you have received |  |  |  |  |
(g) What the future seems to hold for you |  |  |  |  |
(h) Your friendships |  |  |  |  |
(i) Your family life |  |  |  |  |
(j) The present government |  |  |  |  |

YOUR ACTIVITIES AND VIEWS

44. WHEN YOU ARE WORKING FULL-TIME, WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE A MEMBER OF A TRADE UNION?

(a) YES | (b) NO
Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If there is anything else you would like to tell us, please write it in.

If there is more information you think we should know about, please write it in.

Thank you for your cooperation.
APPENDIX 3 - GROUP DISCUSSION: INTERVIEW GUIDE

A LIST OF POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

STUDENTS' PRESENT SITUATION

Reasons for choosing this college
General opinions about the college
Reasons for choosing this course
Opinions about the course
Opinions about standards of work/lecturing
Decision-making, taking on responsibility
Career advice from the college
Who has worked? Full-time or part-time?
Looking for work. Job-seeking strategies
Opinions on recent changes in education
The locality. What do you think of where you live?
Atmosphere of the group

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Optimism/pessimism about finding a job
Definite career aims/aspirations
Flexibility about taking jobs
To what extent is finding a job down to the individual?
Feelings of control in the transition to work
Attitudes towards unemployment
Influence of gender, race, social class, family background
Has course/college helped you prepare for work?
Social, geographical and individual mobility
What will you look for in a job?
Relationship between work and leisure
Work patterns and family life
What do you expect to be doing in 5 years time?

STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS

Age range, schools attended
Area of residence, familiarity with the locality
Details of courses, examinations taken
Attitudes of parents to school, college, work
Previous work, training, vocational experience
Career advice at school
Career plans when at school
Decisions at 16 plus
When did you feel 'adult', independent?