Research Report

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For Me or Not for Me?
- That is the Question

A Study of Mature Students' Decision Making
and Higher Education

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Employment.

Contents

1   RESEARCH RATIONALE, THEMES AND METHODS

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Summarises the statistical background which motivated the research; the decline in mature student entry to HE between 1995/6-1998/9

♦ Provides an explanation of and rationale for the conceptual approach which highlights national, labour market, institutional and personal factors as motivators for HE entry

♦ Details the research questions which stem from this conceptual approach

♦ Outlines the research methods employed

1.1   Rationale for the project

This research project arose following concerns about the fall in mature student enrolments to higher education (HE), identified in the original research specification from the then DfEE as a decline of 12% between 1997/8 and 1998/9. Evidence was also presented by the then Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) in a briefing note on Widening Participation (CVCP 1999a), which reported a 9% decrease in full-time mature applicants in May 1999, using data supplied by the Universities Central Admissions Service (UCAS). As a follow-up to that report, further work was undertaken by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and UCAS for CVCP to explore this decline and to determine 'whether this was part of a longer term trend and whether participation by certain groups of mature students, or those in specific geographical regions, had declined more significantly than others'. The work analysed mature student participation in HE between 1994/5 and 1998/9 and was circulated to CVCP members as an Information Note (CVCP 1999b). The key statistical findings of that study showed that:

♦ the decline in mature entrants was greatest amongst white males, both for full-time and part-time courses and for first degree and Higher National Diploma (HND) courses

♦ the decline related to most mature age groups

♦ there was a particularly high percentage decrease in direct mature entrants as opposed to those who apply through UCAS.

It was this evidence of a decline in mature student participation that provided the basis for the research described here which aimed to 'get behind' this statistical picture and to describe qualitatively some of the issues which encourage or discourage potential mature students when they are deciding whether to enter HE. The methodology was designed to focus intensively on potential and new mature entrants in specific subject areas and in a number of institutions, which accounted for a significant proportion both

of mature students in HE and of the decline in the numbers of such entrants (see 1.5 below and annexe 2). These are not fully representative of all mature entrants (see figure 4, para 4.1 for a comparison) and care should be taken to avoid drawing conclusions on that basis.

1.2   The statistical background

Initial analysis of more comprehensive data (HESA 1999) for the period 1997/8 to 1998/9 added to the CVCP findings and suggested a number of other significant trends (annexe 1). Firstly, while there was a decline in full-time enrolments, there was an increase in part-time numbers, a trend that has been developing over several years (Davies 1999). Although this was from a low base for first degree courses, it was from a higher base for other undergraduate courses. Secondly, there were gender differences: the largest decline being among full-time men on other undergraduate courses and the largest rise among women on part-time first degrees. Thirdly, there were differences between subject areas: a decline in enrolments in traditional 'male' subject areas on full-time first degrees but also in business and administrative studies on other undergraduate courses. Fourthly, the largest percentage changes and the biggest differences between the two years were between age groups. Full-time enrolments showed the most significant changes: on first degree courses the percentage reduction increased with age to -14% for the 25+ year old age group; and on other undergraduate courses was -12% for the 21-24 year old age group. Although on part-time courses there was an increase in enrolments for both first degrees and other undergraduate courses, the increase was smaller for mature entrants than for the under 21 age group.

The CVCP analysis that informed the research specification also showed significant differences between regions. Other analysis of the data for Scotland (see for example Osborne 1999, Bamford and Schuller 1999) also showed differences in the pattern of enrolments between part-time and full-time students; and a high and growing percentage of new entrants enrolled for higher education in the further education (FE) sector. However, the most recent data for England (FEFC 1999) suggested that student enrolments for HE level study in FE had fallen.

The trends in participation that characterised the late 1980s and early 1990s have clearly changed in the late 1990s. Patterns of participation in higher education study are becoming more complex, on the supply side as the institutional base and the curriculum offer diversify, and on the demand side as the needs, expectations and aspirations of mature students change. This research project sought to explore the complexity of these patterns drawing on supply side data and also used a variety of methods to explore the demand side in depth. The main focus of this work was the range of structural, institutional, financial and personal factors which might interact and impact on the individual decision making process of mature learners.

1.3   Conceptual background

Essentially there are four types of factor that impinge on the participation of mature students in HE: national financial and education policy; economic and labour market characteristics; the policy and practice of HE (and FE) institutions; and individual background and circumstances. National financial policy issues include the impact of loans, grants, fees, benefit regulations and access funds; and educational policy includes the general expansion of HE and the strategies to widen participation. Economic factors focus on changing labour market opportunities in terms of the number and type of

jobs available, changes in work-based learning and employer provided training opportunities. For many mature students the local and regional labour market may have greater significance but national and international trends may also influence their decisions. Institutional factors focus on mission and policy in relation to mature students (Davies et al 1994), partnership arrangements (e.g. compacts and franchising affiliations), growth of HE level study in FE colleges (Osborne 1999), growth of part-time and more flexible modes of delivery (Davies 1999), changes in HE curriculum offer (e.g. nurse education now in HE), and the range of subject areas and types of qualification available and admissions practice (e.g. selective growth in GNVQ admissions).

Individual factors include personal and social characteristics, financial circumstances and attitudes to debt, educational background and qualifications, domestic situation and location, occupational status, perceptions of labour market opportunities and value of HE qualifications, career aspirations, support (if any) from employers, friends and family members.

All these factors interact and impact on individual decisions in different ways, depending on individual backgrounds and circumstances. Furthermore, making a decision to enter HE is not a simple single event for most mature students; it is a process where differing factors have salience at different times (Williams 1997). Neither does the process lead continuously in the same direction: those on qualifying courses may not apply to HE; those who apply may not accept a place; those who accept may not enrol. It was therefore important to aim to capture at least one whole applications cycle, particularly in relation to those who choose not to enter HE. This research project therefore sought to include all of these factors by including entrants and acceptors who did/did not enrol at the start of the 1999-2000 academic year and those who were potential entrants to the 2000-2001 year.

Academic theorisations concerning individual decision making around entry to HE tend to focus on the range of social factors but such research had not explored the relative importance of different factors or the interaction between them. More qualitative studies, whilst acknowledging social categorisations, theorise the return to HE in terms of identity shifts (Green and Webb 1997, Britten and Baxter 1999) looking at the personal meaning of becoming an adult learner. Such studies provide a range of important insights but rarely include personal financial decisions as a significant element. There is also growing evidence of the mismatch between the expectations of graduates in terms of employment (Purcell, Pitcher and Simm 1999) and the recruitment strategies of employers (Purcell and Hogarth 1999), which may be impacting in as yet unexplored ways on the entry decisions of adult learners.

The research described in this report was designed to inform an understanding of these patterns in more detail and to explore these explanations in greater depth, through the study of groups of qualified and qualifying potential entrants and a sample of recent entrants in case study institutions located across the UK. Through the use of key case study HE institutions (HEIs) and selected 'critical case' subject areas within them, insights generated by previous quantitative and qualitative studies were built upon and the impact of more recent policy developments were explored.

1.4   Research questions

The research questions and methods proposed were designed to explore changes in the patterns of recruitment of mature students, apparent in the national data. At each point and at each level in the enquiry, patterns of decision making and the interaction between critical factors were related to the social characteristics and the regional location of students in order to generate data that can inform

policy. Whilst the methodologies used allowed for open ended questioning so that responses were not constrained by expectations of the research team, the following particular research questions were developed and investigated.

1) What influence on application and entry to HE do financial factors (e.g. fees, loans, access funds, benefits, New Deal) have? Is there a cumulative effect in the perceived costs or a critical point at which the cost or the debt overtakes the perceived benefits? How important is loan repayment in long term planning? How do potential entrants assess the relative cost of full-time and part-time study? Do they make rational economic decisions of this kind? To what extent do they understand the financial implications and consequences?

2) Does employment status – past and/or present experience and future aspirations – make a difference to the way in which the financial factors are judged? How do perceptions of local or national labour market opportunities impinge on the decision to enter? Can such factors explain regional differences in adult participation? How do potential mature entrants perceive the debates about public/private investment in lifelong learning in relation to their individual career/employment planning?

3) How has the policy and practice of the FE colleges and HE institutions (the curriculum offer, mode of delivery, compacts, franchising etc) acted as a motivator to entry or to a specific form of participation? How does the increased availability of part-time provision affect decisions?

4) How do individuals make the decision to apply or enter or not to apply or enter a particular institution to study at higher education level? How does the social background and educational/work experience of potential entrants influence their decision? How do identity, career aspiration, financial considerations and other factors interact to motivate or inhibit entry? Do a number of factors accumulate to a critical turning on/off point? How can the gender and age group differences in mature entry be explained? Does flexibility in provision 'warm up' adults but the consequent length of time to achieve qualifications have a 'cooling off' effect?

1.5   Research methods

An outline of the research methods is set out here. Further details of the methodology are provided in annexe 2 and details of the data obtained are set out in chapter 2.

The design of this research was not intended to produce a large scale representative sample of all mature new entrants or of all potential mature entrants (in fact the latter would not be possible since the total population of potential mature students is not known) and the results presented in this report should not be read in that way. Rather it was intended, within the budgetary constraints, to access as large a number as possible of people on the cusp – in the process of deciding or having recently decided whether or not to enter HE. Thus it focussed on case study HE institutions where there were both large number of mature students and where there appeared to have been significant decline in the recent period. Through these HEIs, new mature entrants (in 1999) in specific subject areas were able to be identified and contacted using a questionnaire; and through their guidance and recruitment activities, their own feeder provision and their local FE colleges, potential entrants (in 2000 or later) were identified and contacted by a questionnaire, focus groups and interviews. Thus a range of methods and tools were used to elicit rich qualitative data rather than quantitative representative data. The results of the

questionnaires and interviewed are reported in percentage terms in order to indicate the scale of the response among the specific groups targeted for study.

The research funded by the then DfEE drew on case studies in 9 HEIs: 7 in England, 1 in Wales and 1 in Scotland and the selection of these is described in chapter 2. The main body of this report is based on these 9 case studies. Chapter 9 presents a summary of the findings for Scotland including 3 additional case studies funded by the Scottish Executive.

In each of the **case study HEIs, interviews** were conducted with key personnel to elicit changes in policy and practice and in patterns of mature student recruitment, regional/local economic or other issues, perceptions and understandings of the reasons for trends in mature student participation. Also in each of the **case study HEIs, 3 subject areas** were identified where there had been significant change (usually a downturn) in the recruitment of mature students. The 'entrants questionnaire' was distributed to a sample of new mature entrants to the case study HEIs in 1999, in the selected subject areas. A total of 866 responses were received and further information on this sample is set out in chapter 2.

The **'potential entrants questionnaire'** was distributed to mature applicants for 1999 entry who had been offered and accepted a place but did not enrol. It was also distributed to potential entrants in 2000 who were unable or unwilling to be interviewed (see interviews below). A total of **79** valid **responses** were received.

For each of the selected subject areas (3) in each of the case study HEIs (9), a qualifying route was identified – a total of **27 qualifying routes**. These included a range of different kinds of provision: in-house and FE based Access courses, A levels, year 0/foundation courses, non-advanced and advanced vocational courses and community based programmes.

In each of the qualifying routes, **a focus group** was conducted, with a total of **220 participants**.

In addition, **187 interviews** were conducted with individuals identified through the case study HEIs and the qualifying routes. They included:

- ♦ current and past participants on qualifying routes

- ♦ those who had left qualifying routes prior to completion

- ♦ direct applicants to the case study HEIs

- ♦ those who approached the HEIs through individual routes such as advice and guidance services, and open days.

2 PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Sets out the patterns of participation of new mature entrants to HE in the period 1995/6 to 1998/9

♦ Shows a decline in mature entry to full-time first degree and DipHE/HND/HNC programmes when nursing is excluded

♦ Shows a more varied and variable pattern in mature entry to part-time first degree and DipHE/HND/HNC programmes with some indication that in most regions the trend appeared to be upwards in the more recent years

♦ Presents the data for new mature entrants in the 9 case study HEIs showing similar patterns

2.1 National and regional trends

The starting point for this research was an investigation of the trends in mature student participation by region, in order to identify 9 case study HEIs. To do this we used the HESA December returns from institutions. The main advantage of this data (rather than that based on the July returns) was that it was available more quickly: the data on entrants to the academic year 1998/9 was available at the start of our project (December 1999). Although the December returns tend to be less accurate than the July returns because they are completed so early in the academic year, the differences were not great for new mature entrants to full-time courses. There were more significant differences for new mature entrants to part-time courses, especially in those HEIs that recruit in the second semester. However, since we were able to identify these we were able to allow for it. The academic year 1994/5 was the first year for which HESA collected data and in a number of respects is not comparable with subsequent years – we therefore took 1995/6 as the starting point for our analysis. In addition, over the period 1995/6 to 1998/9, nursing was incorporated into HE, but into different institutions in different academic years. Time series data are therefore difficult to read, since the underlying trends are obscured, particularly as nursing is predominantly female. In order to overcome this problem, we excluded nursing from our analysis. The resulting data is set out in table 1 for full-time and table 2 for part-time, new mature entrants, by region, for the UK.

Table 1 shows that for new mature entrants to full-time first degrees and DipHE/HND/HNC programmes (excluding nurses), the pattern was clear and fairly consistent over the period 1995/6 to 1998/9. In England, in almost all regions, there was a decline year on year, with the greatest percentage decline between 1997/8 and 1998/9. The only exceptions were in the Eastern region and the West Midlands where there was a slight increase between 1996/7 and 1997/8. Greater London, although experiencing

a smaller decline than most other regions was the biggest region in terms of numbers. In Wales, there was a decline each year from 1996/7 onwards and in Scotland there was a similar pattern of decline but by a smaller percentage. In Northern Ireland the pattern was rather more erratic year on year, but nevertheless over the whole period there was a significant decline.

Table 1

Mature, UK domiciled, new entrants to HE, 1995/6 to 1998/9, Full-time,
First degree and DipHE/HND/HNC, excluding nursing, regions

					% change	
Region	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	1995/6-1998/9	1997/8-1998/9
East	4,343	3,569	3,640	3,053	-29.7	-16.1
East Midlands	4,868	4,328	4,118	3,457	-29.0	-16.1
Greater London	18,238	17,388	16,181	14,190	-22.2	-12.3
North East	3389	2,902	2,758	2,422	-28.5	-12.2
North West	9,636	9,133	8,535	6,811	-29.3	-20.2
South East	7,956	7,593	6,636	5,735	-27.9	-13.6
South West	5,339	4,688	4,512	3,855	-27.8	-14.6
West Midlands	5,528	4,732	5,101	4,326	-21.7	-15.2
Yorks & Humberside	6,254	6080	5,611	4,757	-23.9	-15.2
Sub-total England	*65,551*	*60,413*	*57,092*	*48,606*	*-25.9*	*-14.9*
Northern Ireland	1,127	860	907	788	-30.1	-13.0
Scotland	5,711	5,745	5,283	5,093	-10.8	-3.6
Wales	4,016	4,218	3,774	3,352	-16.5	-11.2
Total (excl Nursing)	*76,405*	*71,236*	*67,056*	*57,839*	*-24.3*	*-13.7*
Nursing	5,033	7,285	7,322	6,657	+32.3	-9.1
Total (incl Nursing)	*81,438*	*78,521*	*74,378*	*64,496*	*-20.8*	*-13.3*

Source: HESA December individualised student returns for 1995/6, 1996/7, 1997/8, 1998/9

Table 2

Mature, UK domiciled, new entrants to HE, 1995/6 to 1998/9, Part-time,
First degree and DipHE/HND/HNC, excluding nursing, regions

Region	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	% change	
					1995/6-1998/9	1997/8-1998/9
East	1,841	1,311	1,422	1,518	-17.5	+6.8
East Midlands	2,002	1,584	1,680	1,676	-16.3	-0.2
Greater London	6,778	5,737	5,340	4,846	-28.5	-9.3
North East	1,583	1,322	1,204	1,318	-16.7	+9.5
North West	3,663	3,671	3,408	3,503	-4.4	+2.8
South East	1,555	1,801	1,615	1,703	+9.5	+5.4
South West	1,510	1,363	1,225	969	-35.8	-20.9
West Midlands	2,955	2,955	2,718	2,938	-0.6	+8.1
Yorks & Humberside	2,263	2,073	2,010	2,031	-10.3	+1.0
Sub-total England	*24,150*	*21,817*	*20,622*	*20,502*	*-15.1*	*-0.6*
Northern Ireland	765	752	795	957	+25.1	+20.4
Scotland	1,063	895	937	1,276	+20.0	+36.2
Wales	2,235	2,275	2,262	2,693	+20.5	+19.1
Total (excl Nursing)	*28,213*	*25,739*	*24,616*	*25,428*	*-9.9*	*+3.3*
Nursing	7,626	7,077	7,302	6,564	-13.9	-10.1
Total (incl Nursing)	*35,839*	*32,816*	*31,918*	*31,992*	*-10.7*	*+0.2*

Source: HESA December individualised student returns for 1995/6, 1996/7, 1997/8, 1998/9

Table 2 shows that for mature new entrants to part-time study over the same period, the pattern was very different – both more varied and more variable between regions and from one year to another. In most regions of England over the period as a whole there was a decline but this disguises an increase between 1997/8 and 1998/9. The exceptions were in the East Midlands, where the number was almost the same in the two years, and in Greater London and the South West where the decline continued and indeed grew between 1997/8 and 1998/9. In Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland there was a general upward trend particularly strong in Scotland in the last year of the period (although the numbers were relatively small).

Overall therefore the data suggested that the decline in the number of new mature entrants to full-time study was persistent and had accelerated between 1997/8 and 1998/9. This trend was, however, weaker in Scotland and Wales than for the rest of the UK. For part-time study, in most regions over the last two or three years of the period, the number of new mature entrants was increasing and this trend seemed to be particularly strong in Scotland (albeit from a low base). There were two notable exceptions to this trend: Greater London and the South West.

2.2 Nine case study HEIs

The analysis set out above informed the selection of case study HEIs and suggested the geographical distribution of the institutions. Further, in order to take account of institutional factors and to access a sufficient number of mature new entrants for the questionnaires, we needed to select HEIs that had experienced a decline in mature entrants in recent years but that nevertheless still had significant numbers in a range of subject areas, modes of study and qualification aims. The approach taken when selecting the individual case study HEIs was therefore a pragmatic one, with the aim of concentrating fieldwork efforts on those areas where we were most likely to pick up evidence on the types of factors at play; it was not intended that this would be a representative sample of all potential or new mature students. The patterns of participation in the 9 HEIs selected on this basis are set out in tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3

Mature, UK domiciled, new entrants to HE, 1995/6 to 1998/9, Full-time,
First degree and DipHE/HND/HNC, excluding nursing, 9 case study HEIs

Case study HEI	Region	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	% change	
						1995/6-1998/9	1997/8-1998/9
UK1	Gtr London	780	859	718	478	-39	-33
UK2	Gtr London	1,835	1,840	1,598	1,455	-21	-9
UK3	S East	912	854	704	637	-30	-10
UK4	W Midlands	1,447	1,232	1,323	1,170	-19	-12
UK5	E Midlands	1,148	1,198	920	747	-35	-19
UK6	Wales	511	655	554	503	-2	-9
UK7	N West	1,962	1,938	1,758	1,512	-23	-14
UK8	Y & Humbs	1,416	1,274	1,077	999	-29	-7
UK9	Scotland	491*	975	764	721	+47*	-6

Source: HESA December individualised student returns for 1995/6, 1996/7, 1997/8, 1998/9

Note*: The 1995/6 figure for the Scottish HEI was not considered to be valid so that despite the increase over the whole period shown in table 3, there was a clear decline between 1996/7 and 1998/9

Table 4

Mature, UK domiciled, new entrants to HE, 1995/6 to 1998/9, Part-time,
First degree and DipHE/HND/HNC, excluding nursing, 9 case study HEIs

Case study HEI	Region	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	% change	
						1995/6-1998/9	1997/8-1998/9
UK1	Gtr London	78	62	51	99	+27	+94
UK2	Gtr London	659	549	576	451	-32	-22
UK3	S East	302	237	210	283	-6	+35
UK4	W Midlands	819	727	444	661	-19	+49
UK5	E Midlands	544	479	358	426	-22	+19
UK6	Wales	442	438	479	437	-1	-9
UK7	N West	932	987	1,076	1,071	+15	<-1
UK8	Y & Humbs	390	355	252	294	-25	+17
UK9	Scotland	392*	263	174	350	-11*	+101

Source: HESA December individualised student returns for 1995/6, 1996/7, 1997/8, 1998/9

Note*: The 1995/6 figure for the Scottish HEI was not considered to be valid so that despite the increase over the whole period shown in table 3, there was a clear decline between 1996/7 and 1998/9

In the 9 case study HEIs there was a clear and persistent decline in the number of mature new entrants to full-time study and a more variable pattern with a recent upward trend in part-time study in some institutions.

It should be noted that, without exception, the largest numbers of mature entrants are to be found in the post-1992 universities. In pre-1992 universities there are not only far fewer mature entrants but there are no HND/HNC programmes and very little part-time undergraduate provision. Nevertheless, it was important to include one pre-1992 university and one institute of higher education in order to explore different institutional factors. In general, the resulting sample of HEIs had both a higher than average number of mature new entrants and had experienced a decline in entry to full-time programmes, higher than the average in their regions. They were not therefore in any sense 'typical' but were primarily designed to provide access to people and data, which would enable us to investigate the patterns of participation from the learners' perspectives.

3 INSTITUTIONAL VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Outlines the rationale for and nature of the institutional interviews undertaken.

♦ Reports the variety of informant responses to an understanding of mature student recruitment in terms of: national trends and policies, labour market and employment factors, personal and individual factors and institutional factors

♦ Summarises the institutional perspectives and agendas showing that there are differences both between and within HEIs

♦ In general, for HEI management the concept of their market was crucial. Mature students were sometimes seen as central to the extent that they had been mainstreamed; at the other end of the spectrum one HEI was seeking to focus almost entirely on young students as part of a positioning strategy in the hierarchy of universities.

♦ For subject leaders and tutors the local labour market and employers' policy and practice in supporting their employees was seen as very important in vocational areas.

♦ Subject tutors also saw student finance as an important factor in the decline of mature student entry. This was expressed particularly strongly by those in non-vocational subject areas.

3.1 The respondents

The rationale for undertaking interviews with a range of staff in both HE and on feeder courses was twofold: firstly to obtain the views of providers as to the reasons for the decline in mature student entry; secondly to gather contextual data which might reveal other explanations of inter and intra institutional differences in recruitment patterns. Each institution nominated a 'key informant' (KI), usually a member of the senior management team, who in turn provided access and introductions to other contacts and particularly to course leaders and subject tutors in selected subject areas (KTs). FE and community based contacts stemmed partly from information provided by HE subject leaders and partly from 'cold calling' by researchers highlighting particular qualifying routes. The picture presented therefore reflects the diverse perspectives of those informants who came into contact with the project. The dispersed nature of much decision making within HE meant that key informants did not always know what initiatives were being undertaken or may not have valued them highly.

On several occasions staff outside HE suggested contacts inside HE that key informants had not named. Thus the views reported here are illustrative of staff at differing levels of responsibility within institutions; they do not, and were not intended to, provide a systematic account of the complete range of views within any one institution or across the nine case studies. They do however, reflect the different ways HEIs are organised and the different emphases placed on provision for mature students as a framework for making sense of the learners voices which we report in the following chapters.

3.2 National trends and policy factors

3.2.1 Changes in the structure of the further and higher education sectors

Higher education in the UK has undergone considerable change over the last 20 years, moving from an elite system to mass provision with participation rates doubling between 1981 and 1995. Some expansion in HE provision has occurred in FE colleges, particularly in Scotland, with adults benefiting. Attention was often drawn by both KIs and KTs to the complex articulation arrangements that exist between FE colleges and HEIs: franchising of one or more years of university study to colleges; entry via HNC or HND to year 2 or 3 of a degree (i.e. analogous to the American '2 + 2 degree'); the creation of a 'top-up' third year of an HND programme to provide a degree validated by a university. The boundaries between sectors have therefore become blurred, in some cases as a result of institutional policy. However, as some HEIs also pointed out, there was also growing competition for students, both young and mature, from the FE sector, where familiarity and closer geographical location may well make them the first choice for mature students. It was argued that this may explain some of the decline in mature entry to universities.

3.2.2 Demographic trends

Most respondents made no mention of demographic trends as a factor in their recruitment strategies. However, there was a suggestion from one HEI that, since the numbers of school leavers have been declining, there was a need to recruit a higher proportion of young people **and** more mature students if expansion targets were to be met. Further, in Scotland, it was suggested that while in the past '*mature entrants were often 'second chance' learners, aged 30 or more – Access students are now younger*' (Access co-ordinator). Similarly, in one of the English HEIs, the KI believed that the average age of mature students was declining: '*there are more younger people, in their early 20s, on courses than five years ago, and also more men*'.

Some speculated that after years of mature student recruitment the pool of potential students had shrunk. Data from qualifying routes on this issue was varied. Where time series data were available (in an FE college linked to UK6), Access recruitment had actually increased since 1996-7, and although fewer students completed their courses, numbers progressing to HE had changed little. However, one Open College Network provided data showing a small decline in level 3 recruitment, a shift to vocational courses, a larger non-completion rate and fewer of those with certificates going on to HE; and one HEI reported that despite maintaining numbers in Year 0 Science the mature student proportion had declined since 1997 with larger decreases in 1999-2000.

3.2.3 National policies on widening participation

Government policies implemented through the Funding Councils have both exhorted HEIs to recruit and added a funding premium for particular groups of students as part of the steer towards widening participation, leaving HE in no doubt as to their intentions. Several KIs and KTs mentioned that the

Widening Participation Report (HEFCE, 1997) or its Scottish equivalent (SHEFC, 1999) indicated the need to attract people from other under-represented groups, rather than just mature entrants: 'Widening Participation is seen in general terms – not just targeting mature students'. When senior managers talked of positioning their institutions in the HE market they saw themselves as responding to government wishes to increase the proportion of young people and to what they read as an increasing emphasis on widening participation in the younger age group. For some HEIs simply increasing numbers of young entrants meant drawing at least in part from under-represented groups without initiating special programmes: 'we have extraordinarily qualified, excellent, ethnic young students from school'. As a consequence at management level in several HEIs there was little attention paid to the mature market per se. Target groups were described in terms of other characteristics:

> 'we have lots of ethnic minorities'
>
> 'we are well known for being good at accepting people with disabilities, especially dyslexia'
>
> 'we have a special open day for part-time students'.

One KI reported that the university received '*plenty of ethnic minority students, mostly young and straight from local schools and so there is no need to recruit mature students*'. Significantly, no KI highlighted specific funding incentives attached to mature students as instigating policy priorities, or influencing them to any great extent.

Most institutions were involved in some form of Widening Participation project (some more than one) for which specific funding had been made available but some were paving the way for the future by targeting young (14-16 year old) school pupils in disadvantaged areas. A spokesperson for the Scottish HEI reported that there had been a change over the last two years associated with Funding Council policy and so their focus had moved to other groups and to strategies to widen participation more generally rather than targeting mature students in particular (see figure 1).

Figure 1

The 'Widening participation' measures introduced by UK9

Summer school: designed to help students already offered places but who have diagnosed weaknesses.

Part-time access: in-house evening provision in science and technology. It is advertised, attracts direct applicants, different from FE colleges' access programmes.

Community Based Provision: SHEFC funded, started 1998 in areas of multiple deprivation to give students a better view of HE.

APEL: A university-wide framework developed; departments encouraged to award credit for work experience.

SWAP: the Scottish Wider Access Programme used to recruit through FE colleges. There are several partnerships in most curricular areas and one major franchise.

Part-time provision: this HEI has large numbers of PT students, many of whom are mature. Maintaining part -time numbers is an important HEI objective. Popular courses include BA Social Sciences, a BA in Health Studies and a degree in Building and Surveying.

This HEI had set targets and recorded success or failure to achieve them in the university's annual monitoring statement. All academic departments were expected to know which target groups to aim for and what support was available. They were expected to use central resources, but many additionally developed separate initiatives.

In one of the English HEIs, the KI reported the development of the concept of the 'Moving Pavement' access to HE.

> We have the Introduction to HE course,
> then Foundation Studies (both part-time),
> then the degree. People hop on at the
> point at which they are ready. The access
> courses, like the 'IHE', are repeated
> several times throughout the year.

The KT for Combined Studies in that HEI believed passionately that:

> The delivery of access is so important. We
> want people to show that they can succeed.
> We want them to succeed. We think that
> they can do it. That is our philosophy.

The KTs hoped to develop provision in nearby sparsely populated areas by delivering in new ways including distance learning (plus the Web, e-mail, CDRom and outreach). Staff at another institution reported that they ran a 'recruitment bus' to publicise the university and its courses in rural areas but admitted that it did not focus on mature students.

However, in some HEIs there were specific strategies aimed at the 'mature market'. For example, in one a Mature Students' Guide was published every autumn and followed up by presentations in colleges, tailor-made for their specific needs, covering such issues as fees and finance, flexibility, details of the institution, full-time and part-time options, career prospects. In another HEI there was an open evening for mature students during the first week of every month throughout the year.

In a whole range of ways therefore these institutions were responding to the widening participation agenda – some directly targeted at mature students but many not.

3.2.4 Financial support systems

Attention was drawn by KIs, KTs and qualifying route tutors to how the benefits system operates nation-wide, in particular differences between regions. Everywhere, staff reported that students (and often it seemed staff themselves) were confused about financial matters and the application of rules under New Deal and other benefits and allowances. In one HEI-based access course, staff complained that three

current students had been on New Deal but two had to leave the scheme in order to continue to study. In another HEI, they reported difficulties experienced by those on Job Seekers Allowances. Other KIs thought that all students had '*real money problems. They compare their weekly income on the maximum loan and on Job Seekers Allowance and realise they can't afford to do it*'. Elsewhere a KT (Humanities) reported that the mature student recruitment:

> is dying. The financial thing has skewed mature recruitment to non-vocational courses. I'd say the mature student market in non-vocational courses was 50-60% down.

Tutors of non-vocational courses expressed the view that their courses were affected more than vocational courses since the employment prospects for their graduates were less obvious and thus the issue of loan repayment had a greater impact on the decision-making process of the potential entrants. The following indicates how one tutor had experienced this:

> Its very depressing – last week I saw a woman who was exactly the sort we are trying to recruit – inner city, black, single parent, woman, mid 30s, kid in school, very lively, bright, done Access course. We offered her an unconditional place. She was delighted. Then she asked about fees. We discussed her circumstances. I told her she wouldn't have to pay fees and she was really relieved. She said "that's great. I was worried about that. What about a grant?" I told her there was no grant but a loan. I put as positive a spin on it as possible. I told her it was the cheapest money she'd ever get etc. But she said, "so, in three years time I'll be £12-15000 in debt and I'll have a degree in English". She won't be coming.

3.3   Labour market and employment factors

Some respondents asserted that in general recruitment trends followed national and local employment trends. The argument presented was that mature student numbers in general rose when the economy was sluggish and employment opportunities were limited, or in specific subject areas when there were local problems in a particular sector or industry. These were seen as particularly significant where close links existed between employers and the HEI, for example in health, construction and engineering and where mature students were supported on day release and other forms of part-time study, as part of their career development.

> When the building industry is in decline
> we get an increase in [full-time]
> students; when it is buoyant the part-time
> numbers
> go up.   (KT - Built Environment)

> Employment is up so recruitment is down.
> The relationship is clear in creative
> industries, especially performing arts,
> graphics
>   (KT-CAD)

Some courses recruited almost exclusively mature students, often with close links with industry. For example:

> The part-time degree in Construction
> Management is almost entirely mature
> students. […] We also provide a course in
> Fire Risk Engineering for fire brigade
> personnel because of the link with
> building. It's an accredited full-time
> course, which is not advertised currently.
> All the students are time served fire
> fighters with employer support, so that is
> 100% mature.
>   (KT - Built Environment)

In the same HEI, the KT (Building Studies) reported that Building Control was popular with mature students, of whom nearly all '*have been in the job for several years*' and wish to improve their qualifications. Here, many part-time students had fees paid by employers who perceived benefits from doing so. Employers co-operated in a Liaison Group with HEI staff, helping to predict demand and HEI staff were trying to encourage more industrial sponsorship for first year students. In another HEI, although there were fairly large numbers of mature students on part-time and day-release courses in a large school comprising construction and related subjects mature students were not specially targeted, although they were seen as '*motivated students who do well*' (KT). Instead, this department was targeting women and ethnic minorities as more severely under-represented groups.

Elsewhere the numbers of mature (and young) students on courses in subjects allied to medicine had increased due to the purchase of places by health authorities as key employers. However, reliance on such students could also explain a sudden and dramatic decline in numbers should a contract be lost (KI).

One informant pointed out that changes in local employment did not always have a direct impact in the way one might expect but sometimes generated or suppressed demand in other subject areas:

> 10 years ago there were few employment
> opportunities and recruitment onto
> education courses was good. Now much more

```
            is available so applications to education
        have gone down.                    (KTEducation)
```

In one HEI, several reasons related to the economic health of companies were suggested for reduced mature student numbers in several subject areas (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Views of Key Tutors at UK3 about links with economy

The recession led employers to provide training 'in-house' – not sponsoring employees on HE qualifications.

Employers are 'down-sizing' so there is a smaller pool to draw on.

Training budgets have been cut or disappeared, so there is no day release.

Professional exams. required by e.g. banking, insurance, chartered secretaries have mostly been replaced by in-house NVQs.

Programmes for local authorities (e.g. HNC in public administration) have mostly gone -now it's NVQs Some (e.g. IPD) go straight to post-graduate courses.

NVQs qualify for tax relief for individuals; HE courses do not.

Adult vocational returners from cultural industries often go directly into post-graduate programmes, by-passing undergraduate provision altogether.

Adverse conditions in an employment sector were sometimes an opportunity to recruit. For example, a KT (Education) referred to `spot advertising in Birmingham after the Rover announcement' to recruit redundant engineering workers as trainee secondary teachers in shortage subjects.

In engineering, some accounted for recruitment trends in terms of action by the professional bodies, for example, the Engineering Council's rule changes on Chartered Status. Nevertheless, some HEIs were making strenuous efforts to attract mature students. In one, Mechanical Engineering and Computer Aided Manufacture were popular courses and two major companies were sending staff to the part-time programme, mostly on a day release basis. Difficulties with dealing with part-timers in this way were admitted but the students were characterised as `very motivated and better in almost every way than full-time'. Nevertheless, many of them `feel isolated and find it difficult to get together for group project work'. These tutors confidently expected part-time engineering provision to expand.

The emphasis that all students, but particularly mature entrants, were now placing on vocational courses meant that computing, nursing and business studies were all perceived as growing while non-vocational courses were declining. Law was also seen as an employment area with good prospects in one HEI, but in another law applications had declined with `Clearing used for the first time in 1999-00' (KT-Law). Although only one fifth of full-time students on this course were mature, on part-time courses mature students predominated (about 85% of 60 places) and were perceived as `*much more motivated*', hard working and able to perform well.

Nevertheless, there were no special plans to recruit more mature students and nothing special was done to support them (KT-Law).

Business studies was another buoyant area and this was seen as related to the labour market. In one HEI, it was the largest course with 700 undergraduates, about 10% of whom were mature.

The part-time market (mainly mature students) had held up despite competition from two local colleges who had upgraded their own provision while maintaining partnership links with the university. Part-time students were again rated highly in terms of their work ethos, commitment and involvement.

In general therefore, while some respondents pointed to trends which were more widespread, most understood labour market and employment issues as local or regional, relating to specific employers or a sector of industry that was significant in the geographical area. Recruitment to courses was seen as a function of the willingness of employers to support and enable mature students to gain vocationally relevant qualifications in specific subject areas.

3.4   Personal and individual factors influencing decisions to enter HE

In general, managers and tutors saw mature students as more hardworking, more committed and often more confident than young students. Their motivations were seen as either employment related: '*the majority interviewed want a more satisfying job*', or to do with proving themselves: '*Also there is the personal motivation thing to prove that they can do it*'. Overwhelmingly however, subject tutors in HE and qualifying route tutors (QRT) explained the decline in mature student recruitment in terms of student finance and concerns about money and debt and they reported these in some detail (see figure 3).

These financial issues were specifically seen as contributing to a decline in recruitment to qualifying routes, which then had a knock-on effect on recruitment to HE. For example, one QRT reported a 14% drop in recruitment to an Access to Teaching course since tuition fees were introduced and staff at the HEI reported a drop of 16% in mature entrants, even though many did not pay fees. The changing age composition of qualifying route entrants, linked primarily by these respondents to changing student finance, was seen to be a crucial factor in understanding HE progression patterns.

Figure 3

What staff in HE and FE said about student finance

♦ Applicants raise money worries continuously (KT- Education)

♦ It has altered the social composition of mature students – more middle class women (KT- Art & Design)

♦ Students emphasise loans and fees (KT- Social Science)

♦ Loans are especially disastrous for non-vocational courses (KT Humanities)

♦ New Deal and Job-seekers Allowance are a real problem (KT, QRT)

♦ Decline in mature recruitment is related to loans and fees (KT Bio-medical)

♦ The former grant was like a part-time wage for many women (KT)

♦ Students have debts but know little about grants, benefits available (QRT)

> ♦ Loans are unpopular because older working class people do not want to go into debt (KT)

3.5   Institutional factors relating to mature student recruitment to HE

Some KIs were surprised to learn of a decline in mature student entry:

> `'I have no knowledge of the trends'`
>
> `'even after so much effort, so many initiatives, over 10 years'.`

However, most tutors were aware and explained the trends largely in terms of local employment and employer policies and/or student finance as we have described above. However, some decline was attributed to institutional policies and structural changes.

In the search for greater efficiency and effectiveness, some HEIs had changed the organisation and management of recruitment and admissions. The centralisation of policy and practice on recruitment had sometimes been designed to overcome the perceived elitism of particular departments or to foster a consistent prioritisation of A levels, both of which have impacted on mature student recruitment, albeit in opposite directions. In one HEI, a KT reported that increased centralisation of admissions had constrained flexibility on entry requirements for mature students. In another, it had removed discretion from departments except for `'alternative' students'` (KI).

A continuum of different stances emerged. At one end were HEIs where policy was moving away from recruiting mature students.

> `Universities in the top third of the hierarchy do not have part-time undergraduate programmes or flexible entry routes such as Associate Student Schemes or sub-degree provision.          (KI)`

In some, academic drift or inertia was noted: '*we have no special focus on mature students'*.

Other HEIs, were pro-active and welcomed mature students:

> to extend our role in providing Lifelong
> Learning opportunities through innovative,
> student-centred flexible programmes.
>
> (University Mission Statement).
>
> The University must deliver in all sorts
> of ways. Last year we taught Summer School
> during the day and also in the evenings on
> the same days. We three delivered it and
> were on our knees but it was successful.
> We need multiple deliveries at different
> times to reflect different lifestyles.(KT)

Some HEIs had used recruitment priorities as part of a strategy to reposition themselves, attempting to '*raise the quality of academic profiles*', with a key thrust '*that the growth of the previous decade should be replaced by a focus on distinctive excellence*' (KI). Elsewhere, particular departments, rather than whole institutions, sought to raise A Level point scores and reduce HND provision, leading to a decline in mature entrants although, when recruiting from 'widening participation' groups, these revised grade targets for admission were not always applied. Other departments wished to recruit '*alternative students*': disabled, mature with dependants, or ethnic minorities to particular shortage areas such as secondary teaching. Two HEIs, however, had decided to prioritise the younger candidates from these groups. The KT recruiting for a Physiotherapy course had little interest in mature students because

> 'we can ask for 3 Bs at A Level. We insist
> on Biology A (Level) because this
> increases students' chances of doing well
> on the course and reduces the number we
> have to consider'
>
> (KT-Health)

Similar views were expressed at another HEI in relation to Business Studies.

The level of resources committed to the recruitment, support and retention of mature students varied considerably. Some had developed services such as a town centre 'shop' well before targeted funding became available. Others were imaginative in their use of recent Funding Council earmarked funds whilst others failed to maintain initiatives once the three year allocation of funds ended.

Course provision was another issue pursued by some respondents. One of the factors in the decline of mature entrants who were often attracted to Combined Studies, related to the decreasing number of such courses, often as a result of HEI policy. For example, one HEI had decided to '`push single degrees`' because '`single degrees are better`' (KT-Social Science). Elsewhere, Combined Studies had been phased out '`because it's not part of our culture. It belonged to the institution we took over`' (KI). The ending of the modular degree structure was held responsible for smaller numbers by

the KI in another HEI, and at yet another, with large numbers of mature combined honours students, a recent decline was attributed to `structural changes` but the situation was expected to reverse. (KI-Combined Studies).

New courses targeted at mature students were often pitched below degree level or at undergraduate level but not necessarily leading to a degree or diploma. For example, one HEI reported a management programme for football administrators. These students would register for Level 1 credits but as such would not be counted as new entrants to degree or HND programmes (KT Business School). New courses had also been designed to cope with changes such as new vocational A levels, further down the educational ladder and a new foundation course had been established: `It's a four-year engineering course to give them A Level maths and physics` (KT-Engineering). The brief for this research project was to investigate the decline in recruitment to first degree and HND/HNC programmes but it may be that there is a increase in mature student participation in other forms of study at HE level that are not reflected in these statistics.

One KI reported that some summer school provision aimed at helping mature students into HE had lost FEFC funding and in the same HEI franchising had also been reduced (KI & KT- Engineering). There was evidence that Access course numbers in some FE colleges were declining because HEIs had introduced Foundation Studies courses which `poached` students (QRT). Elsewhere, however, little decline in numbers joining Access courses was reported, despite shifts into more vocationally orientated subjects. So, no one pattern prevailed across the HEIs and associated colleges.

KTs for several subjects (e.g. Education, CAD) reported that applications were healthy so they did not target mature students. In some subjects there was no sense of decline in mature numbers:

> `law is a safe occupational area`(KT-Law)

> `good, part-time recruitment`   (KT-Biomedical Science)

In one HEI, that had a large proportion of mature students in all subjects at all levels, mature recruitment per se was embedded in the institutional policy agenda: `mature students have been mainstreamed – they are no longer specifically targeted` (KI).

One KT in another HEI actively discouraged mature students:

> it's a very harsh environment because
> students are so young so it is difficult
> for mature students to live on campus
> (noise etc.) and off campus it is not a
> university experience.
>   (KT-Engineering)

Unsurprisingly mature students comprised less than 5% of the students on that course. A colleague in another faculty in the same HEI evinced a different attitude. Mature students were actively recruited from colleges, women's groups and via advertising; A Levels were not a necessary pre-requisite.

> We find out about students' backgrounds.
> […] We like people who can demonstrate
> suitability through life experience or can

```
show they know how to learn and are self-
critical. […] mature students bring a
wealth of understanding that A level
students don't. [...] They are among our
best students.                    (KT-Arts)
```

Elsewhere too there were more proactive approaches. In one HEI, greater flexibility was being introduced to in-house access provision in an attempt to be more accommodating and to attract more students. `We are trying to break the mould of saying there is only one start to the academic year' (KT-Combined Studies). In another, monthly open evenings specifically for mature students were held at one HEI with APEL arrangements that led to the award of university credits and progression routes into degree programmes. Another HEI ran a special mature students' induction programme and established schemes to target and to support mature students. However, among teaching staff it was often thought that the attention of university senior managers does not remain fixed for long. As one KT reported:

```
commitment to Access varies according to
whatever else is happening […]. Last year
Access was a 'good thing', bringing
in more people […] This year [it's] full-
time degrees with traditional students.
```

3.6   Institutional agendas

Drawing upon the views reported above, the following factors would need to be considered in any systematic attempt to link the supply and demand aspects of mature student recruitment and to unravel institutional differences.

♦ External policy and funding arrangements, whether initiated by government directly, by the funding councils or bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), set an overall context for recruitment. The key elements in relation to mature student recruitment include the funding premium attached to adults, widening participation initiatives and the institutionalisation of performance indicators and quality measures. Little consistency or stability was perceived across these agendas and, importantly, they were seldom referred to as particularly relevant to the recruitment of mature students in the context of this research. The focus of the government's agenda for 'widening participation' was frequently perceived to have shifted to other groups, particularly disadvantaged young people.

♦ Senior managers responded to the 'question of mature students' in terms of markets. Both the market positioning and the league table position of institutions were referred to by many key informants. For some this meant that mature students were their 'natural' and 'traditional' market and debates about mature student recruitment had been 'mainstreamed' or 'embedded'. In these institutions, the focus of attention was not on mature students per se but was on, for example, part-time provision or the development of new courses that implicitly addressed the needs of mature students. At the other end of the spectrum was an institution where a senior manager expressed the view that the recruitment of mature students with a wide range of alternative

qualifications and the provision of the kind of courses that would meet their needs would damage the national positioning of their institution in the ranking of universities.

♦ The formal mission of the institutions reflected these market positions but the acceptance and delivery of the mission objectives was not consistent internally. Different subject areas had their own markets which did not always coincide with the formal position of the HEI. In addition the variation within institutions in the competitive position of subjects led to differing recruitment strategies, depending partly upon the buoyancy of the young A level (or in Scotland SHC) application rates.

♦ The knowledge of enrolment trends and, more importantly, the building of this awareness into institutional review and planning also varied considerably. Some KIs appeared completely unaware of the trends in recruitment presented in this research, whilst others could list numerous initiatives addressing particular concerns.

♦ Institutional investment in practices encouraging flexibility and accessibility, in terms of modes of course delivery, teaching and learning approaches and specific support and guidance services provisions did not neatly fit with the patterns of mature student recruitment. Some HEIs that had invested considerable resources and planning seemed to be experiencing as great a decline in mature recruitment as those less committed and felt they were `running hard to stand still'.

♦ The implementation of policies on admissions and admission criteria ranged from those imposed by a centralised bureaucracy to dispersed autonomy. Both models sometimes operated in favour of mature student recruitment and sometimes against it.

♦ Widening participation agendas varied considerably in the importance placed upon them, the target groups prioritised, the resources allocated, the monitoring undertaken and their spread across departments. At times there appeared to be a 'competition' between differing prioritised groups.

♦ Both the state of the local labour market and specific employer links were seen as very important in the provision of mature student routes and the recruitment of mature students on to them.

♦ Student finance was seen by subject leaders and tutors as the key to understanding current trends, particularly in non-vocational or less directly vocational programmes. However, services to help cope with the situation were often limited. Some institutions provided trained staff to give information and advice in feeder institutions or from a town centre 'shop'. The majority of the research respondents interviewed had little detailed knowledge of student financial provision themselves.

The following sections of this report shift the focus of attention to the adults themselves – mature entrants and potential entrants to higher education and the factors that influence their decisions to be or not to be a student.

4 ADULT VOICES: THE NATURE OF THE SAMPLES

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Identifies the two key groups of adults who were targeted in different ways as respondents.

♦ Provides the key characteristics of the 866 new mature entrants who answered the entrants questionnaire and compares them with the total population of new mature entrants to First degrees and HNC/D/DipHE.

♦ Provides the key characteristics of the potential entrants: 79 who responded to a questionnaire, 220 who participated in focus groups, and 187 who were interviewed.

There were two key groups of adults who were targeted in this research: **new mature entrants and potential mature entrants** to the nine case study HE institutions

4.1 New mature entrants

This group was contacted through the entrants questionnaire. A total of 2,726 questionnaires were sent to mature new entrants (UK domiciled) on first degree and HND/HNC/DipHE courses across a range of vocational and non-vocational subject areas in the 9 case study HEIs. Full details of the 866 responses and response rates are set out in annexe 3, tables 1-3. In summary:

Figure 4

Profile of new entrant respondents compared with all new home mature entrants to first degree/ HNC/D/DipHE in GB 1999-2000

Respondents	All mature new entrants[1]
64% women	59% women
64% full-time	64% full-time
82% on first degrees programmes	74% first degree
81% white	83% white[2]
8% from minority ethnic groups	17% from ethnic minority groups
11% unknown	
31% were aged 21-24	34% aged 21-24
21% were aged 25-29	21% aged 25-29
30% were aged 30-39	29% aged 30-39
13% were aged 40-49	13% aged 40-49
3% were 50 or over	4% aged 50 or over
2% not known	

[1]Source: HESA, July returns from institutions for 1999-2000

[2]As a percentage of entrants whose ethnic group was known

The key differences here are: the overrepresentation of women and first degree entrants and the under representation of entrants from ethnic minority groups among the respondents

Figure 5

Subject area of new entrant respondents compared with all new
home mature entrants to first degree/ HNC/D/DipHE in GB 1999-2000

Respondents		All mature new entrants[1]
–	Medicine and dentistry	1%
14%	Subjects allied to medicine	27%
–	Biological sciences	3%
–	Veterinary science	–
–	Agriculture and related subjects	1%
2%	Physical sciences	2%
0%	Maths and Information sciences	0%
0%	Information Technology	8%
13%	Engineering and Technology	7%
4%	Architecture and building studies	3%
6%	Social sciences	8%
5%	Law	3%
12%	Business/Administrative studies	11%
–	Mass communication/ documentation	1%
3%	Languages	3%
3%	Humanities	2%
9%	Creative arts and design	7%
11%	Education	5%
17%	Combined studies	7%

[1]Source: HESA, July returns from institutions for 1999-2000

The key differences here are: the underrepresentation of entrants to Subjects allied to medicine and Information technology, and the overrepresentation of entrants to Engineering and technology, Education and Combined studies. These differences were largely due to the research design which targeted those subjects where there appeared to have been the greatest decline in numbers in recent years.

4.2   Potential mature entrants

Since potential mature entrants, even to a specific HEI, are a very diffuse group and difficult to identify, they were targeted through a variety of different approaches: focus groups, interviews and the potential entrant questionnaire. Full details of these methods are set out in annexe 2. Since the total population of potential entrants is not known or analysed, it is not possible to compare our respondents to any general frame of reference.

4.2.1 Focus groups

A total of 27 qualifying routes were identified, associated with or potentially leading to the selected subject areas in the 9 case study HEIs. The qualifying routes included Access Courses, A levels, year 0 courses, non-advanced and advanced vocational courses and community-based programmes – some delivered on campus and some outreach. A focus group (details in annexe 2) was conducted with participants on each of these qualifying routes with a total of 220 people participating.

4.2.2 Interviews

Interviewees were identified through the focus groups, qualifying route tutors, open evening and special events for mature students, admissions, and advice and guidance offices.

187 interviews were conducted:

- ♦ 29% were men and 70% were women

- ♦ 75% were over 25 years old

- ♦ 51% had children living in their household

Their applicant status was:

- ♦ 120 (64%) were current applicants (i.e. applying for entry in 2000). Of these:
  - ♦ 66% were applying for the first time
  - ♦ 9% were re-applicants (previously applied but not entered)
  - ♦ 21% were 're-entry' applicants (previously entered but left very soon)
  - ♦ 4% did not reply.

- ♦ 54 (29%) were current deciders (thinking of entering but not sure). Of these:
  - ♦ 50% had never applied before
  - ♦ 44% were 'delayed deciders' (previously applied but not entered)
  - ♦ 4% were 're-entry deciders' (previously entered but left very soon)
  - ♦ 2% did not reply

- ♦ 6 (3%) were non-entrants (definitely not applying in the near future); of these 4 had never applied previously and 2 had applied but not entered

- ♦ 7 (4%) were not willing to say

4.2.3 The potential entrant questionnaire

The potential entrant questionnaire was sent to all students in the selected subject areas in the 9 case study HEIs who had been offered and who had accepted a place in 1999 but had not enrolled (colloquially known as the 'no shows'). A surprisingly very small number of these were identified in each institution. In addition, many of those who replied had in fact entered another HEI, or were under 21 (i.e. not mature) or were in fact applying for postgraduate rather than undergraduate courses; 31 responses were of this kind and were classified as invalid and therefore not used. We also used this questionnaire

to obtain information from potential entrants in any of the settings for the fieldwork, who were either unable or unwilling to participate in a focus group or to be interviewed.

Since the HE data that was used as the starting point for the distribution of the questionnaire was revealed as unreliable and it was then used in this pragmatic fashion to capture voices that would otherwise be excluded, the response rate is not relevant here.

The number of respondents is also small so that this data should be understood as supplementing that collected from potential entrants by other means.

A total of 79 valid responses were analysed:

- ◆ 64% were women

- ◆ 42% had been offered a place in HE in the past and had either not taken it up or had left very early before they were counted as an entrant

- ◆ 62% intended to apply for a place in 2000/1 and 15% at some time in the future

The following four chapters present the findings from these various sources of data. We integrate the findings from the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews under the headings of the four types of factors influencing mature student entry to higher education: labour market and employment, personal and individual, institutional, and national policy factors to facilitate comparisons between different groups of respondents. When references are made in this report to the 'entrants questionnaire', the 'focus groups', the 'interviews' and the 'potential entrants questionnaire', the samples set out above are the basis of the data presented.

5   LABOUR MARKET AND EMPLOYMENT FACTORS

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Focuses upon employment factors as crucial to an understanding of mature student motivation to enter HE

♦ Provides details of the importance attached to professional advancement factors: 'to enhance career prospects', 'to improve qualifications' and 'to improve long term financial situation' were among the five factors ranked as the most important motivations for entering HE

♦ Shows that for entrants and potential entrants studying non-vocational subjects, these factors were still important but less likely to be ranked as the top priority.

♦ Shows that for both entrants and potential entrants, employment constituted both pull factors (pulling towards a change of career or occupation) and a push factor (away from dissatisfaction with current and/or previous job)

♦ Illustrates how employment also acts as a problem – of time, money and employer support – that has to be overcome before potential entrants can become entrants.

♦ Locates these motivations in wider understandings, largely optimistic, of the local and national labour market and graduate prospects within it

In this chapter we explore the views, motivations and barriers in relation to labour market and employment factors as experienced by the adult respondents in our study. As indicated earlier, we have integrated the findings from different data sources but retained a distinction between the new entrants (those who entered HE for the first time in 1999) and the potential entrants (those not yet participating in higher education system).

5.1   New entrants

5.1.1   The labour market as motivator
Among the new entrants, labour market and employment related factors were clearly their most important reasons for applying to higher education (detailed data for this section are set out in annexe 3, tables 4-6). From a wide ranging list of 25 possible responses, 54% of all respondents ranked one of the 6 'professional advancement' factors (Boshier and Collins 1983) as the most important of their motivations. In addition, such factors were the first, third and fifth most frequently ranked 1, the most important (the second and fourth were personal factors and are discussed in the next chapter).

'To enhance career prospects' was the most important motivating factor overall, ranked as 1 (the most important) by 27% and somewhere between 1 and 5 by 79% of all respondents.

♦ A slightly higher proportion of men (31%) than women (25%) and by rather more part-time students (30%) than full-time students (26%) ranked it as the most important.

♦ It was the highest ranking motivating factor in all age groups except the 40-49 year olds who nevertheless put it in 4th position.

♦ It was the highest ranking factor among entrants in 6 of the 12 subject areas, particularly in architecture and building studies (43%), business and admin studies (38%) and engineering (36%). In most other subject areas it was the second or third most frequently ranked 1; the exception was languages where only 4% ranked it 1 and for that group it was at the bottom of the list of priorities.

'A desire to improve my qualifications' was the third most frequently identified as the most important motivating factor: ranked as 1 by 18% and somewhere between 1 and 5 by 71% of all respondents.

♦ A slightly higher proportion of women (19%) than men (16%) ranked it as the most important

♦ This factor was more important for part-time students (22%) for whom it was the second most frequently ranked 1, than for full-time students (15%) for whom it was the fourth.

♦ There were also differences between the age groups: it was ranked 1 by 24% of 40-49 year olds (making it the top priority for this group) and 17% of 50+ year olds (second in order of priority). This compared to 17% – third, 16% – third, and 17% – fourth, for the 21-24, 25-29 and 30-39 year old groups respectively.

♦ There were significant differences on this factor among students in different subject areas. It was very important for business and admin studies (29% – second), education (27% – first) and engineering students (20% – second) but among languages students no-one ranked it as the most important factor.

Clearly qualifications were linked to employment opportunities as shown by the greater importance attached to this factor by those studying vocational qualifications compared to the little or no significance for those studying non-vocational subjects. The higher priority given to this factor by older age groups may therefore relate to the competitive advantage that qualifications provide in the labour market, particularly relative to younger age groups.

'To improve long term financial situation' was the fifth most frequently ranked 1 overall: ranked as 1 by 10% and as between 1 and 5 by 50% of all respondents.

♦ Slightly more men (11%) ranked it as the most important than women (9%); and double the proportion of full-time students (12%) compared with part-time students (6%) did so

♦ It was more important for younger age groups (under 40s) than for older ones.

♦ There were considerable differences between students in different subject areas: 14% of engineering students ranked it as 1 while among languages students no-one did so.

The employment related factors were mostly positive and future oriented: to enhance or improve their current situation. However, a small proportion ranked more negative employment related reasons as the most important:

♦ 'To escape unemployment' was ranked 1 (the most important factor) by 3% of respondents overall and by 12% as somewhere between 1 and 5.

♦ 'Because it is necessary for my job/required by my employer' was ranked 1 by 3% and 11% ranked it somewhere between 1 and 5.

5.1.2 HE study and future career prospects

Further questions were posed about the expected impact of HE study on future employment and career prospects and the responses are set out in table 5 below.

Table 5

Expectations of impact of HE on future employment prospects,
all respondents, gender, mode of study

	Women			Men			All
	FT	PT	All	FT	PT	All	
Number in category – N=	345	209	555	210	100	310	865
% agreeing with statement	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Will prepare me for a new career/occupation	76	41	63	67	35	57	61
Will enhance my prospects in previous /current occupation	13	54	28	15	60	29	19
Will enhance my prospects in my expected occupation	35	17	28	36	21	31	29
Will make no difference	1	4	2	1	4	2	2
I am unsure of its effect	8	8	8	9	10	9	8

Note: Respondents could tick more than one category

Overall, the new entrants clearly saw HE as preparing them for a change in their career or occupation rather than enhancing their prospects in their previous or current occupation. There was little difference between men and women in this regard but there was a significant difference between part-time students and full-time students. Rather as might be expected, a far higher percentage of full-time than part-time students expected their HE studies to prepare them for a new career or occupation and conversely a far higher percentage of part-time students than full-time students expected their HE studies to enhance their prospects in their previous or current occupation. However, there was a significant minority of part-time students (35% of the men and 41% of the women) who were using HE to change their career or occupation.

5.1.3 Perceptions of labour market opportunities

Overall respondents had a fairly optimistic view of current employment prospects, as shown in table 6 overleaf.

Table 6

Assessment of current employment prospects – all respondents

Rating	Graduates in the region %	Intended occupation in the region %	Graduates nationally %	Intended occupation nationally %
Excellent	7	10	5	14
Very Good	21	27	29	35
Good	53	44	55	43
Poor	17	17	11	7
Very Poor	2	2	<1	1
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*
N=	*805*	*799*	*806*	*793*

Respondents tended to rate the current employment situation in their intended occupation higher than for graduates generally:

♦ 37% rated prospects in their region for their intended occupation excellent or very good compared to 28% giving a similar rating for graduates generally;

♦ 49% rated the prospects nationally for their intended occupation excellent or very good compared to 34% for graduates generally

Respondents tended to rate the current employment situation nationally higher than those in the region:

♦ 81% rated the prospects for graduates in the region at good or better compared to 89% for graduates nationally

♦ 81% rated the prospects for their intended occupation in the region at good or better compared to 92% nationally

Similarly, their expectations of the employment situation in their intended occupation by the time they had completed the course were fairly optimistic, as set out in table 7 overleaf.

Table 7

Expectations of employment situation in intended occupation by time course completed

Expectations of employment situation	%
Will be unchanged	40
Will have improved	36
Will have declined	6
Don't know/don't have a view	18
Total	*100*
N=	854

Interestingly here the percentage responses to each category were exactly the same for men as for women.

In general therefore, it seems that the decision to apply for and enter HE was based more on a positive view of the labour market, especially in their chosen occupation, than a negative one. The purposes and expectations were related to engaging with a relatively buoyant labour market rather than to escaping a depressed labour market.

5.1.4 Employment as a barrier

Respondents were also asked what barriers had previously prevented them from applying to higher education. Interestingly, an employment related factor – **'job responsibilities'** was the fourth most frequently ranked 1 among the barriers identified, ranked as 1 (most important) by 9% and somewhere between 1 and 5 by 36% of all respondents.

- ♦ More men (14%) ranked it 1 compared to women (7%)

- ♦ Although the same proportion (9%) of part-timers as full-timers ranked this factor as the most important, 47% of part-timers put it in the top five compared to only 29% of full-timers

- ♦ It was also more frequently ranked 1 by each succeeding age group: among 21-24 year olds, 6% ranked it 1 compared to 22% among 50+ year olds.

- ♦ It was ranked as 1 more frequently by students in physical sciences (28%), architecture and building studies (17%) (although the numbers are small in these two groups) and engineering (14%) than by those in other subject areas.

Thus, although job responsibilities was the fourth most frequently ranked as the most important barrier, it should be noted that this represented only a small proportion of all respondents (9%) and only just over a third ranked it in the top five barriers. Nevertheless, it had clearly been a particularly important factor in the decision to enter HE for part-time students.

5.2 Potential entrants

5.2.1 Current employment and prospects

Although the numbers were small and should be treated with caution, among the respondents to the potential entrants questionnaire, slightly more women were optimistic about current employment prospects in their home region than men: of the 61 respondents who intended to apply for HE in 2000/1 or in the near future, 62% of the women rated their employment prospects as 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good', compared to 55% of the men. Current prospects nationally were not felt to differ much from those in the home region, but most people felt that national prospects for graduates were good.

In interviews it was possible to explore these perceptions more fully with 145 answering the question 'What are your feelings about your current job?':

- ♦ 44% were content/satisfied

- ♦ 56% were not content, made up of: 16% who identified the nature of the work; 13% the status of the job, 9% identified the level of pay; and 18% who gave no reason.

Among the same interviewees, when asked about employment opportunities in general, 72% were optimistic and 28% pessimistic.

However, in one focus group, a London-based business studies preparatory course, the participants highlighted the minority view. They demonstrated a strong sense of insecurity, of living in a hostile environment in which they were likely to be left behind without a degree and who were not convinced that even with a degree were they going to be able to compete successfully in the job market.

Thus the potential entrants had a tendency to be dissatisfied with their current job and felt the need for a degree or higher education qualification to be able to engage with the opportunities for improved employment in what they perceived to be a fairly buoyant labour market for graduates. It is in this context that we can understand the importance they placed on career motivations.

5.2.2 The importance of career/employment factors in current motivations to study

In the focus group discussions employment and job prospects were of significant importance for all groups, particularly when a specific occupational goal (for example, to be a teacher) or promotion requirements were included. The notion of a 'better' job was a complex one and comprised a number of interconnected ideas. For many, 'better' equated to a higher salary or to more secure employment. For others, it meant more challenging or stimulating work, more responsibility or a 'worthwhile' job. For a few it meant a job which provided status within their community circle. Clearly vocationally-linked qualifying routes (Access to B.Ed. for example) generated more specific occupational motivations than the general courses, but even these latter groups prioritised factors such as `financial security,' `change my economic status,' `secure better financial security for my child,' `job/career with a sense of satisfaction'.

Interviewees were also asked for up to five reasons for applying to HE. Of the 292 replies recorded, 48% included employment motivations (53% of replies from men and 47% of the replies from women). When asked in a separate question to rank on a four point scale employment prospects as a factor influencing HE entry, 68% of the men and 94% of the women ranked it top.

Similarly, respondents to the potential entrants questionnaire were given a list of possible motivating factors and asked to rank the five most important:

- ♦ Professional advancement was ranked as the most important by 23% of the men and 19% of the women, and was included in the top five by 61% of the men and 62% of the women.

- ♦ 'To escape unemployment' was included by 14%

- ♦ 'To improve qualifications' (indirectly linked with employment) was included by 77% of men and 53% of women

Thus among all the groups of potential entrants, 'career/employment prospects' was very high in the ranking of motivations. This was located in dissatisfaction with their current occupation and a generally optimistic view of their employment prospects with HE qualifications. However, for some there was less certainty about this positive future.

5.2.3 Employment/career factors as disincentives/barriers to HE study

All potential entrants rated labour market and employment factors as the least important factors in preventing HE entrance except in three particular and important ways:

- ♦ Current jobs provided money that was essential for supporting the family and so could not be abandoned.

♦ Jobs were a crucial element in understanding the 'time' factor that was a key barrier to further study. For large numbers, working part-time was essential while studying and so added to the juggling of time that caused serious problems.

♦ Employers could not be relied on to provide support either in terms of money or time. For example, engineering students in one focus group reported that although their employer released them for one day, some of them were not paid for that day and that would continue if they progressed to higher level study.

5.3 Entrants and potential entrants compared

Not surprisingly, among entrants and potential entrants in non-vocational and less directly vocational subject areas, labour market and employment factors were less important than for those interested in vocational subjects. This was particularly so for those studying languages (including English), creative arts and physical sciences (although the numbers in the latter group were very small), but also to a lesser extent for those in law and combined studies.

However, the role of labour market and employment factors in the decision making process was similar for those who had newly entered and HE and those who were potential entrants. For both groups, professional advancement factors were very high in the ranking of the most important motivations and this was strongly linked to a desire to change their career or occupation rather than to improve their situation in the current occupation. Even among part-timers there was a significant minority for whom this was the case. For more than a third of those in HE, job responsibilities had been an important barrier to be overcome in their decision to enter. For those still in the process of deciding and/or applying their current jobs were both essential as a source of income, a source of dissatisfaction for most, and a key element in the problem of managing their time to allow for study. Employers were sometimes both a help and a hindrance in this regard. Thus while 'professional advancement' constituted both 'push' and 'pull' factors motivating adults to enter HE, current employment also constituted for many an important problem – of time and/or money and/or employer support – which had to be resolved before potential entrants could become actual entrants. Among potential entrants there appeared to be less certainty about their future prospects than among those who had already entered HE.

6   INDIVIDUAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Provides details of the 'multiple roles' of the student respondents, illustrating their numerous responsibilities and life-juggling situations

♦ Demonstrates the crucial place of cognitive factors, as expressed in 'interest in the subject', for both entrants and potential entrants but particularly for those in non-vocational subject areas

♦ Shows the importance of personal/situational barriers preventing HE entry and the ways these are linked to age, gender, mode and subject differences

♦ Shows that home and job responsibilities are ranked highly as barriers by both men and women

♦ Uses qualitative data to illustrate the nature of both time constraints and the lack of confidence in academic skills among potential entrants

♦ Shows that personal factors acted as both motivators and disincentives: the desire to achieve was linked to self esteem and to a wish to act as a role model for the family, however, the same family responsibilities also limited participation, increased stress and necessitated more time-juggling.

In one sense all the factors which influence a decision to enter HE are personal. What are discussed here are those factors that relate to individual identity, focus on the 'self' and the individual situation. This cluster of factors represented particularly important motivators.

6.1   New entrants

6.1.1   Roles and responsibilities

At the time of application to HE, the mature students were not an homogenous group: they had a wide range of differing roles and responsibilities and many had multiple roles. These provide the backdrop to the factors involved in their decision making about HE.

Table 8 shows that a slightly higher percentage, by 2-4 points, of men than women were full-time students, in full-time paid work or unemployed. Conversely, a slightly higher percentage of women, by 1 or 2 points, were part-time students or in part-time paid work. The largest difference between men and women, 25% compared to 34%, was in the proportion recording multiple roles. These are explored further overleaf in table 8a.

Table 8

Status/role at time of application to HE – all respondents, gender

Status/role	Women		Men		All	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
PT Student only	17	3	7	2	24	3
FT Student only	48	9	33	11	81	10
FT Paid work only	206	38	124	41	330	39
FT Vol work only	3	<1	1	<1	4	<1
PT Paid work only	37	7	16	5	53	6
PT Vol work only	1	<1	1	<1	2	<1
Unemployed only	24	4	25	8	49	6
Carer only	8	1	2	<1	10	1
Self employed only	10	2	13	4	23	3
Other (mostly retired)	7	1	4	1	11	1
Sub-total	*361*	*66*	*226*	*75*	*587*	*69*
2 or more roles	188	34	75	25	263	31
Total	*549*	*100*	*301*	*100*	*850*	*100*

Table 8a

Status/role at time of application to HE – respondents recording multiple roles, gender

No. of roles reported	Women		Men		All	
	No.	% of all women	No.	% of all men	No.	%
Respondents reporting 2 roles	142	26	67	22	209	25
Respondents reporting 3 roles	44	8	8	3	52	6
Respondents reporting 4 roles	2	<1	-	-	2	<1
Total	*188*	*34*	*75*	*25*	*263*	*31*

Table 8a shows that not only did a higher proportion of women than men report more than one role but a higher proportion reported 3 roles or more. The most common combinations of roles are set out in table 8b below.

Within the group reporting more than one role, women were rather less likely to be combining full-time study with part-time paid work than men (14% compared to 20%). However, more women than men reported combinations of roles that could not be encompassed by the most frequently cited combinations – they were more varied and variable than those of men.

Most frequently claimed combinations of status/role at time of application to HE, gender

Combination of roles	Women		Men		All	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
PT Student + FT Paid work	33	18	14	19	47	16
FT Student + PT Paid work	27	14	15	20	42	16
PT Student + PT Paid work	14	7	6	8	20	8
Unemployed + Carer	10	5	4	5	14	5
FT Paid work + PT Paid work	7	4	4	5	11	4
PT Student + Carer	9	5	1	1	10	4
PT Student + Unemployed	4	2	4	5	8	3
PT Paid work + PT Vol work	4	2	3	4	7	3
FT Paid work + Carer	4	2	3	4	7	3
PT Student +FT Paid work + Carer	6	3	1	1	7	3
FT Student + Unemployed	3	2	3	4	6	2
Sub-total	*121*	*64*	*58*	*77*	*179*	*69*
Other combinations	67	36	17	23	84	31
Total	*188*	*100*	*75*	*100*	*263*	*100*

6.1.2 Other characteristics

A number of other social characteristics and circumstances need to be taken into account when exploring the part that HE study played in the lives of the respondents:

♦ 8% considered themselves to have a disability.

♦ The majority of respondents had other adults living with them – 73% of the women and 81% of the men.

♦ The majority of respondents living with other adults appeared to be in traditional family groups with partner and children (47%) or siblings and parents (27%). A further 20% were living with friends or flatmates. A small proportion (5%) were living in more complex, mixed arrangements, for example, `partner, stepson and friends`, `partner, grandmother and son`.

♦ Despite the high proportion living with partner and children, only 6% of women and 13% of men said they had a financial responsibility for other adults, and only 8% of women and 10% of men said they had a caring responsibility for other adults.

♦ 30% of all respondents had a financial responsibility for children and for the majority of them (55%) this involved more than one child.

♦ Although a higher proportion of women than men (36% compared to 21%) had a financial responsibility for children, by a small margin men were responsible for more children. Generally, if respondents had financial responsibility for children, the children were living with them.

♦ 21% of all respondents had a caring responsibility for children and there was a similar difference between the proportion of women (25%) compared to men (14%).

6.1.3 Personal factors as motivators

Personal and individual factors were the second and fourth most important factors overall that had motivated the mature new entrants in HE (details are in annexe 3 tables 4-6)

♦ An 'interest in the subject' was the second most important motivating factor overall: ranked as 1 and by 23% and between 1 and 5 by 77% of all respondents.

♦ It was ranked most important by 25% of women and 19% of men and by 25% of full-time students compared to 19% of part-time students. For part-time students this put it in third position behind 'desire to improve qualifications'.

♦ It was ranked as 1 by rather more young age groups than older ones, although the difference was small. Nevertheless it does contradict the usual expectation that older students are more likely than young ones to be studying for personal development and fulfilment.

♦ The ranking was clearly related to subject area. Not surprisingly those studying non-vocational subjects ranked it higher than those in vocational subjects: 50% of those in languages ranked it as 1 and 32% of those in creative arts (for both these groups it came in first position) compared to 10% in architecture and building studies, 15% in business studies, and 17% in engineering.

♦ **'To change the direction of my life'** was the fourth most important motivating factor overall: ranked as 1 by 14% and as between 1 and 5 by 51% of all respondents. This was rather more so among full-time students and among the 40-49 year olds. Among students studying physical sciences, 33% ranked this as 1 and for them it was the most important factor overall. (The numbers in this group were small so this needs to be treated with some caution but may be worthy of further investigation).

6.1.4 Personal circumstances as barriers

Three of the top five barriers for entrants at the time of applying to HE related to individual 'situational' factors. The need to work to earn money was second – 15% ranked it as 1 and 52% ranked it as between 1 and 5; home responsibilities was third – 11% ranked it 1 and 38% ranked it between 1 and 5; and lack of time was fifth: 8% ranked it as 1 and 36% ranked it as between 1 and 5.

♦ On **'the need to work to earn money'** there were few differences between different categories of respondent. However, it was age related – a higher percentage of older age groups than of young ones ranked it as 1. There were also some differences between subject areas: it was more frequently ranked as 1 by students in social sciences and languages than in other subject areas.

♦ On **'home responsibilities'**, the differences between men and women and between full-time and part-time students who ranked it as 1, were very small. However, there were significant differences in the proportion of women (43%) and men (29%) and between part-time (44%) and full-time students (35%) who ranked it as between 1 and 5. Not surprisingly a higher proportion of students in the 30-39 and 40-49 age groups ranked it as 1 compared to the 21-29 and 50+ age groups.

- On **'lack of time'**, there were no significant differences between men and women. There were differences, however, between part-time (13% ranked it as 1 and 54% ranked it as between 1 and 5) and full-time students (5% and 26% respectively). The fact that they were currently studying part-time was therefore clearly related to lack of time as a previous barrier to application. It was also more frequently ranked as 1 by 40-49 year olds and by those studying business studies and languages.

These factors identified by entrants as barriers at the time they had applied to HE are linked to the multiple roles and complex lives the respondents reported above. They were most important for those at the peak age for childcare and home responsibilities – hence the need to earn money and the lack of time. It was interesting that this was not experienced more acutely by women than by men – the same percentage ranked home responsibilities as most important – even though a somewhat higher proportion ranked it somewhere in the top five most important barriers.

6.2 Potential entrants

6.2.1 Personal factors as motivators

In nearly all the focus groups with potential entrants academic/intellectual interests in a particular subject area were signalled as particularly important motivators and the ones that linked directly to enhanced self-esteem. Illustrative of these sentiments are the following:

> `'I didn't realise it was so good to learn.
> I   love   it.   I   just   want   to
> go on'`

> `'to prove I'm not brain dead'`

> `'to feel more fulfilled with myself'.`

Other personal factors agreed as important in the focus groups included `'to help others'`, `'to give something back'`, `'to meet new people'`, `'to widen my circle of friends'`.

The importance of personal factors was also endorsed in the interviews: 138(47%) out of 292 replies to a question on motivation included personal factors. A desire to learn, a fascination with a particular subject was enthusiastically reported in many interviews, often nurtured over a long period of time and linked to future aspirations for the next generation:

> `'my ambition has always been to get a
> degree'.`

> `'I have a desire to learn, to be a role
> model for my daughter'.`

Similarly, in the potential entrants questionnaire:

- 47% of the women and 31% of the men who responded chose factors related to cognitive interest as the main reason for HE entry

- 85% of the women and 77% of the men mentioned it as one of the 5 most important factors.

♦ For 50% of the women and 35% of the men a degree was something they had always wanted to do.

6.2.2 Personal circumstances as barriers

When the respondents to the potential entrant questionnaire were presented with a list of 25 factors which might discourage HE entry and asked to choose up to five in order of importance:

♦ 51% of the men and 57% of the women included home responsibilities

♦ A further 23% of women and 3% of men specifically mentioned childcare

♦ A lack of time for study was mentioned by 36% of the women and 54% of the men

♦ A lack of confidence in their own abilities was mentioned by 37% of the women and 15% of the men.

A very similar concern over situational barriers was highlighted in the focus groups. Money, child-care and time were key factors. Some felt they could not afford the luxury of being motivated by intellectual curiosity:

> 'I would love to have the privilege, but when you are worried how you're going to pay the gas and electric, how you're going to feed your children over the weekend you can't worry over a History essay'
>
> 'How can I fit the course round my child's school times?'

How to juggle time between various aspects of their lives stimulated much discussion. The length of time part-time study involved was frequently mentioned:

> 'I've had to put the rest of my life on hold'

Self-belief was also a key personal factor. Worries that they '*would not be up to it'*, '*might feel stupid'* surfaced in many discussions.

These patterns were repeated in the interviews. Of the 261 responses to a question on barriers to HE study, (34%) were personal, again with family problems and lack of confidence in ability being the most prevalent.

> 'You can make arrangements to juggle work, studying and child care and just about manage, but if something unexpected happens like illness or a partner's redundancy there's no slack in the system and something has to go – and it's usually the studying.

I wanted to carry on but my wife was taken ill so I had to drop out.

Now I'm on my own I need to be self sufficient'.

6.3 Entrants and potential entrants compared

Interest in the subject tended to be a stronger motivating factor among potential entrants than among new entrants. In particular, the love of learning and its link with self fulfilment was vividly described.

Among entrants, the multiple roles and complex lives resulting in greater responsibilities in all aspects of life had clearly been a barrier they had had to overcome. Similar conflicting pressures rooted in personal/individual situations were identified by the potential entrants and through the focus groups and interviews we were able to explore these in more detail. The juggling of responsibilities was vividly described in focus groups and the relationship between personal factors as both motivators and disincentives was an interesting one. The personal desire to achieve was linked both to self esteem and to a wish to enhance the educational standing of the whole family (to act as a role model). However, the same family responsibilities also limited participation, increased stress and necessitated the time-juggling that worried many potential HE entrants, both men and women.

7   INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Provides evidence that in general institutional features did not act as key motivators or barriers to HE entry for entrants or potential entrants

♦ Particular institutional factors had been very important for some groups in the choice of the institution: the availability of specialised vocational courses targeted at specific groups, or the formal approval by a professional body

♦ Part-time students in particular ranked structure of the course and APEL arrangements as important in the choice of institution

♦ Among potential entrants geographical location was particularly important suggesting that for those who have constraints on their mobility, relatively small additional distances were sometimes crucial.

♦ Behaviour and practice in relation to mature students was more important for most than attitudes and in particular potential entrants suggested that HEIs

♦ should be much more clear about procedures and the possible outcomes of those procedures.

♦ Information per se was seen as less of a problem than the timing of information – potential entrants wanted to have all the information (for example about time tables) before they made their final decision.

7.1   New entrants

7.1.2   Motivations and barriers

Institutional factors did not feature significantly in the general list of motivating factors, with one minor exception: the 'availability of credit for prior learning' was ranked as most important by 2% of respondents and as among the five most important by 11%.

Neither were they very important as barriers, although four institutional factors were offered in the question (as well as 'other' where it could have figured): 'attendance requirements', 'courses not available', 'enrolment procedures too complicated' and 'no APEL'. Nevertheless, while none of these single factors featured in the top five, taken together, 14% ranked one of them as 1 and 86% ranked one of them as among the five most important barriers.

♦ These four factors together were ranked as most important slightly more frequently by men (16%) than by women (14%) and rather more by full-time (16%) than by part-time (12%) students.

♦ The responses differed greatly between age groups: 45% of 21-24 year olds ranked one of these factors as 1 compared to 10% of 25-29 year olds, 28% of 30-39 year olds, 6% of 40-49 year olds and 2% of 50+ year olds. This is perhaps somewhat surprising since it might be expected that they would be rather more important for older age groups given the constraints on their time and location.

♦ The factors were least important for social science students (5% ranked one of the four factors as 1) and most important for students in subjects allied to medicine (26% did so). The higher priority given to these factors by students studying subjects allied to medicine appeared, from other responses in the questionnaire, to be related to the fact that such courses may or may not be approved for NHS bursaries – availability of not just the subject but a course which carried bursaries was very important for some students.

Thus although individually institutional factors did not often feature among the most important, taken as a cluster they were significant for a majority of respondents.

7.1.3 Choice of HEI

In order to explore the institutional issues in more detail, respondents were asked what factors influenced the **choice of the particular HEI** in which they were studying (see Annexe 3, Table 4).

♦ The **'availability of specific course/subject'** was clearly the most important: 37% ranked it as 1. This was the case across all categories: men and women, full-time and part-time students, all age groups (slightly more for the over 40 year olds than the under 40s) and all subject areas (particularly architecture and building studies (53% ranked it 1) and combined studies (49% ranked it 1). This subject difference probably related to the specificity of some of the building studies courses targeted at mature students offered by at least one of the HEIs. Similarly, combined studies is not available everywhere, particularly if specific combinations are sought.

♦ The **'location of the HEI'** was the second most frequently ranked as 1 (28% overall). This was rather more so for women than for men (31% and 24% respectively) and for full-time than part-time students (31% and 23% respectively).

♦ **'Reputation for academic standards'** was fifth in the league table of most important factors, ranked as 1 by 7% of all respondents and as between 1 and 5 by 38%. This is noteworthy since it is not a factor often regarded as a very high priority for mature students,

♦ **'Attitudes to mature students'** was ranked as the highest priority by a smaller percentage than might be expected (only 4%) and only just over a third ranked it in the top 5. It may be of course that it is the policy and practice in relation to mature students as seen, for example, in a flexible course structure, that is more important rather than the more nebulous notion of 'attitudes'.

♦ **'Attitudes to ethnic minorities'** was ranked as the most important factor by only 2% and only 9% ranked it among the 5 most important, even though 18% of all respondents were from ethnic minority groups.

♦ Taking the 3 course related factors together – **'availability of specific subject/course'**, **'structure of the course'** and **'availability of APEL'** – 49% of all respondents ranked one or other of them as 1 – most important. The only significant difference between groups here was that the proportion was higher among part-time students (59% ranked one of the three factors as 1) and even more marked among languages students (71% ranked one of them as 1). Clearly,

the structure of the course was important for part-time students as not all undergraduate courses are available in part-time mode in all HEIs.

♦ Taking the 5 factors related to admissions practices and attitudes **('availability of APEL', 'suitable entry requirements', 'accessibility and friendliness of staff', 'attitudes to mature students' and 'attitudes to ethnic minorities'),** 17% of all respondents ranked one of these as 1 (most important). They were rather more important for women (18% ranked one of them as 1) than for men (15% did so); and for full-time (19%) than for part-time students (13%). There were only minor variations between age groups but a wide range across different subject areas: from 4% among humanities students to 23% among combined studies students. The importance of these factors to students in combined studies relates to the greater need for guidance and advice when constructing combined programmes in flexible modes.

♦ Three factors related to information/advice: **'publicity/marketing information', 'recommendation of family or friend', and 'advice of employer'.** Together these were ranked as 1 by only 5% of all respondents, with very little variation between different categories of students.

In general, the choice of a specific HEI was related to the specific rather than the general needs of the learners: for those studying part-time, course structure was most important; for those studying subjects allied to medicine, the availability of an approved course was important; for those undertaking combined studies, access and admissions arrangements were important; for those in a particular occupation the customised course (for example in the building industry) was clearly crucial.

7.2   Potential entrants

7.2.1   Institutions as motivators

Relatively little was said in the focus groups about specific institutional factors as motivators for entry. For many, the particular qualifying route provided one of very few options for study for geographical reasons. The choice of HE institutions was then further circumscribed by locality and course options but in most areas there was a choice, even if limited. Among the qualifying routes investigated, links with local HE institutions were very varied, ranging from in-house provision and franchised courses to free-standing general routes with no links with any particular institution.

Similarly few interview respondents saw specific institutional factors as key, general motivators. Only 4% of the 292 replies included institutional features such as location, course provision or support service such as child-care as reasons to enter HE. Such factors would rather influence the choice of a particular institution.

However, the potential entrant questionnaire asked respondents to list up to five factors influencing their choice of a particular HE institution and responses were stronger (although the numbers were small):

♦ An accessible institution in terms of **geographical location** was a prime factor cited by 87% of the women and 95% of the men.

♦ **Attitudes towards mature students** were included by 62% of women and 73% of men

♦ The **structure of courses** by 66% of women and 73% of men.

7.2.2 Barriers or disincentives

Institutional factors provided a wide range of disincentives, but none were given a high priority when compared with other factors.

In the potential entrants questionnaire respondents were asked to name up to five disincentives to HE entry. Of the responses given, 21% could be labelled as institutional, covering a range of issues such as 'course too long', 'lack of information about courses', 'desired courses not available'.

More discussion around these factors took place in the focus groups. Issues such as timetabling, poor information, unhelpful staff, inconsistency in dealing with qualifications, emphasis upon the young (particularly in science and engineering), were mentioned as immediate disincentives. A few named courses were cited as being dismissive of mature students and these were well-known locally. An important issue for some was course over-subscription – this was of great concern to those applying for subjects allied to medicine.

In the interviews institutional factors accounted for 21% of the 261 responses to a question asking for disincentives to HE entry. The nature of course provision and facilities and the lack of support for mature students formed the majority of these responses.

7.2.3 Recommendations for HE institutions

General discussions, however interesting, do not necessarily pinpoint particular changes that students would like to see implemented. More direct questions were therefore asked to enable discussions of key issues drawing directly upon student views.

Interviewees were asked: 'What institutional features are most important in attracting mature students?' More than one answer was recorded per respondent and a total of 307 responses were received. Table 9 shows those identified as issues HE institutions should address.

Table 9

Issues for HEIs identified by interviewees

Accessibility – facilities, location of courses	19%
Support for mature students	19%
Flexibility – e.g. timetabling	10%
Facilities for mature students (e.g. accommodation)	10%
Choice/variety of courses (e.g. more part-time, more work-based)	9%
Reputation/standards/integrity	9%
Provision of information (e.g. timetable in advance)	7%
Links with community, FE, employers	5%
Local area (e.g. night-life)	2%
Total	*100%*

Focus groups were asked what advice they would give to HE institutions to attract more mature students. Examples of the issues identified by 2 groups are set out in figures 6 and 7.

Figure 6

Issues for HEIs identified by Focus Group (Humanities and Education qualifying route)

- Should be welcoming to mature applicants, not patronising

- Get rid of negative responses from admissions tutors

- Provide open days for mature people

- Very variable contact with university staff during Access course

- Address tutor lack of knowledge about Access course

- Sort out equal opportunities, e.g. disability awareness

- Provide information on child care

- Provide information on timetables

- Provide child-care places

- Deal with fears of courses not running

- Prevent unpredictability of responses (ie make it clear whether applicants will be interviewed, how many places there are)

- Look at lack of flexibility in timetabling and course organisation

Figure 7

Issues for HEIs identified by Focus Group (Social Science)

- Lower the cost of halls of residence

- Look at the atmosphere on courses where few mature students

- Provide disabled access

- Develop 2 year degrees where time is crucial

- Continue HND in FE college – happy with this arrangement

- Provide advice concerning financial entitlements and costs

- More contact with university staff, information on money issues in particular

- Run mature-student open days

- Produce mature-student prospectus

- Look at the amount of work demanded when part-time jobs are a necessity

- Sort out flexibility of hours and timetabling, to fit round family commitments

- Provide free child-care

7.3   Entrants and potential entrants compared

Institutional factors did not figure strongly in the general list of motivations and barriers to entry that had been experienced in the past by those who were currently in HE. Of course, they had all, by definition, successfully negotiated the institutional issues around access, admissions, course selection and so on. However, potential entrants were, at the time of the research fieldwork, in the midst of decision making: many were in the process of applying or had done so fairly recently, some had been successful and some not. They were therefore much closer in time, space and individual involvement to the institutional issues and thus saw such issues as more important and had much more to say.

It was nonetheless noticeable that some particular factors seemed to be much more important for the potential entrants than they had been for the entrants, especially geographical location. Partly this was a function of the fact that we identified most of the potential entrants through local qualifying routes and institutions local to the case study HEIs, but most were located in major conurbations where other HEIs were not far away. Thus those who were constrained by geographical distance seemed to be severely constrained since relatively short additional distances seemed to be quite crucial for some.

Interestingly too, some of the suggestions from potential students, for example the mature students prospectus, were actually already in place in the HEI to which they were currently applying. Some of the suggestions were also in place in other HEIs where there were large numbers of mature students, for example, open evenings specifically for mature students. Many of the suggestions centred around the transparency and timing of information: in the decision making process the potential entrants were looking for greater clarity and certainty before they made their final decision rather than having to decide before everything was completely clear.

8   NATIONAL POLICY FACTORS

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Provides detailed evidence on the ways in which national policies were perceived by mature students

♦ Identifies 'cost of study' as the important barrier both for the new entrants and the potential entrants in the data, although only 29%of the new entrants said that tuition fees had affected their decision to enter HE

♦ Examines the variety of responses to loans, including those that see them as providing an independent source of income and an enabling mechanism

♦ Examines the detailed responses of potential entrants to the costs of study and their criticisms of their DSS and New Deal experiences

♦ Details the lack of specific information which potential entrants have of financial support and costs, very late in the admissions cycle

♦ Outlines the recommendations potential entrants wish to pass to government to encourage mature student entry, focussing largely on financial measures.

Students and potential entrants to higher education had a fairly narrow perception of the role of government and national policy in shaping their experience; they were largely unaware of the wider trends and issues such as expansion, massification and lifelong learning which pre-occupy national and institutional policy makers and practitioners. They were students in, or seeking to enter, higher education; they were not specialists in higher education as a subject and sometimes were unclear or incorrect in attributing policy to institutions or to government. Their concerns quite naturally were with the key issues that impact on their individual circumstances rather than in an evaluation of national policy factors in general. We report here their perceptions of these factors.

8.1   New entrants

When asked about motivating factors, national policy developments did not feature among the five most important identified by new entrants; they did, however, feature among the most important disincentives at the time they were applying.

8.1.1 Cost of study
'Cost of study' (fees, books, travel etc) was the most important barrier overall and although this is clearly a package of elements, only some of which lie within the national policy domain, the most important was fees (a point which we explore in more detail overleaf).

♦ 20% of all respondents ranked 'cost of study' as 1 (the most important barrier) and 56% ranked it somewhere between 1 and 5.

♦ There was no difference between the proportion of full-time and part-time students who ranked it as 1 or who ranked it between 1 and 5.

♦ It was more often ranked as 1 by women (22%) than by men (17%) and similarly a higher proportion of women (59%) than of men (50%) ranked it somewhere between 1 and 5.

♦ It was ranked 1 more frequently by younger age groups (24% of both 21-24 and of 25-29 year olds) than by older age groups (17% of 30-39 year olds and 18% of 40-49 year olds).

♦ It tended to be ranked as most important more frequently by students in non-vocational (29% of students in languages) than by those in vocational (7% of students in architecture and building studies) subject areas. However, students in some vocational areas figured in the middle of this range: 20% of those in subjects allied to medicine, 18% of those in engineering, 18% of those in business and admin studies.

8.1.2 Fees

These students (new entrants in 1999) were in the first complete cohort to make a means-tested contribution to tuition fees of up to £1,000 if they were studying as full-time undergraduates. 'Fees' was the key element of the 'cost of study' factor. There was a clear difference between those who were paying fees – 31% of whom ranked it as 1 – and than those who were not paying fees – 22% of whom ranked it as 1. However, the difference was less marked – 74% compared to 69% respectively – in terms of the proportion who ranked it somewhere in the top 5 most important barriers at the time of application.

Part-time students who had previously paid fees were entitled to exemptions in 1998-9 if they became unemployed during their course and from 1999-2000, the year of entry of the respondents in this study, they were exempt if unemployed before the course began.

Clearly, for the majority of the new entrants in our study, it had been a significant element of their decision making at the point of applying to HE, not least because at that time it was a very recent innovation and had a high profile in the public arena. This also meant that there was a lack of clarity and uncertainty around the issue at that time.

Although it had been a significant factor in their decision making process, only 29% reported that it had in the end affected their decision to apply, but 41% of the respondents were actually paying fees at the time of the survey (some part-time and some full-time). This makes for a complex pattern, which is set out in table 10.

Table 10

The effect of fees on the earlier decision to apply to HE, full-time and part-time
students, students who pay and do not pay fees, percentages.

	Currently paying fees (41%)			Currently not paying fees (or no reply) (59%)			Total N=865
	FT %	PT %	All %	FT %	PT %	All %	
Decision affected	47	19	32	29	23	28	29
Decision not affected	53	81	68	71	77	72	71
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N=	160	192	352	396	117	513	865

There were some interesting patterns here.

♦ Clearly the issue of fees had an effect on a higher proportion of full-time students for whom 'fees' was a new issue than part-time students who had always paid fees.

♦ Not surprisingly also, a higher proportion of full-timers who were paying fees (47%) said their decision had been affected than full-timers who were not paying fees (29%). Nevertheless, the latter represents a significant proportion and may well relate to the uncertainty at the time of their application around whether they would or would not eventually pay fees at all, or the precise amount. In addition, those students who were not required to pay fees were, by definition, those with the lowest incomes and therefore those most likely to have been concerned about the possible cost.

♦ Amongst part-time students, although the percentage of students whose decision had been affected was much smaller than among full-time students, a higher proportion of those not paying fees said their decision had been affected than of those paying fees. Again, this may well relate to the general air of uncertainty at the time of application.

It would appear, therefore, that at least some of the students' concerns were a product of the lack of clarity about their eventual fee status, at the time of their application to HE.

The uncertainty around fees seems to have been further complicated for those who were paying by the variety of sources of support, at least as reflected in the support they finally obtained. Of those who were paying fees, 42% were paying them from their own resources and 58% were receiving a contribution towards them – the details are set out in table 11.

The most important source of financial help with fees was employers, who were providing support to 44% of those paying fees. Partners and/or family members were supporting 35% and 10% were obtaining support from a university bursary or Access Fund.

Differences between the responses of men and women to this question were explored but varied only by one or two percentage points and were not therefore significant.

Table 11

Sources of help with fees

	Responses	
	No.	%
Employers	85	42
Parent	38	19
Partner	26	13
University bursary	11	5
Access fund	9	4
Employers and others	5	2
Partner and others	2	1
Parent and others	2	1
Other relative	3	1
Univ bursary and others	2	1
Charitable trust	1	<1
Other /not identified	19	9
Total	*203*	*99*

Almost all the respondents who said that their decision had been affected (29% overall), gave some explanation. An 'effect' does not of course necessarily mean a negative effect. The nature of the explanations given by full-time students are set out in table 12 and for part-time students in table 13.

Table 12

Effect of fees on decision to apply – full-time students

	Responses	
Type of effect	No.	%
Delayed entry	81	46
Hastened entry	21	12
Made decision much harder	21	12
Worry much more about debt	11	6
Would not have been able to enter if had to pay	10	6
Made financial management much harder	7	4
Made me less optimistic about completing	6	3
Need to work as well as study	6	3
Had to get /thinking about getting parental help	2	1
Made it possible to go – couldn't afford it before	2	1
Thinking about going part-time next year	2	1
Thought more about which course/changed course	2	1
Made me explore other non-academic career paths	1	1
Sought direct entry to yr 2 but preferred to do yr 1	1	1
Would prefer PT but would get no help with fees	1	1
Didn't know fees could be paid	1	1
Total responses	*175*	*100*

For full-time students the most often cited effect was that their entry to HE had been delayed and where further elaboration was given it was always related to financial matters: for `example 'to save money before starting', 'to clear off existing debts before incurring new ones'.` Some respondents claimed that it had hastened their entry but did not further elaborate. However, several seemed to be suggesting that they felt fees might increase in the future and therefore they had thought it important to start before that happened. For a small proportion of students it had had an impact on the degree of difficulty in making the decision and on the on-going level of anxiety. For some, this extended to doubts about whether they would be able to continue or complete.

Table 13

Effect of fees on decision to apply – part-time students

Type of effect	Responses	
	No.	%
Made me go part-time instead of full-time	41	65
Delayed entry	8	13
Made me go part-time and delayed entry	8	13
Could not enter if had to pay	3	5
Hastened entry	2	3
Part-time is the best of both worlds	1	2
Total responses	*63*	*100*

For part-time students who responded, the majority claimed it had obliged them to study part-time instead of full-time or delayed their entry, or both.

8.1.3 Loans

The other important element in the financial calculations that the entrants in the study had had to make was the availability and entitlement to loans. Loans had been gradually replacing maintenance grants prior to this and in 1999 the process was complete: living costs were fully funded by loans with all full-time students having access to 75% of the maximum loan and the remaining 25% being means-tested. Some changes were also made to repayment arrangements and from September 1999, the key date for the entrants in this study, loans were available for the first time for 50-54 year olds if they were returning to work after their course.

Among the respondents to the entrants questionnaire, just over a quarter (27%) said that their decision to enter HE had been affected in some way by 'loans' and almost all of them gave some explanation of this – set out in table 14 overleaf.

Table 14

Effect of loans on decision to enter – all respondents

	Responses	
	No.	%
Allowed me to go full-time	55	24
Provides an independent source of income	30	13
Hard to accept debt	27	12
Delayed entry	22	10
Without it I could not go	19	8
Provides support if necessary	17	7
Hastened entry	14	6
Made me go part-time	12	5
Made me think harder about going	5	2
It's not enough	6	3
A great help/made it easier	5	2
Forced me to go full-time (would prefer part-time)	4	2
Gives me more money to spend	4	2
Enabled me to plan my finances	3	1
Made me more motivated to work hard	1	<1
Made me look at alternative sources of income as well	1	<1
Allowed me to go part-time	1	<1
I am unable to continue because of debt	1	<1
Total responses	*227*	*100*

Amongst those students for whom loans had been a factor in decision-making, most welcomed the availability of loans: for many, without a loan they would either not have been able currently to study full-time (24% of those who responded) or not have been able to study at all (8%). For others it provided an independent source of income (13%) or a kind of safety net if necessary (7%). A small number (2%) said it made life easier or relieved the pressure in some way: `It helped me decide to go for it'; `it helped me to buy equipment and books'. Some (2%), said it gave them more money to spend and a further 2% said it had enabled them to plan their finances: `it helped because I can pay it back over time'; `it enabled me to avoid a massive uncontrolled debt'.

The negative responses related to the worry of debt (12% of those who responded). The word 'worry' here included a wide range of emotions from `absolutely terrified' to `its hard to accept' and included one who said `I am afraid to apply [for a loan] because I don't know how I will repay a debt like that'. A significant number (10%) said it delayed their entry and in general this was because they had to work out or sort out their finances, which was not a simple matter for most: `it took a

while to suss it all out'. For some (5%), it meant they had to study part-time rather than full-time as they would have wished, while for others (2%) the opposite was the case – they were 'forced to go full-time' when they would have preferred part-time.

Some responses might be seen as positive or negative. For the 6% who said it hastened their entry, most did not make it clear whether for them that was a 'good thing' or not. However, some responses indicated a lack of confidence in the stability of financial support in the future. For example, one respondent said: 'before they [the loans] get taken away like the grants were'. For others it made them think harder or more carefully about entry or about which course they would do or how they were going to finance themselves and one said it made her more motivated to work hard at her studies.

8.2   Potential entrants

There was very little evidence, at the time when the fieldwork took place, that national policy factors acted as incentives to HE entry for mature students. Potential entrants were able to identify few, if any, incentives provided by government other than 'exhortations to engage in lifelong learning' and only one person interviewed said that the availability of loans had been the prime factor in deciding to apply to HE.

At the end of January 2000, the government announced that mature student bursaries would be available in the academic year 2000/1 for students with children to cover the cost of childcare and other course related costs, with priority given to those aged over 25. In the Spring, the then DfEE issued a booklet – 'Making a Difference' – that included details of the new bursaries and summarising the help available for mature students. From May onwards, following guidance from the then DfEE, HEIs were able to use money provided for the specific purpose of publicising the bursaries and many did so. One of the HEIs in the study produced a leaflet of their own and used this alongside the DfEE publication with local colleges and in various publicity events. However, this was quite late in the applications cycle and the fieldwork with potential entrants in this study was largely complete by that time so it is not entirely surprising that they were unaware of the new bursaries when they participated in focus groups and interviews. This lack of knowledge may well therefore have been a function of the timing of our study and the timing of the publicity campaigns rather than a reflection of their effectiveness in conveying the necessary information. In addition, the new childcare grant also announced in January 2000, did not come into effect until September 2001 and would not have been available to the potential entrants in our study who were considering applying for entry in September 2000.

8.2.1 Barriers
In contrast, national policy factors were widely seen as disincentives to entry.

When respondents to the potential entrant questionnaire were asked to give up to five factors which would discourage entry to HE, the current **costs of study** were mentioned by 85% of women and 70% of men. 45% of women and 30% of men stated that costs were **the** most important factor. Fear of long-term debt was mentioned by 55% of the women and 23% of the men (note this was a small sample of 79 respondents).

Students in the focus groups provided detailed personal accounts as to why finance was the crucial factor affecting their decision-making. They felt little recognition was given to the fact that most mature students have financial commitments in the form of dependants and mortgages, circumstances which

are very different from those of post-school entrants. Attitudes to debt ranged from sheer panic to resigned acceptance. Current loans were not seen as being large enough to cover the outgoings of mature students but few would have been willing to borrow more. Significant numbers of the female students were receiving benefits and provided examples of the disincentives to study that stemmed from inconsistencies in the application of rules, and the incompatibility between the rules of some benefits and study.

DSS rules had made it difficult for some to continue courses and New Deal was seen as a major barrier to further study. Some women were very critical of the change in benefits that occurred after they had started an Access course and made arrangements for the year.

> Rejig New Deal because students are currently penalised. There is a tension between the need to earn and the need to study and the payment of benefits. If they [government] want to encourage people like us [to study] they should take account of these anomalies.
>
> Access funds are used to help with nursery fees and travel and then this was taken away from benefits*
>
> My friend had to leave this course because her JSA was stopped.

(* Note that income from Access Funds should be disregarded by the DWP/Benefits Agency.)

Interviewees identified inadequate finance as the most important disincentive to entry. When asked to list up to 5 reasons that would lead to a decision not to enter HE (261 responses) 39% detailed inadequate finances, mentioning both fees and loans. When asked 'What is the single most important factor against entering HE,' (167 responses) 42% mentioned fees, debts or costs, more than twice as many as any other single factor.

> I think it comes down to money. Lots of people think you've got to have lots of money… A lot of people have accepted life in these disadvantaged areas thinking 'I'm totally stuck here' They wouldn't even think about university. They think it's just for the rich. The impression people get about students is that they owe so much money in student loans.

8.2.2 Knowledge of financial arrangements

Because of the importance of financial factors in understanding entry decisions, questions were asked of all respondents concerning their knowledge of student financial arrangements.

The potential entrant questionnaire asked about knowledge of the current student finance system. Of those intending to apply for HE in 2000/1 (49 respondents):

- 40% said they did not know whether they would have to pay fees or not

- 40% knew they would have to pay fees

- 15% knew they would not have to pay fees

- 48% of the women and 44% of the men were expecting to take out student loans

- 83% did not know of the possibility of any support for part-time students.

In the focus groups, a similar level of ignorance was found. Some groups had received detailed advice from expert counsellors often given in a one-off session. Very few FE college tutors were able to provide advice on the changing student finances. Other focus groups had no knowledge of the ways fee contribution was calculated or of other benefits available.

In the interviews, quite detailed information was collected concerning the financial knowledge of potential students. Responses to the question: 'What do you know about fees and other costs involved in university study?' are set out in table 15.

Table 15

Knowledge about fees and costs – potential entrants in interviews

Response	Fees %	Other costs %
Nothing/very little/confused	59	48
I have all the information I need	36	33
No reply	5	19
Total (N=187)	*100*	*100*

Responses to the question: 'What do you know about available benefits and financial support?' are set out in table 16.

Table 16

Knowledge of benefits and financial support – potential entrants in interviews

Response	%
None	19
Very little	22
A bit/some knowledge	29
I have most information	20
No reply	10
Total (N=187)	*100*

When asked about entitlement to benefit there was a similar level of ignorance with 80% of those who replied (97) saying they would be entitled to nothing or didn't know whether they would or not. Only 12% of them knew of the Access Fund in HE.

The degree of uncertainty from all our respondents was particularly striking, given that the time of data collection, between February and June, was very late in the applications cycle. However, it was clear that the respondents did not have clear and comprehensive information about the range of funding possibilities and that this contributed to their concerns.

8.2.3 Recommendations for Government

Direct questions were asked concerning government policies, again in order that any policy discussions could be linked directly with student views.

In the focus group discussions, the issue of benefit regulations emerged again and again. Students found the whole situation in relation to benefits and allowances `confused`, `inconsistent` and `difficult to understand`. Request for clarification concerning New Deal and Job-seekers allowance in terms of level 3 study and for benefit rules for HE students were made vociferously and frequently. The inconsistencies in the application of rules in different localities caused problems for students and staff.

Interviewees were asked 'What is the most important thing the government could do to encourage mature students to enter HE?' Clearly many correspondents have misunderstandings as to the responsibilities of government, however, of the 251 suggestions:

- ◆ 52% focused on providing more financial resources for students

- ◆ 18% on administrative /support issues, better child-care, less bureaucracy

- ◆ 12% on institutional course issues, flexibility in timetabling, more part-time courses.

- ◆ 10% on employment, pressure on employers to help with fees and time.

8.3   Entrants and potential entrants compared

The key difference between the entrants and the potential entrants was the level of confusion about the costs of study and the benefits and financial support available. This is hardly surprising at one level, since the entrants had been in HE about 5 months when they responded to the questionnaire so their financial situation and commitments for the year were fairly clear. Nevertheless, the anxiety levels of most seemed to have fallen from the time they made their application to the present.

For the potential entrants, however, their anxiety levels may almost have been at their peak since it was between February and early June 2000 (mostly in the latter part of that period) when most of the fieldwork with potential entrants was carried out. At that point, only a few months away from entry, most still did not know with any certainty how much studying in HE might cost them as individuals or how much financial support they might be entitled to or might be able to obtain from one or more of the available sources of assistance. There was therefore a strong sense that they were taking a leap in the dark and however much they felt that it was 'for me', they were by no means certain whether they would be able to make the leap.

9   SCOTLAND

This chapter focuses on the changes in mature student participation in Scotland. With further funding from the Scottish Executive, we were able to add three further institutions to the one university included in the original study. The methodology adopted in the original GB study was replicated in the additional institutions and we report findings for all four Scottish institutions in this chapter.

9.1   The statistical background

In Scotland, the decline of full-time mature entrants in HEIs was less than for the UK as a whole, but nonetheless, was almost 11% during the period 1995-6 to 1998-99, a period of overall expansion in the HE sector. Over the same period part-time mature entrants increased by 20%, but numbers were small as a proportion of all mature entrants, and there appears to have been considerable fluctuation in numbers (see tables 1 and 2, chapter 2 for the details).

Of particular interest in Scotland is the atypical role, within a UK context, of further education colleges (FECs). A very high proportion of HE provision is located within the FE sector, especially part-time Higher National provision, and this proportion has increased markedly in recent years. Tables 17 and 18 below show the relative share of all new entrants (mature and non-mature) across the two sectors.

Table 17

New full-time entrants (all ages) to HEIs and FECs 1995/6 to 1998/9, First Degree and HNC/D

Sector	1995/96 %	1996/97 %	1997/98 %	1998/99 %	Change 1995/6 to 1998/9
HEIs	66	66	65	65	+10%
FECs	34	34	35	35	+18%
Total (N=)	53,363	59,386	60,507	60,125	+13%

Source: Scottish Executive, 2000

Table 18

New part-time entrants (all ages) to HEIs and FECs 1995/6 to 1998/9, First Degree and HNC/D

Sector	1995/96 %	1996/97 %	1997/98 %	1998/99 %	Change 1995/6 to 1998/9
HEIs	22	29	29	29	+90%
FECs	78	71	71	71	+30%
Total (N=)	34,282	43,377	45,639	49,277	+44%

Source: Scottish Executive, 2000

Thirty-five percent of new full-time entrants were enrolled in FE and the expansion over the period was greater in the FE sector. Further, 71% of new part-time entrants to HE in 1998/9 were enrolled in FECs and although the expansion in HE was greater over the period it was from a much smaller base than the FE sector. Of these, high proportions were mature, particularly those taking part-time programmes (see tables 19 and 20 below).

Table 19

Mature students taking full-time advanced courses at Scottish FECs, 1996/7 to 1998/9

Subject grouping	1996-7	1997-8	1998-9	% change 1996/7 to 1998/9
Business	2,125	2,024	1,760	-17%
Arts/Humanities/Social Science	1,670	1,674	1,664	-<1%
IT	1,212	1,375	1,461	+21%
Science/Technology	1,502	1,517	1,266	-16%
Service	1,198	1,144	1,008	-16%
Care/personal development	1,637	1,779	1,704	+4%
All subjects	9,344	9,513	8,863	-5%

Source: Scottish Qualifications Authority

Table 20

Mature students taking part-time advanced courses at Scottish FECs, 1996/7 to 1998/9

Subject grouping	1996-7	1997-8	1998-9	% change 1996/7 to 1998/9
Business	6,463	7,024	7,593	-17%
Arts/Humanities/Social Science	1,284	1,277	1,546	+20%
IT	2,370	3,637	3,746	+58%
Science/Technology	3,464	3,371	3,692	+7%
Service	1,955	2,196	1,616	-17%
Care/personal development	2,728	2,961	2,719	-<1%
All subjects	18,264	20,466	20,912	+14%

Source: Scottish Qualifications Authority

This analysis of the further education statistics shows that mature entrants to HE programmes in FECs were in moderate decline (-5%) overall in the full-time mode but showed a marked increase in the part-time mode (14%) over the period 1996/97 to 1998/99. There was a substantial variation in trends by subject area with greatest declines among full-time students taking science and technology, business studies and care subjects and among part-time students, service subjects. By contrast there were steep increases in numbers of mature students taking information technology subjects on a part-time basis. The increase of 58% in this subject area is by far the most significant factor in part-time mature student numbers in the FEC sector. Further analysis, college by college, also shows substantial variations in enrolments with some of the larger colleges sustaining their mature student enrolments best.

9.2   The case study HEIs

The choice of the Scottish HEI in the original GB wide study (referred to here as SA) is set out in chapter 2. Two further universities, one ancient and one recent post-Robbins, were added to the one post 1992 university included in the original GB-wide study. These universities were chosen on the basis of further analysis of HESA data, and were institutions where there were significant numbers of mature students, but where there had been recent declines in either full-time or part-time (or both) mature entrants. Detailed analysis of SQA data, carried out by Gillian Raab and Helen Storkey at Napier University, allowed us to select one large FEC with a high proportion of HE provision and large numbers of mature students. The chosen college (Institution SD) had experienced an increase in mature student participation in both part-time and full-time mode, though with some variation between subject areas. Tables 21 and 22 show changes in mature student entry for the 4 institutions over the period 1995/6 to 1998/9.

Table 21

Mature new entrants to HE 1995/6 to 1998/9
Full-time, UK domiciled, First degree and DipHE/HND/HNC, excluding

Case study institution	Scottish region	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	% change 1995/6 to 1998/9
SA	South-West	491	975	764	721	+47%
SB	South-West	515	399	406	320	-38%
SC	Central	300	269	235	189	-37%
SD[1]	North-East	N/A	1,348	1,892	2,280	+69%

Source: Institutions SA, SB and SC – December returns to HESA; Institution SD – returns to SQA

Note[1]: For the FEC the data for 1995-6 was not available – the % change therefore relates to the period 1996/7 to 1998/9

Table 22

Mature new entrants to HE 1995/6 to 1998/9
Part-time, UK domiciled, First degree and DipHE/HND/HNC, excluding nursing

Case study HEI	Scottish region	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	% change 1995/6 to 1998/9
SA	South-West	392	263	174	350	-11%
SB	South-West	24	16	12	16	-33%
SC[1]	Central	N/R	132	128	86	-35%
SD[1]	North-East	N/A	377	526	452	+20%

Note[1]: For the FEC the data for 1995-6 was not available and for the HEI 'SC' the data was unreliable – the % change therefore relates to the period 1996/7 to 1998/9 for these 2 institutions

9.3 HEI perceptions of mature student recruitment

In the GB study a continuum of different stances was apparent. In Scotland, of the four institutions, SB could be placed at the 'doing little' end of the continuum and SA at the other extreme. Institutions SC and SD lay between them but tended towards the 'welcoming' end.

Most KI interviews concentrated on institutional structures and practices used to recruit, support and retain mature students, but individuals tried to explain the recent decline in mature recruitment, which was not uniform across institutions, nor across subjects within them. They drew attention to the barriers mature students faced: financial, motivational, geographical, and the considerable commitment and motivation required to overcome these and enter HE. It was suggested in one institution that there was `a marked female bias, perhaps 60: 40 because in the past fewer women had aspired to a university education so there remained more of a pool of untapped talent'. Elsewhere it was suggested HEIs were facing more competition since mature students had considerably more choice with some FE colleges offering HE courses and the Open University setting up a centre in the west of Scotland.

HEI personnel noted the overall levels of ignorance about the financial support available to students and argued that the changed arrangements in Scotland following the Cubie review had not been assimilated by many potential students. They saw students' financial problems as centred on difficulties with the benefits system and conflicts between those arrangements and educational policy.

Mature students were frequently equated with Access courses and with part-time provision. One HEI did not see any need to cater specifically for the needs of mature students, while two others relied heavily on mature students and did more to accommodate their special requirements. HEI staff frequently recognised mature people as highly successful students but they reported a nervousness among mature students themselves regarding their abilities to cope with higher education, which the institutions were doing little to overcome.

Different attitudes and practices existed in relation to different subject areas. Vocationally orientated subjects, (e.g. construction, health studies and business studies) tended to recruit better amongst mature students; humanities and social sciences were doing rather less well despite considerable success in the past. There were general assertions that recruitment trends followed national and local employment trends – in simplistic terms, recruitment levels among mature students rose when the economy was sluggish.

9.4 New entrants

1,369 questionnaires were sent to mature new entrants (UK domiciled) on first degree and HND/HNC courses across a range of vocational and non-vocational subject areas in the four Scottish case study institutions. There were 454 responses (a 33% response rate) and, in summary, the respondents were:

- ♦ 58% women

- ♦ 63% full-time students

- ♦ 24% were aged 21-24, 18% were aged 25-29, 31% were aged 30-39, 22% were aged 40-49, and 5% were 50 or over.

In institutions SB and SC there were insufficient new mature entrants within single subject categories so questionnaires were sent to all mature entrants. As a result respondents are more evenly spread across a wider range of subject areas than in the overall GB study. Entrants were on courses in the following subject areas (HESA codes in brackets):

- 4% Medicine & Dentistry(A)
- 7% Biological Sciences(C)
- 2% Veterinary Science & Agriculture & Related S(D)
- 1% Physical sciences (F)
- 9% Mathematical Sciences(G5)
- 6% Engineering (HJ)
- 3% Architecture and Building and Planning (K)
- 14% Social, Economic & Political Studies(LM)
- 10% Business and administrative studies (N)
- 2% Librarianship and Information Science (P)
- 6% Languages (QRT)
- 6% Humanities (V)
- 13% Education (X)
- 16% Combined studies (Y)
- <1% in: Subjects allied to medicine (B), Law (M3), and Creative arts and design (W)

Analysis of the responses to the questionnaire produced results largely similar to those found in GB as a whole; however, there were some interesting differences. When considering motivations for entering HE four of the top five factors ranked as the most important in GB study overall were the same in Scotland, though their order of precedence was different. **'Interest in the subject'** was ranked most highly in Scotland, followed by **'enhancement of career prospects'**, the reverse order from GB as a whole. However, as in GB as a whole, over 70% of all students ranked each of these two factors in their top five. The one factor ranked as most important in Scotland that did not appear in the top five in GB overall was **'always wanted to/never had a chance'**; conversely the factor not to appear in the top five in Scotland was **'improvement of long term financial situation'**, though 44% ranked it between 1-5 in importance, a similar figure to GB overall.

As in GB overall, **'cost of study'**, **'the need to work to earn money'**, **'home responsibilities'** and **'job responsibilities'** were ranked amongst the top five impediments to entry. 'Lack of time' was ranked less highly than in the UK overall, and was cited by only 29% of the Scottish sample as between 1-5 in their reporting of barriers. **'Lack of confidence'**, however, was ranked as the most significant barrier by 9% of the sample and between 1-5 by 38%; this was rather higher than in GB overall (5% and 33% respectively).

Other differences among the Scottish respondents were the greater proportion by comparison to GB as a whole who had been in full-time work at the time of their application (50% against 39%), and the lower proportion that had been unemployed (6% against 12%).

Factors associated with the institution also illustrated some differences. Scottish students ranked the **'location of the institution'**, **'the availability of certain courses'** and **'academic reputation'** most highly in their choice of HEI. Availability was however less important than in GB overall (27% compared to 37% ranked it as the most important) and academic reputation was more important (16% compared

to 7%). Location was particularly important for part-time students and for women. By contrast reputation was much less important for part-time students and women.

Given the different and changed position in Scotland in relation to fees, we asked certain different questions to these Scottish entrants. The introduction of fees had affected the decision to enter HE of a similar proportion of the Scottish cohort as in GB overall (25% compared to 29%). A majority but not all (76%) respondents reported an awareness of the subsequent abolition of fees, and of these only 17% reported that it would have an affect on their future study plans. Some students who had had to study part-time hoped that the abolition of fees would allow them to study full-time or for longer (e.g. for an honours rather than a general degree).

9.5   Potential entrants

The **potential entrants questionnaire** was sent to all students in the selected subject areas in the four case study HEIs who had been offered and who had accepted a place in 1999 but had not enrolled. In addition, it was given to potential entrants in any of the settings for the fieldwork, including those attending Summer Schools at institutions SA and SB, and those identified by the Scottish Wider Access programme, who were either unable or unwilling to participate in a focus group of to be interviewed.

A total of 78 valid responses were analysed:

- ♦ 65 % were women

- ♦ 40% had been offered a place in HE in the past and had either not taken it up or had left very early before they were counted as an entrant

- ♦ Over one third of respondents were financially responsible for children, with about one quarter of respondents also having a caring responsibility for children.

- ♦ One third of respondents (more women than men) held traditional HE entry qualifications, i.e. GCE 'A' levels or SCE Highers.

- ♦ 47% intended to apply for a place in 2000/1 and 25% at some time in the future (see table 23)

Table 23

Respondents intentions to apply to HE – potential entrants questionnaire, percentages

	All %	Women %	Men %
For 2000/1 entry	47	48	46
Sometimes in the future	31	34	25
Don't know	10	10	11
Not at all	12	8	18

As in the main GB-wide study, the majority of respondents were classified as:

- ♦ having failed to take up an offered place at an HEI,

68

- ♦ currently applying

- ♦ planning to apply for a place to study.

Almost the same proportion of men and women were applying for 2000/1 entry. A larger proportion of men than women had decided not to apply for a place to study, with a bigger share of women thinking of applying in future. Among those either applying at the time or postponing their application, the majority (57%) was planning to study full-time. The proportion of women planning to study full-time was greater than that of men.

Eleven **focus groups** were conducted with participants on a wide range of qualifying routes associated with or potentially leading to courses in the four case study institutions. The qualifying routes included in-house and FE based mature student Access courses, summer schools, non-advanced and advanced vocational courses and community-based programmes and individual direct routes. A total of 94 learners participated in these discussions, of whom 24% were men and 2% from minority ethnic groups.

Interviews were conducted with people identified through the focus groups, qualifying route tutors, open evening and special events for mature students, admissions, and advice and guidance offices.

74 interviews were conducted:

- ♦ 68% were women and 32% were men

- ♦ 78% were over 25 years old

- ♦ 43% had children living in their household

Thus the profile of the interviewees was similar to the GB study, except that a smaller proportion had children living in their household than the GB sample (51%).

Their applicant status was as follows:

- ♦ 62% were current applicants (i.e. applying for entry in 2000) of whom:

  - ♦ 72% were applying for the first time,
  - ♦ 11% were re-applicants [previously applied but not entered],
  - ♦ and 7% were 're-entry' applicants (previously entered but left very soon)
  - ♦ the remainder were already graduates.

- ♦ 16 % were current deciders (thinking of entering but not sure) of whom:

  - ♦ 42% had never applied before,
  - ♦ 25 % were 'delayed deciders' (previously applied but not entered),
  - ♦ 33% were re-entry deciders (previously entered but left very soon)

- ♦ 15% were non-entrants (definitely not applying in the near future); of whom two thirds had never applied previously and one third had applied but not entered.

- ♦ 7% not known.

9.6   Perceptions of potential entrants

Here we report on data gathered from the potential entrant questionnaire, focus groups and interviews with potential students.

9.6.1 Motivating factors influencing decisions to enter HE

Personal factors including: family and employment circumstances; physical location; financial commitments; personal histories; individual interests and aspirations as well as doubts and fears, were more significant in determining whether an individual was motivated to enter an HE course than the three other types of identified factor. Themes running through many responses were desires to improve material circumstances and to set positive examples for children, though a number were more focused on self-development per se rather than what material benefits higher education might bring.

The three motivating factors most often rated as most important by the questionnaire respondents were:

♦ **'interest in the subject'** (24% overall, 23% women, 25% men)

♦ **'to enhance career prospects'** (15% overall, 14% women, 25% men)

♦ **'the desire to improve qualifications'** (12% overall, 14% women, 8% men).

In focus groups:

♦ Substantial numbers placed **'a desire to learn'** high on their list with many responding to a personal challenge or desire for growth.

♦ Some were more altruistic: `'to have more to offer to society'`; others expressed a view relating to a particular form of family responsibility: `'to be an example to my children'; 'role model for children'; 'to inspire my daughter'`.

♦ A small number thought that entering HE would broaden their social contacts.

♦ 'Opportunity ' was an important factor – the `'time was right'` for many, especially women (those with older children) – it was `'time to do something for myself'`. Others suggested that now that they were older they felt better able to cope than they would have done as 18 year olds. They were `'ready for the second chance'`.

In the interviews, a range of respondents reported that their educational horizons had been limited by teachers at school, but now their perceptions had changed. In the past, there had been a prevailing notion of university `as 'not for the likes of us'`, but `'for the upper classes' and 'for the highly intelligent'` – with assumptions that the two went together. Other responses from interviewees were as follows:

♦ For a small minority the spur to think about higher education was dissatisfaction with their current circumstances: `'to get out of the rat race and reduce stress'`.

♦ A major motivation for many interviewees was 'money' (resulting from better job prospects – equated with graduate status). This was, however, rarely the sole motivation.

♦ A long held interest in a subject, and less concrete concepts such as `'improved quality of life', 'self-improvement', 'to test my own capabilities'` were also claimed as motivations by interviewees.

♦ The altruism shown in some of the focus groups was echoed in the interviews: a desire `'to contribute somehow to society', 'to try to change`

things for the better' and 'to provide an educated role-model for my children'.

9.6.2 Barriers to enter HE

Situational factors provided the most important barriers to HE entry for the respondents to the potential entrants questionnaire. The three reasons ranked 'most important' by the largest proportions were situational:

- ♦ **'Cost of study'** was most important for 28% of respondents
- ♦ **'The need to work to earn money'** for 16%
- ♦ '**Job responsibilities'** for 8%.

Women in particular also referred to a lack of confidence in their own abilities.

In focus group discussions, the following issues emerged as barriers:

- ♦ Childcare (availability and cost) and family commitments were many women's major consideration.
- ♦ The health (of themselves as well as close family members) was seen as a possible barrier by a number.
- ♦ 'Juggling time' between the various aspects of their lives was a major preoccupation for many prospective students: ('juggling home, family, college and work').
- ♦ For many, the long term commitment needed for a degree was 'a lot to take on'.
- ♦ Many students were apprehensive and lacked confidence in their own abilities and worried about failure. Specifically many spoke of the feelings of inadequacy felt when working alongside 18 year olds.

However, despite the many barriers identified by students, the majority were committed to continuing their studies, so for them the positive incentives outweighed the negative factors.

9.6.3 The choice of institution

Relatively little was said in focus groups about specific institutional factors. For many participants the qualifying route being followed was apparently the only option they could access, often for geographical reasons. Flexibility of provision, attractive surroundings, reputation and prestige were all cited as positive factors in certain focus groups.

Among the respondents to the potential entrants questionnaire:

- ♦ 43% ranked the **location of the institution** as most important factor
- ♦ 21% ranked the **academic reputation** of the institution as most important
- ♦ the **structure of the course** was ranked somewhere between 1 and 5 by 73% and the **availability of the specific course** by 55%.

Barriers were also rarely mentioned in focus groups apart from timetabling and accessibility. Rigid timetables were specifically identified. Intending part-time students in particular worried about coping with the logistics of travel. The major complaint was that there was a distinct lack of communication

between institutions and students; they felt that they needed much more information about the first year courses so that they could be better prepared. In some groups, the attitudes of some staff were commented upon unfavourably – there was a need to treat adults differently and recognise their needs.

9.6.4 Recommendations to institutions

Focus group participants and interviewees had a great deal to say about how institutions could improve the situation for mature applicants (although none seemed aware of the changes being made in the financial arrangements in Scotland following the Cubie (1999) report). Many of the participants echoed the recommendations identified in GB as a whole:

♦ Information aimed specifically at mature students did not always reach its target. Students suggested a range of dissemination routes – colleges, local papers, libraries, TV, special mature student brochures and prospectuses were called for

♦ Better career advice for potential students – vital for the selection of an appropriate course of study

♦ Current mature students be recruited as 'ambassadors' or 'role models' as they could explain about problems from the students' perspective

♦ Information should be given about mature students' success rates and the kinds of jobs they eventually secured.

♦ Recruitment visits by HE providers should take place at the start of an Access course rather than near the end

♦ HEIs should be more sensitive – they should recognise that `adults are different'

♦ There should be more one-to-one guidance to find their way through the current financial system – described as `a morass' or a `minefield' with no one person seeming able to answer all the questions.

9.6.5 Labour market factors

As in the GB study, labour markets factors were important to potential entrants: 83% of the respondents to the questionnaire were looking for an HE qualification to change their occupation/career direction. In focus groups, participants saw HE as helping them to `get a better job', `to start a different career path', `to have more career options', `to become more employable'. However, those who were currently employed were often reluctant to give up their jobs in order to study because of the inevitable impact that it would have on incomes, 'balancing time' and fitting in all their commitments.

9.6.6 National policy factors

The policy context, particularly in relation to fees was different in Scotland. Not surprisingly therefore given the high profile of the issue at the time, a high proportion of respondents to the potential entrants questionnaire (50%) said that their decision to study in HE had been affected by the introduction of fees for full-time undergraduates. However, only 31% were aware of the abolition of fees for all Scottish full-time HE students studying in Scotland from Autumn 2000, with only 40% of those claiming that they were affected by the abolition, although among those that had been affected, this frequently meant that they had delayed their application. More than 40% of respondents did not know whether they would

have to pay fees if they were to enter HE in 2000. If payment was necessary the majority expected to finance their studies themselves; those expected to receive help would obtain it from their families. Eighty-five percent of respondents were aware of the availability of student loans but only 10% were aware of the introduction of the Scottish Graduate Endowment scheme and most of those did not know of the proposed exemption for mature students from this scheme. The availability of Access Fund payments for certain groups of students was known by only 3% and only 16% knew about financial support available for part-time students.

In the focus groups there were almost always rather generalised fears about 'not managing' financially if they became students but many potential students were poorly informed as to what their commitments might be. Almost all groups called for the government to review the benefit system so that mature students do not lose benefit when they undertake study because they would not be 'available for work' since this was seen to be unfair. In several groups, married women resented being assessed on their husband's income rather than as independent individuals.

9.7   Comparisons between the FEC and the HEIs

Interestingly, comparisons between data for new entrants in the FEC and the three Scottish Universities showed few differences. Those that did appear can be explained by the disproportionate share of part-time students in institution SD (as in the FE sector in Scotland as a whole), and by its rural location. The main differences were as follows:

♦ Proportionally fewer students at SD cited **'to change the direction of life'** as a motivator for going to college (however, in the universities' sample this proportion was also lower in cases where the proportion of part-time students was high)

♦ More students at SD cited **'lack of time'** as a barrier (again, in universities this proportion increased where the sample of respondents contained a higher proportion of part-time students)

♦ The FE students were more likely to have financial or caring responsibilities for children

♦ For FE students the **academic reputation** of the institution and its attitude towards mature students was less important than for the university students

♦ FEC students were more likely to cite **'enhancement of prospects in their previous or current occupation'**, rather than **'preparation for a new career'** as a motivator. This corresponds well with the smaller proportion of FEC students citing **'to change the direction of their life'** as a motivator.

♦ FEC students more frequently anticipated being bound to their current region after their studies; these same students also frequently reported having other responsibilities and the difficulty of travel in a remote rural region. These factors together of course may be why they have chosen the part-time route.

It would be dangerous to extrapolate too much from these differences, as they appeared to be a function of geography and mode of study rather than institution. However, given the constraints imposed by their situation, FE was the only viable option for these students. Moreover, the supply of provision at the FEC 'SD' clearly showed its commitment to mature students. During the past few years, over half the student population was aged 26 or over and three courses were provided exclusively for mature students. This strategy responded well to fears among mature students in focus groups about being

taught in groups alongside young students, feeling that they could not cope. At SD, the targeted courses had also had a more condensed day's timetable, which fitted in with school hours to facilitate the delivery and collection of children.

Although based on a small sample, current and potential mature entrants to HE within FECs exhibit motivating and inhibiting factors that differ little from those in the university sector in both Scotland and the rest of GB. The fact that the FEC sector in Scotland is able to recruit such high numbers of mature students, particularly at time when many universities are experiencing a downturn can be viewed positively. It is likely that the shorter cycle of study and the greater availability of part-time programmes in FECs are responsible for the difference. In terms of flexibility of provision, FECs seem to be supplying the type of provision that mature students find possible to sustain. However, this raises the question as to why the majority of universities have been unable or unwilling to create similar variety in provision. Whilst SHEFC have for some years under the aegis of a number of initiatives provided top-sliced funds to stimulate supply in the HE sector, provision is still limited.

The exhortations of the Cubie Committee (1999) to stimulate further demand for part-time study by creating greater clarity and fairness in support mechanisms, and in particular in relation to the benefits system (Recommendation 9) and means-tested support (Recommendation 10) may merit further consideration. It is of interest to note that the Scottish Executive (2000) indicated that the review of how to develop the relationship between the benefits system and support for part-time students will occur when staff resources permit.

10 BECOMING A STUDENT: FRAGILITY AND RISK

Summary

This chapter:

♦ Explores the shifting attitudes to and the experiences of certificated learning which encourage mature students to become potential HE entrants

♦ Outlines the prioritisation and interaction between motivations and barriers which allow an aspirant to become an applicant

♦ Develops a notion of a learner as struggling to decide if HE is 'for me' or 'not for me

♦ Explores in some detail the fragility of the aspirants' decision making.

♦ Uses the concept of 'risk' to outline the understanding learners have of the contexts within which they can study and the consequences for their personal lives of entry to HE.

This chapter is concerned initially to provide evidence to enable an understanding of 3 key processes: the transformation of individuals who left school without HE entry qualifications into HE aspirants; the prioritisation between key factors which have motivated that transition; and the complex interaction between these factors leading to a decision to enter or not. The quantitative and qualitative data allow for these complexities to be scrutinised. We then provide a conceptual over-view, focussing upon the interaction between three key processes: continuing to be a learner, the fragility of the decision to enter HE and the notions of risk that underpin the decisions and choices made.

It is important to note that this study involved as potential entrants mostly people who were at the very least considering HE, some with a greater degree of commitment than others, but often unsure as to when and how that commitment would be translated into action. Many had applied to or briefly entered HE previously. Others had applied for 2000/1 entry but were still not sure whether to take up a place. The decision to enter HE even for this group is therefore a fragile one. It is the nature of this fragility that this chapter is attempting to understand.

10.1 Becoming a student

The potential entrants in this study were largely committed to entering HE if possible. What was clear was that they had moved since leaving full-time education to a position where they were redefining their educational identity. The interviews illustrate this transition in several ways. Less than 20% of the 187 respondents possessed HE entry qualifications on leaving school and only one fifth of them applied for entry at the time. But all had acquired numerous qualifications post school and large numbers of these were vocational: NNEB, RGN, RSA, GNVQ, and City and Guilds. What was interesting was the range of qualifications outside the 'standard' A levels and Scottish Highers routes; only 8% had taken A levels post school. Since we identified the sample through qualifying routes, most (more than two thirds) were

currently undertaking a course of some kind: an Access course, vocational qualifications, a small number on A levels, and other kinds of courses, all with certification.

On leaving full-time education, the majority possessed neither the qualifications for nor aspirations to HE; and in interviews they expressed strong views concerning this transition from 'not for me' to 'for me'. When asked about their perceptions of universities when they left school, of the 119 replies:

♦ 48% had been very negative:

> `'it was like school, and I hated school'`

> `'posh, not for the likes of me'`

♦ 33% had no real idea or interest at the time:

> `'never come across anyone who went, didn't`
> `know about such places'`

♦ only 16% had been positive:

> `'provided a good life'.`

Similarly when asked their perceptions on leaving school of university students, of the 128 replies:

♦ 47% had had very negative views:

> `'scruffy',`

> `'drunks and dossers',`

> `'toff children'`

♦ 27% had had no experience of university students:

> `'there weren't any where I lived'`

♦ only 23% had held positive views:

> `'I wanted to be one', 'like my brother'.`

What had changed their negative or indifferent views in the intervening years was an increase in familiarity with the HE system: `'it's not so elitist'`, `'people who go later are motivated'`, a growth in confidence in their own abilities: `'I realise I'm not dim'` and/or a change in their aspirations: `'necessary to achieve my goals'`. Together these constituted an increasing sense of the self as a learner and with that came a more proactive stance towards the possibilities and circumstances which might allow these to be translated into action. The proliferation of level 3 qualifying routes within FE, community education and employer-linked vocational provision was of crucial importance in providing a range of spaces where this transition could occur.

10.2 Becoming a potential entrant – prioritising factors

Overlapping with the lessening of the distance between the adult learner and the idea of higher education among the people in our study, there was a growth of 2 key motivating factors: the importance of career/employment prospects and of cognitive interest in a subject area and greater

engagement with learning in that areas. This was clear in all the groups of potential entrants. When given a list of 24 possible reasons to enter HE the potential entrant questionnaire respondents ranked 'to enhance career prospects', 'desire to improve qualifications' and 'interest in a subject' as far more important than any other factors. In the focus groups, participants individually provided 3-5 reasons for entry to HE. These were collectively grouped into categories and the whole group voted (3 votes per person) on the subsequent list. A Science Access course comprising 18 participants produced the list set out in table 24.

Table 24

Reasons for entry to HE – Focus group, Science Access course

Factor	No. of mentions	No of votes
Personal development	17	19
Job satisfaction	16	9
Career development	7	4
Better paid job	3	1
Life style changes	8	10
Give back to society	3	3
Bursary available	2	2
Family influences	3	-

Other focus group participants often found it difficult to separate the two issues: `enjoyment of learning and to be able to do a job in the future that I enjoy'.

The interviews allowed for a comparison between those who said they were 'applicants' for entry and those who were still making up their minds 'the deciders'. They were asked 'What are your motivations for applying or thinking of applying?' (up to 5 answers were allowed).

The 115 applicants provided 200 responses and of these:

♦ 49% were related to employment/career motivations

♦ 47% were personal/individual factors

The 54 'deciders' provided 75 responses:

♦ 44% were related to employment/career motivations

♦ 47% were related to personal/individual factors

Although the difference is small, the applicants ranked employment and career motivations rather higher than those who were less sure about actually entering HE.

The general trend therefore was clear: the key feature of the group who had now become potential entrants was the increased intensity and the coming together of these two elements: career/ employment aspirations and the individual sense of interest and engagement with learning in a particular field of study.

What then were the countervailing factors in the transformation? When the commitment to continue studying had been entered into, what made the difference between entering HE or not among those suitably qualified to do so?

Earlier chapters have demonstrated the strength of feeling concerning financial barriers to HE entry, but these need to be seen as linked with other factors, particularly with the costs of study (in terms of time as well as finance) for those with families and the need of most potential applicants to undertake paid work. For example, in the potential entrants questionnaire, of the 30 respondents (some giving more than one answer) who had previously been offered an HE place were asked why they did not take it up:

♦ one third blamed costs/financial problems
♦ one third timetabling/travel difficulties
♦ a quarter work commitments
♦ a quarter family commitments.

Similarly, the interviewees were asked 'Is one factor so important that it has prevented or would prevent you from applying?' Of the 109 responses:

♦ 42% cited financial issues – fees, debt, costs
♦ 19% cited personal issues – time/family problems/self-confidence
♦ 17% claimed that nothing would stop them
♦ 14% cited institutional issues – course full, no crèche place
♦ 7% cited employment related factors – eg employer would not give time.

Among entrants it was clear that the key motivating factors were very similar to those among the potential entrants. As illustrated in previous chapters (and set out in detail in annexe 3), the 5 most important motivating factors for new entrants had been, in order of priority:

♦ To enhance career prospects
♦ Interest in subject
♦ Desire to improve qualifications
♦ To change direction of life
♦ To improve long-term financial situation

For the majority of mature entrants the top two factors were the key motivators: more than three quarters ranked both them between 1 and 5.

The key barriers to previous application for the entrants in our study were also similar to those identified by the potential entrants:

♦ Cost (books, fees, travel etc)
♦ Need to work to earn money
♦ Home responsibilities
♦ Job responsibilities
♦ Lack of time

The two most important here were clearly related to finances and the other three to the problems of juggling the various roles and responsibilities – a theme that recurred throughout our study.

10.3 Balancing the motivating factors and barriers

In addition to investigating the way in which the various groups prioritised the various factors influencing their decisions, one of the key research questions was how did these positive and negative factors interact to bring about a decision to enter HE, or not.

Apart from the top five motivations and barriers, there was a long 'tail' of factors (in a possible list of 25) which were ranked as 1 by much smaller proportions of students but which together constitute the complexity of decision making concerning application and entry to higher education. In order to retain this complexity but at the same time to make the analysis manageable, we grouped the factors together (see annexe 3, figures 1 and 2), in each case using the most important factor identified by students (i.e. ranked as 1). For the motivating factors, we drew on Boshier's work (Boshier and Collins 1983) with some amendment to reflect the fact that in this project the respondents were exclusively mature students. Boshier identified 6 types of factors: cognitive interest (CI), social contact (SC), professional advancement (PA), social stimulation (SS), community service (CS), and external expectations (EE); to which we added: opportunity (O). To group the barriers to application we drew on Cross's typology of situational (S), institutional (I) and dispositional (D) barriers (Cross 1981). The resulting analysis is set out in table 25 below.

Table 25

Interaction between motivating factors and barriers to application to HE

Motivating factors Barriers	PA %	CI %	SS %	CS %	EE %	O %
Situational	57	57	52	50	51	54
Institutional	17	15	18	16	24	18
Dispositional	25	27	31	30	25	28
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*
N=	465	241	150	14	43	102

The overall trends identified in the earlier part of this report are clear: whatever the most important motivating factors at least 50% of the respondents ranked situational factors – that is their financial and family circumstances and commitments – as the most important barriers, at least a quarter ranked dispositional factors as the most important and the rest (at most a quarter) ranked institutional barriers as the most important.

For the majority, whose prime motivations were professional advancement (PA) or cognitive interest (CI), situational barriers tended to be more important than for students who ranked other motivating factors more highly. This is important since together these two groups constituted 82% of all respondents. This reflects the clear priority given to these motivating factors among the respondents and the high level of agreement around the cost of study as a barrier to previous application. However, beyond this majority there were some differences.

For those who ranked social stimulation (SS) or community service (CS) as the most important motivating factors, dispositional barriers tended to be more important than for other students. This suggests that among those for whom affective and altruistic motivations were most important, issues

around self confidence were more likely to be important inhibitors. For those who ranked external expectations as the most important motivating factors, institutional barriers tended to be more important than for other students.

Although these differences are small they do indicate some variation in what tips the balance between entering and not entering for some mature students. Since the situational barriers were so significant, the key problem for crossing the threshold between being a potential entrant to being an entrant was the resolution of those issues around the cost of study and other time commitments. As we pointed out in previous chapters, the potential entrants had high levels of anxiety and ignorance about the financial costs and sources of financial support that were available. Among entrants, while they had experienced similar problems at the point of applying, those who had 'made it' had either discovered that the costs were less than they had feared (for example only 41% were actually paying fees) and/or had found sources of support to meet the costs they were incurring (58% had some financial help). Student loans were also seen as a crucial element for many new entrants.

Institutional factors were important too – especially issues around timetabling and the structure of the course. However, although for some the options were very constrained, either by geography or by the availability of a very specific course, for the majority, institutional factors were linked more to the choice of a specific institution rather than to entering HE per se. Thus such issues seemed to come into play as factors which might tip the balance only when other more generalised problems had been resolved.

10.4 Mature learners, fragility and risk

The prime focus of this research was an understanding of the motivation of mature students to study at an HE level and the translation of this motivation into action, to become an entrant. The key stages in the decision to become an entrant have been outlined above. The concepts 'learner', 'fragility' and 'risk' are used here to summarise a model for understanding and interpreting these processes on the basis of the evidence collected in this study.

The notion of a learner encapsulates the shift, often over a sometimes lengthy period of time: from an educational underachiever to an educational achiever and/or from someone for whom HE is a alien land to an HE aspirant, then to a 'decider' who is seriously considering an HE future, and finally from a decider to an applicant, possibly an entrant who then achieves a HE qualification. This shift in learner identities has been well documented in previous studies but what is added here are the interconnections between various facets of the shift. It involves a changing perception of the self, in terms of possible abilities and achievements, and key motivations to succeed, spurred either by a love of learning or interest in a particular subject, or by a desire to gain access to a career or to employment that provides a range of differing 'better' rewards, or by a combination of both. It seems to be when professional advancement and cognitive interest peak together that barriers may be overcome.

The other dimension of the changing perception of self as a learner is the fit between the self and a university student – the shift from `not for me` to `for me`. Partly this transformation takes place through a different engagement with learning post school, most usually in FE, which over-rides previous perceptions of universities; partly it also seems to be that the expansion of the post 1992 universities in the inner cities and their formal and informal links with FE has opened up the system to large numbers of 'non-traditional students' – in one of our case study institutions more than 75% of the students were mature, a very high percentage were from ethnic minority groups, and most lived locally.

This has made it more likely that `people like me` go to university. Of course this does not apply to all universities and the mature students in our study seemed to have an acute sense of the kind of university that is 'for me' and 'not for me' – but here 'for me' has a different meaning that attaches to the notion of a university rather than to the self - the university is looking for me and is 'on my side' or is not welcoming for people like me. In our study, institutional factors were not high in the list of general motivations and barriers but a wide range of factors were seen as very important in the choice of a particular HEI, including factors such as advice, attitudes and admissions procedures were clearly important for a significant minority.

Partly too this transformation depends on dispositional factors. Among applicants, for example, there was a strong sense of determination to `do it somehow`, even though many had waited some time to turn this into action – `something I've always wanted to do but never had the chance`. By comparison, 'deciders' were much less confident that they would be able to juggle everything and found the whole prospect more worrying and more `scary`. In addition, for some of our respondents, children provided this dispositional shift: the desire `to be a role model for my children` was linked to the idea that university could be 'for me', in the sense not just 'for me personally now' but also 'for my kids in the future'.

Although some of the ideas associated with HE as an investment in the future were present among the most important motivating factors for the students in our study – career enhancement, a better job, improved financial situation in the long term and so on, the language they use to talk about these aspects of their own future was located clearly in a discourse of risk. Of course in the financial sector the idea of investment is always associated with risk but in educational policy discourse it has usually had a blue chip kind of certainty about it: invest in your education and you **will** be better off, not you **might** be better off.

This concept of 'risk' highlights the processes through which positive and negative factors – the motivations and barriers – are balanced. The range of risks identified by respondents was large but the majority can be subsumed within five broad categories: personal achievement (what if I fail?); finance (what if I cannot afford to live or support my family?); time (what if I just cannot meet my obligations? what if my family relationships suffer? what if I don't have enough time with my family?); resources and services (what if the institution won't accept me, the course is at the wrong time, support services are not available?) and future rewards (what if jobs are not available, what if I end up with an enormous debt?). These risks are the costs of study in the broadest sense and account for the fragility of the decisions made. Many mature students see the decision to enter HE not as an investment but as a gamble. For the over 25 year olds, the risks were huge and they were interrelated: the cost in terms of time, money and pressure set against the uncertainty of outcomes. Although the mature students in our study had a fairly optimistic view of the labour market and the employment prospects for graduates in general, at a personal level it was much weaker: `It's scary not knowing where you'll end up`.

There was also a sense that they were not risking just their own but their families' situation – in terms of money but also in terms of time. In the literature this is often presented as a burden – here it was more about wanting and needing to spend time with family – to enjoy it and to give children especially a sense of being cared for and to ensure that relationships were not neglected. Often this is presented as a female issue but in this study it is just as much an issue for men.

This sense of risk was reinforced by confusion or ignorance among many applicants and deciders about the range of financial support available and about the cost of study. Frequently this was blamed on:

♦ the fragmented nature of the information – `it's in so many different places and different peoples heads'

♦ the inadequacy of advice services which stem from that fragmentation

♦ the reactive nature of advice systems – since the applicants don't know what they don't know a reactive service cannot be satisfactory.

It was also a question of timing: many of our interviews took place in May and early June and some interviewees were still unclear whether they would have to pay fees, be entitled to a loan or a particular kind of financial support since at least some of these depend on being offered a place. If the information about individual situation is not clear until after an offer is made how could they be sufficiently reassured about the support available to encourage them to apply.

In addition, partly no doubt due to the timing of our study and the national debates in England and Scotland about fees at that time, there was little sense of security that the present financial charges and support mechanisms would hold. Thus even when people had decided they could 'manage' they were not certain that this would continue for 3 or 4 years. Somewhat paradoxically, for some this scepticism spurred them to apply since they believed it could only get worse.

There was some evidence, however, that for the younger, single, independent, mature entrants loans may be welcome and viewed positively. For this category of entrant there was a self-perception of being better off than before and being able to live independently with the support of a loan. Among these young mature entrants, the sense of risk was less obvious.

The implications of this model, linking the notion of risk with the fragility of decision making by mature students, are that certain issues become important for policy makers at different levels within the education system. How can risks be minimised? How can a stronger sense of security and stability be generated around the perceptions about the cost and benefits of HE? What changes would help to mitigate the fragility of the decision making process? The students themselves requested a detailed rethink concerning the interface between lifelong learning and widening participation agendas. They saw the first as essential to the delivery of the second for mature students. The particular aspects highlighted by respondents in this context included an analysis of the real costs of study for those with existing commitments, the difficulties involved in juggling learning, earning, caring and debt, the relationship between a range of benefits and study in FE and HE, the inconsistent delivery of benefits, and the lack of information and advice in terms of accessibility, reliability and timing. Their financial situation was frequently very finely balanced so that ignorance of one element of the support available may have been enough to tip the balance of the decision. The fact that one element – Access funds – was not available until after acceptance of a place meant that risk assessment was difficult and reinforced the sense of fragility around any decision. The study has highlighted the processes of changing learner identities but has demonstrated that even a high level of commitment is not easily translated into HE application, entry and retention if the context means that the risks involved are perceived to be too high.

11   SUMMARY AND ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

This chapter brings together the summary of preceding chapters and draws out issues to be addressed identified by the respondents in this study, designed to get 'underneath' the statistical data.

Chapter 1 Research rationale, themes and methods:

♦ Summarised the statistical background that motivated the research: the decline in mature student entry to HE between 1995/6 – 1998/9.

♦ Provided an explanation of and rational for the conceptual approach highlighting national, labour market, institutional and personal factors as motivators for HE entry.

♦ Detailed the research questions that stem from this conceptual approach.

♦ Outlined the research methods employed

Chapter 2 Patterns of participation:

♦ Set out the patterns of participation of new mature entrants to HE in the period 1995/6 to 1998/9

♦ Showed a persistent and widespread decline over this period in mature entry to full-time first degree and DipHE/HND/HNC programmes, when nursing is excluded.

♦ Showed a more variable pattern in mature entry to part-time first degree and DipHE/HND/HNC programmes, with some indication that in most regions the trend appeared to be upwards in more recent years

♦ Presented the data for new mature entrants in the 9 case study HEIs, showing similar patterns.

♦ Government and institutions need to consider carefully the full consequences of the strength and persistence of the decline in mature entry to HE. Expansion and widening participation targets for higher education will be put in jeopardy if the trend in mature student participation continues on its recent trajectory. There is a complex set of interrelating factors at work. These need further analysis at both the national and institutional level with the specific implications for policy and practice drawn out and acted upon.

♦ Regional, institutional and subject variations in mature student entry provide the crucial evidence of who is entering, where, to do what, and the contexts within which a range of policies and practices can be delivered. Institutional managers need to be aware of the details of entry patterns and demonstrate this awareness in review and planning. There are enormous differences in mature student entry in differing types of institutions, reflecting institutionalised histories and cultures as well as responses to recent policy initiatives.

> **Chapter 3 Institutional views and perspectives:**
> ♦ Outlined the rationale for and nature of the institutional interviews undertaken
> ♦ Reported the variety of informant responses to an understanding of mature student recruitment in terms of:
>   υ national and governmental policies
>   υ local labour market influences and initiatives
>   υ the personal aspirations of and entry barriers experienced by students
>   υ institutional priorities and initiatives
> ♦ Showed that:
>   υ In general, for management the concept of their market was crucial. Mature students were sometimes seen as so central that they had been ...
> mainstreamed; at the other end of the spectrum one HEI was seeking to focus almost entirely on young students, as part of a positioning strategy in the hierarchy of universities.
>   υ For subject leaders and tutors, the local labour market and employers policy and practice for supporting their employees was seen as very important in vocational areas.
>   υ Subject tutors also saw student finance as an important factor in the decline of mature student entry. This was expressed particularly strongly by those in non-vocational subject areas.

♦ Successful positioning, within what is understood as a stratified HE system, depends on identifying and targeting markets. This is central to explanations of inter and intra institutional variation in mature student recruitment. A perception that the ranking of institutions negatively evaluates 'maturity' among students or the kind of entry qualifications gained by mature students has reinforced the polarisation in entry opportunities.

♦ A continuum of receptivity to mature students emerged. At one end were institutions where mature students constituted the majority of the student population and the 'natural' market of the institution so that they had been mainstreamed. At the other end of the spectrum, were institutions that had broadly defined their market as young and had planned for a continuing decline of mature students, except on the margins and in shortage subject areas.

♦ Government statements and initiatives on widening participation have been read differently by different institutions: seen as encouragement in some but reinforcing negativity to mature students in others, and in some respects undermining community links set up to develop wider inclusion in lifelong learning provision.

♦ However, it should be noted that a focus on first degree and DipHE/HND/HNC programmes does not encompass the complete range of HE provision for adults, local communities and employers. Although it was beyond our research brief, we were given information about a number of innovative developments which, for example, led to the award of university credits but these were not counted in the statistics on mature student entry. Such a focus may therefore be missing new programmes and activities. More work needs to be done to review such initiatives.

♦ Another factor was the differential investment of resources in developing and maintaining local links, with employers and further and community education and in instigating particular initiatives. An understanding of and commitment to local labour market and employer needs provided

stimulation for much part-time, vocational provision. Targeted funding had proved useful in developing these initiatives, and more resources would encourage further provision, but projects may be short-lived unless strategically embedded.

♦ Current quality agendas do not appear to foster a particular emphasis upon mature student recruitment and retention.

♦ The majority of HE and FE personnel linked the decline in mature student recruitment to changing student funding regimes but many also seemed not to understand the full range of possibilities available for their support or how they impact on individuals

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Chapter 4 Adult voices: the nature of the samples:
♦ Identified the two key groups of adults in the study: mature new entrants and potential entrants
♦ Provided the key characteristics of the 866 entrants who entrants who answered the entrants questionnaire
♦ Provided the key characteristics of the potential entrants: 79 who responded to a questionnaire, 220 who participated in the focus groups and 187 who were interviewed.

Chapter 5 Labour market and employment factors:
♦ Focused upon employment factors as crucial to an understanding of mature student motivation to enter HE.
♦ Provided details of the importance attached to professional advancement factors: 'to enhance career prospects', 'to improve qualifications' and 'to improve long term financial situation' were among the five factors ranked as most important motivations for entering.
♦ Showed that for entrants and potential entrants studying non-vocational subjects, these factors were still important but less likely to be in the top priority.
♦ Showed that for both new entrants and potential entrants, employment constituted both a push factor (away from dissatisfaction with current employment) and a pull factor (towards a change of career or occupation).
♦ Illustrated how employment also acted as a problem – of time, money and employer support – that had to be overcome before potential entrants could become entrants
♦ Located these motivations and barriers in wider understandings, largely optimistic, of the local and national labour market and graduate prospects within it.

♦ The detailed quantitative and qualitative research undertaken with current first year entrants and potential entrants demonstrated the importance of career advancement/higher earnings as motivating factors. Most were optimistic about job prospects and accepted that a degree was a key factor in improving their life chances. It was the translation of these aspirations into action, rather than their acceptance in principle, that was linked to entry.

♦ Employers, in collaboration with the HEIs, therefore have a role in providing practical support and co-operating to design and deliver arrangements and programmes aimed at providing vocational retraining or career development and at implementing transparent recruitment and training strategies that do not penalise applicants on the basis of age.

♦ These collaborative arrangements need to be further developed and employer support needs to be both flexible and responsive but also to be put on a stable basis so that potential entrants can have confidence in its continuance over the period of their studies.

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Chapter 6 Individual and personal factors:
♦ Provided details of the 'multiple roles' of the student respondents, illustrating their numerous responsibilities and life -juggling situations.
♦ Demonstrated the crucial place of cognitive factors, as expressed in 'interest in the subject', for both new and potential entrants but particularly for those in non-vocational subject areas.
♦ Showed the importance of personal/situational barriers preventing HE entry and the ways these are linked to age, gender, mode and subject differences.
♦ Showed that home and job responsibilities were ranked highly as barriers by both men and women
♦ Used qualitative data to illustrate the disincentive nature of both time constraints and the lack of confidence in academic skills among potential entrants.
♦ Showed that personal factors acted as both motivators and disincentives: the desire to achieve was linked to self esteem and to a wish to act as a role model for the family but that at the same time family responsibilities also limited participation, increased stress and necessitated more time juggling.

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♦ The research sample consisted largely of students already involved (or who had been involved) in some form of qualifying route and therefore had already taken the first step towards HE. Their emphasis upon academic motivations to study was thus not surprising and their desire to obtain further qualifications was not in doubt.

♦ The reality of mature student lives however, was demonstrated through an exploration of their multiple roles and responsibilities. The multifaceted nature of the situational and personal barriers which prevent entry need to be understood by all providers, but three, linked aspects stand out as crucial: the need to have a reliable source of income which will meet existing commitments, the positive importance placed on caring responsibilities, and time problems.

♦ Current income sources for full time students did not meet existing commitments without being supplemented by part-time earnings that then exacerbated the other two dilemmas. The nature of mature student funding and the package of support services needs a careful examination.

Chapter 7 Institutional factors:
- Provided evidence that general institutional features did not act as key motivators or barriers to HE entry for either entrants or potential entrants.
- Demonstrated that particular institutional factors had been very important for some groups in the choice of HEI: the availability of specialised vocational courses targeted at specific groups or the formal approval by a professional body
- Showed that part-time students in particular, ranked 'structure of the course' and 'APEL arrangements' as important in the choice of HEIs
- Highlighted 'geographical location' as particularly important among potential entrants and for those who had constraints on their mobility, relatively small additional distances were sometimes crucial
- Showed that behaviour and practice in relation to mature students was more important for most than attitudes and in particular potential entrants were concerned about the clarity and transparency of procedures
- Identified the fact that information per se was often seen as less of a problem than the timing of information – potential entrants wanted to have all the information (for example about timetables) **before** they made their final decision.

- Institutional provision and culture influenced the decision as to which institution to enter, when, to do what and with what degree of stress. Course availability, location, course structures and reputation were important in choosing where to apply. Student understandings of accessibility and flexibility involved a far wider range of practices than are usually provided, particularly around timetabling, choice of study modes and the provision of information. These acted as key disincentives to continued study. Child care support meant more than the provision of on-site nurseries, but subsidised care was appreciated.

- There is an important and complex challenge for institutions and government in making all the information available well in advance but at the same time providing flexibility.

Chapter 8 National policy factors:

♦ Provided detailed evidence on the ways in national policies were perceived by mature students

♦ Identified the cost of study as the most important barrier both for entrants and potential entrants

♦ Identified fees as having an effect on decision-making for around a quarter of those entrants who were not paying fees and around a third of those who were

♦ Examined the variety of responses to loans, including those that see them as providing an independent source of income and an enabling mechanism

♦ Examined the detailed responses of potential entrants to the costs of study and their criticisms of their DSS and New Deal experiences

♦ Detailed the lack of specific information which potential entrants had of financial support and costs, very late in the admissions cycle

♦ Outlined the recommendations potential entrants wished to pass to government to encourage mature student entry, focussing largely on financial measures.

Chapter 9 Scotland:

♦ Showed little difference between the views of new and potential entrants in Scotland and in the UK as a whole.

♦ Differences between those studying at HE level in FE and those in HE were clear but related mostly to the predominantly part-time and rural setting of the FE provision.

♦ For entrants and potential entrants there was little understanding of national policy beyond the subject of finances and many potential entrants showed a lack of understanding of the respective responsibilities of HEIs and government.

♦ The costs of study were a crucial disincentive to HE entry. Fees had added to this burden even when means testing meant many did not pay them. However, since the main effect seemed to be for many entrants that the introduction of fees had delayed their entry, in the longer term the impact on numbers may stabilise. Nevertheless, it was clear that for some potential entrants already anxious about finances, it tipped the balance against entry.

♦ Attitudes to loans were varied, depending partly upon age and existing financial commitments and resources. Potential entrants and FE tutors detailed the contradictory and uncertain consequences of DSS and New Deal rules in terms of higher level study.

♦ What is particularly important is the evidence provided concerning the lack of knowledge of financial regulations and support for mature students shown by potential entrants late in the admissions cycle. The majority of all students prioritised further financial assistance as the crucial step in encouraging mature student entry but also wanted all the information at the same time and place, available in a way that could be individualised for their particular circumstances, and they needed it much earlier in the admissions cycle.

> Chapter 10 Becoming a student: fragility and risk:
>
> ♦ Explored the shifting attitudes to and the experiences of certificated learning, which encourage mature students to become potential HE entrants.
>
> ♦ Outlined the prioritisation and interaction between motivations and barriers which allow an aspirant to become an applicant.
>
> ♦ Developed a notion of a learner as struggling to decide if HE is 'for me' or 'not for me'.
>
> ♦ Explored in some detail the fragility of the aspirants' decision making.
>
> ♦ Used the concept of 'risk' to outline the understanding learners have of the contexts within which they can study and the consequences for their personal lives of entry to HE.

♦ There is a very clear link between lifelong learning and widening participation, which is not always evident in practical policies. The transition to being a potential HE entrant is often a slow and often a long one, aided by a variety of study options, including those provided by employers. Thus a broad range of qualifying routes enhances wider opportunities and may convince potential entrants that HE is 'for me'.

♦ The fragility of the decision as to whether to enter HE is exacerbated by policies and practices which do not take into account the complex financial and caring responsibilities of many mature students and thus the enormity of the decision. This fragility also manifests itself in retention difficulties after entry.

♦ The notion of 'risk' is understood by mature students as involving an assessment of current and future financial commitments, the problems of time management given existing obligations, institutional accessibility, support and resources, estimates of future rewards and debts and an evaluation of likely academic success. It is often not only about personal risk but also about collective risk because of the impact on immediate family that entry to HE implies, and as risk also implies, there is a possible positive as well as a negative impact.

♦ The sense of risk is exacerbated by a lack of confidence in the future continuity of financial and other support services and of the institutional arrangements (especially timetabling) over the period of time that it may take to achieve the qualification aim. Thus there is a need for simplicity and stability in arrangements as well as the absolute level of support which would mitigate some risk factors and strengthen otherwise fragile decisions.

♦ A commitment to altering the persistent downward trend in mature student recruitment requires that a range of particular issues derived from the preceding conclusions should be addressed by government, HE institutions, local learning and skills councils and employers. The key sources of fragility and risk outlined in this report suggest areas where interventions may be necessary and most effective. The following summary highlights some of the most crucial ones.

- ♦ **A role for government?** Clearly a significant number of people felt that greater financial support would make it easier for them to consider going into HE. But also they need more security, more stability, and more certainty in the arrangements that currently exist. The publicity about and therefore knowledge of what is currently available is limited and fragmented in time and place. The relationship between level 3/4 study and the accessibility or not of a range of benefits needs clarification and consistency in delivery. A more co-ordinated approach is required to the distribution of information and the publicising of initiatives.

  In Scotland, the decline in mature student recruitment is less marked and in some parts of the system has actually expanded – particularly part-time HE based in the FE sector. The government should consider exploring more systematically developing such possibilities on a wider scale in the rest of GB.

- ♦ **A role for institutions?** The investment of resources in the recruitment of, provision for and retention of mature students is an activity which varies considerably in terms of institutional commitment, understanding and in the monitoring of success and appropriateness. Quality agendas could foster or steer this activity in more positive and specific ways. It is also clear that more information should be made available to potential entrants and at an early stage of the decision-making process (e.g. in the ostensibly simple matter of timetabling). This might be part of an overall provision of a comprehensive service of advice and guidance in partnership with others including local learning and skills councils and employers. Our respondents asked that HE institutions look at the meaning of accessibility and flexibility in terms of their needs, that they understand the nature of the costs involved in terms of time, commitments, and resources. It is not clear that currently the accessibility and flexibility that is manifest in institutional statements is translated into provision that meets the increasingly diverse requirements of the mature student market.

- ♦ **A role for employers?** Professional advancement in general and career enhancement in particular were the most important motivators for potential and current mature entrants– but job responsibilities were also one of the most important barriers to participation. Furthermore there is considerable potential for the further development of improved links between local as well as national employers and HEIs in order to create more flexible opportunities and a wide range of vocational routes for employees aspiring to HE study. More employers might then be encouraged to consider providing both financial and non-financial support for students

  It is particularly important that employers review their recruitment practices and recognise and develop the potential of their older employees if mature students are to develop confidence in the idea of investing in education in order to reap the benefits in later employment. While new entrants had a fairly optimistic view of the labour market in general and in their long term future prospects, the potential entrants were much less confident when focussing on their individual employment prospects even though they saw HE qualifications as important.

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SUMMARY OF STATISTICAL BACKGROUND
Changes between 1997/8 and 1998/9

Source: HESA Press Release, PR 29, April 1999

Table 1 (HESA table 1)

Student enrolments on first year HE courses (UK domiciled)

Full time First degree:	-2%
Part time First degree:	+4%
Full time Other Undergraduate:	-5%
Part time Other Undergraduate:	+5%

Table 2 (HESA table 2)

Student enrolments on HE courses (UK domiciled)

First degree	Women – Full time: +2%
	Women – Part time: +5%
	Men – Part time: +2%
	Men – Full time: No change
Other Undergraduate	Women – Full time: +2%
	Women – Part time: +4%
	Men – Full time: -5%
	Men – Part time: +3%

Enrolments by subject area (HESA table 3)

HESA Table 3 shows significant differences between subject areas. In particular decreases in traditionally male subject areas for full time first degree courses: Physical Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Architecture, Building and Planning. On Other Undergraduate courses, there are also significant decreases in Business and Administrative Studies.

Table 3 (HESA table 4)

First year UK domiciled enrolments on higher education by mode of study and age

Mode and level of study	Aged under 21	Aged 21-24	Aged 25+
Full time First degree	No change	-7%	-14%
Part time First degree	+14%	-1%	+4%
Full time Other Undergraduate	- 5%	-12%	No change
Part time Other Undergraduate +16%	+5%	+6%	

RESEARCH METHODS

Sources of data

The following sources of data informed the study:

♦ National and institutional level data for the HE sector derived from HESA returns

♦ Primary data from case study HEIs based on interviews with key personnel in order to:

   – monitor institutional changes in admissions policy and practice
   – focus on changes in patterns of mature recruitment at institutional level,
   – explore institutional and local/regional factors affecting mature student participation
   – gain access to mature learners who decide not to enter as well as those who do.

♦ For 1999 entry:

   – the 'entrants questionnaire' to a sample of new mature entrants to the case study HEIs
   – the 'potential entrants questionnaire' to a sample of those who had accepted a place but did not enrol (identified through the case study HEIs)

♦ For 2000 entry:

   – focus group discussions with mature students on qualifying courses (in house and FE based Mature Student Access Courses, A levels, year 0 courses, non-advanced and advanced vocational courses and community-based programmes and individual direct routes) linked to, or potentially leading to, courses in selected subject areas in the 9 case study HEIs, where there has been significant change in mature recruitment
   – interviews with individual mature students on qualifying routes (including where possible those who had left before completion)
   – interviews with qualified individuals who approached admissions tutors or advice and guidance services directly

Stages of the research

♦ Further analysis of the HESA data for the period 1994/5 to 1998/9 sought to identify regions, institutions and subject areas where there have been significant changes in mature student entry. This analysis provided contextual information and informed the choice of case study HEIs. It was considered that nine case study institutions were the minimum required to give sufficient data across the geographical spread and subject areas upon which to base policy recommendations. Of the nine institutions, seven were in the various regions of England, one in Scotland and one in Wales. Subsequent funding provided by the Scottish Executive allowed the project team to take on 3 further institutions in Scotland, including one FE College with a significant proportion of HE provision; this work is summarised in this report, and detailed in a further publication.

♦ In each case study institution a key informant was identified to:

  – act as link person for statistical data
  – provide access to institutional policy in relation to mature entrants
  – report relevant policy changes and current applications and recruitment information during the project
  – provide access to students for the questionnaire survey
  – provide access to staff (especially advice and guidance staff, and admissions tutors for individual entrants)

♦ From these case study HEIs an average of 3 subject areas/courses per institution were identified where there had been significant change in the recruitment of mature students – the 'critical cases'. These included a range of academic, professional and indirectly professional/vocational areas.

♦ For each of these critical cases, the most significant entry route(s) for mature students were identified. These included studies of qualifying routes (in house and FE based Mature Student Access Courses, A levels, year 0 courses, non-advanced and advanced vocational courses and community-based programmes and individual direct routes), and of the role of advice and guidance services, and admissions tutors. In total 27 qualifying routes were analysed, plus a sample of individual applicants, both groupings covering a range of routes and subject areas across the case study institutions.

Data collected from case study institutions

1) Statistical data and policy/practice information was collected:

  – to explore in detail the significant changes during the period 1994/5 to 1998/9 and (in the second phase of the study) the period 1999-2000 including the characteristics of the students and the type of provision for which they enrolled, to identify the range of subject areas and modes of attendance available, including recent changes
  – to identify changes in institutional policy and practice in relation to recruitment
  – to identify entrants (in 1999/2000) for the questionnaire survey
  – to identify the 'most frequently used' qualifying routes for mature entrants

2) Questionnaire surveys were carried out:

  – The 'entrants questionnaire': mature full time and part time entrants already enrolled on year 1 of the 'critical case' subject areas/courses, where there have been significant changes in enrolment. These questionnaires were distributed through the internal mail of the case study institutions or by post and where possible were supplemented by reminders. A total of 866 responses were received representing a response rate of 32%. The response rate was largely a function of the delayed questionnaire distribution and although the respondents are slightly older than the population from which they were drawn the difference is not great. The sample did however contain an over-representation of women (see Annexe 3, Table 2).
  – The 'potential entrants questionnaire': mature acceptors (full-time and part-time) who did not subsequently enrol in the case study HEIs. These questionnaires were distributed by post through the case study institutions using institutional data and where possible were

supplemented by reminders. They were also distributed to other potential entrants who were unable or unwilling to be interviewed (see point 5 below). A total of 79 valid responses were received. Although this is a small and disparate sample and should therefore be treated with caution, it usefully complemented the focus group and interview data from potential entrants.

The questionnaires focused on identifying and assessing the relative importance of and the interaction between the various factors that inhibit or encourage mature entry to HE, including their perceptions of the labour market and the value of their possible/future HE qualification within it.

3) A range of data was sought from the 27 qualifying routes identified as significant in the supply of mature entrants to the case study institutions. This information included:

- statistical data on recruitment over recent years including (where possible): age, gender, ethnicity, occupational status, previous qualifications, post codes, completion and progression rates

- interviews with course tutors to include information on recent patterns and changes, the intentions of current students and predictions of student progression

- where possible interviews with others concerned with the supply of mature students to the qualifying routes including Open Colleges and the Scottish Wider Access Programme

4) Focus group discussions were held with sets of learners enrolled on each of the 27 qualifying routes – a total of 220 people participated in these groups. The key motivating and inhibiting factors, their relative importance, critical thresholds and the impact of different combinations of factors were explored through workshop activities and metaplanning which combined a disciplined systems approach with the elements of freedom associated with brainstorming. It ensured that everyone contributed, but also aimed to determine differences of opinion and to highlight agreed positions within groups. The approach was therefore not only able to capture the relative importance of various factors and the way they interact but also offered a simple way of recording and collating such rich data and ease of analysis and aggregation across the whole study.

5) Interviews were conducted with a range of mature potential entrants identified through the 9 case study HEIs and the 27 qualifying routes:

- current and past participants on a wide range of qualifying routes
- those who had left qualifying routes prior to completion during the past two years
- those who had approached the institutions through individual routes such as advice and guidance services and open days
- direct applicants to case study institutions.

These interviews focused on the motivating factors, triggers and inhibitors to approaching institutions and/or decisions to enter or not enter them, other possibilities individuals had explored and their reasons for their subsequent decisions. A total of 187 interviews were analysed.

Copies of questionnaires and interview schedules can be obtained from Dr Pat Davies (pat.davies@sheffield.ac.uk).

ENTRANTS QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

Table 1

Sample and responses, subject areas

	B	F	HJ	K	LM	M3	N	QRT	V	W	X	Y	D/K	Total
a) No. of HEIs	3	1	5	2	2	2	4	1	1	2	4	3	2	9
b) Population in selected subject areas	286	127	669[1]	97[1]	105[1]	239	688	297	67	246	372	799	-	3,993[1]
c) Sample – no. sent .questionnaires	241[2]	60	461	101	200[2]	155[2]	429	105	67	246	232	429[2]	-	2,726
d) No. of responses received	122	18	110	30	51	46	100	28	28	79	98	150	6	866
e) % response rate (d/c)	51%[2]	30%	24%	30%	26%[2]	30%[2]	23%	27%	42%	32%	42%	35%		32%
f) % of all responses (d/total)	14%	2%	13%	4%	6%	5%	12%	3%	3%	9%	11%	17%	<1%	100%

B = Allied to Medicine
F = Physical Sciences
HJ = Engineering
K = Architecture and Built Env
LM = Social Sciences

M3 = Law
N = Business and Admin Studies
QRT = Languages
V = Humanities
W = Creative Arts & Design

X = Education
Y = Combined Studies
D/K = Not Known

[1] Excludes UK9, total population not supplied
[2] Includes UK4 where distribution of questionnaire across subject areas is approximate

Table 2
Sample and responses, gender age group, ethnicity, mode and level of study

	Sample	Responses
% F	52	64
% <21	-	<1
% 21-24	38	31
% 25-29	20	21
% 30-39	28	30
% 40-49	11	13
% 50+	3	3
% Age Unknown	-	<1
% White	69	81
% Black	}	9 }
% Asian	} 24*	5 } 18
% Other	}	4 }
% Not Known	7	<1
% FT	66	64
% Degree	78	82
All - N	2,726	866

*Analysis not supplied by UK4

Table 3

Profile of respondents, subject area, gender

Subject Area	Female	Male	Unknown	Total	% F
Allied to Med (B)	102	19	1	122	84
P. Sciences (F)	3	15		18	17
Engineering (H/J)	27	83		110	25
Arch & Blt Env (K)	9	21		30	30
Social Sciences (L/M)	34	17		51	67
Law (M3)	35	11		46	76
Bus & Admin (N)	70	30		100	70
Languages (Q/R/T)	17	11		28	61
Humanities (V)	20	8		28	71
Creative Art & Des (W)	45	34		79	57
Education (X)	83	15		98	85
Combined (Y)	108	42		150	72
Unknown	2	4		6	33
Total	*555*	*310*	*1*	*866*	*64*

Table 4

Top 5 factors influencing application to HE, gender and mode of study

Factor	% of All ranking as 1	% of W ranking as 1	% of M ranking as 1	% of FT ranking as 1	% of PT ranking as 1	% of All ranking as 1-5
Motivating factors – top 5						
To enhance career prospects	27	25	31	26	30	79
Interest in subject	23	25	19	25	19	77
Desire to improve quals	18	19	16	15	22	71
To change direction of life	14	13	15	17	8	51
To improve long-term financial situation	10	9	11	12	6	50
Barriers – top 5						
Cost (books, fees, etc)	20	22	17	20	20	56
Need to work to earn £	15	15	15	15	16	52
Home responsibilities	11	12	10	12	9	38
Job responsibilities	9	7	14	9	9	36
Lack of time	8	8	7	5	13	36
Choice of HEI – top 5						
Availability of course/subject	37	37	39	37	40	83
Location of the institution	28	31	24	31	23	82
Structrure of course (e.g. modular/PT)	11	12	9	7	18	58
Entry requirements were suitable	8	9	7	10	6	57
Reputation for academic standards (teaching and research)	7	7	6	9	3	38
N=	865	555	310	555	309	865

Table 5

Top 5 factors influencing application and entry to HE, age groups

Factor	% of All ranking as 1	% of 21-24 year olds ranking as 1	% of 25-29 year olds ranking as 1	% of 30-39 year olds ranking as 1	% of 40-49 year olds ranking as 1	% of 50+ year olds ranking as 1-5
Motivating factors – top 5						
To enhance career prospects	27	28	31	27	21	9
Interest in subject	23	26	23	21	23	9
Desire to improve quals	18	17	16	17	24	17
To change direction of life	14	8	11	18	22	4
To improve long-term financial situation	10	10	11	9	6	4
Barriers – top 5						
Cost (books, fees, etc)	20	24	24	17	8	-
Need to work to earn £	15	10	15	20	19	13
Home responsibilities	11	6	9	11	12	22
Job responsibilities	9	6	9	11	12	22
Lack of time	8	4	4	9	18	9
Choice of HEI – top 5						
Availability of course/subject	37	36	37	38	43	39
Location of the institution	28	25	27	31	33	30
Structrure of course (e.g. modular/PT)	11	10	9	13	12	9
Entry requirements were suitable	8	11	8	8	6	13
Reputation for academic standards (teaching and research)	7	1	1	2	1	4
N=	866	272	184	264	112	23

Table 6

Top 5 factors influencing application and entry to HE, percentage of subject areas ranking as 1

Factors	All %	B %	F %	HJ %	K %	LM %	M3 %	N %	QRT %	V %	W %	X %	Y %
Motivations – top 5													
To enhance career prospects	27	27	17	36	43	33	22	38	4	25	15	23	25
Interest in subject	23	25	28	17	10	21	26	15	50	25	32	17	26
Desire to improve quals	18	17	11	20	13	10	15	29	-	11	8	27	20
To change direction of life	14	9	33	7	17	21	22	5	14	14	22	13	17
To improve long-term financial situation	10	7	11	14	13	5	13	8	-	11	8	10	13
Barriers – top 5													
Cost (books, fees, etc)	20	20	22	18	7	28	15	18	29	11	24	23	21
Need to work to earn £	15	15	6	17	10	28	13	15	25	11	11	17	15
Home responsibilities	11	8	6	10	20	19	13	7	11	14	15	13	8
Job responsibilities	9	6	28	14	17	12	4	7	11	11	11	8	7
Lack of time	8	2	6	4	3	9	4	2	54	11	11	13	7
Choice of HEI – top 5													
Availability of course/subject	37	39	44	40	53	45	28	33	30	25	43	35	33
Location of the institution	28	28	33	23	13	19	37	38	18	46	16	30	35
Structure of course (e.g. modular/PT)	11	8	1	10	-	24	13	10	14	7	3	19	9
Entry requirements were suitable	8	10	1	10	7	10	9	6	4	-	4	10	12
Reputation for academic standards (teaching and research)	7	7	1	11	7	-	9	4	4	7	19	5	3
N=	866	122	18	103	30	58	46	100	28	28	79	98	150

B = Allied to Medicine
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QRT = Languages
V = Humanities
W = Creative Arts & Design

X = Education
Y = Combined Studies
D/K = Not Known

Figure 1

Classification of motivating factors

Professional advancement (PA):

- ♦ To enhance career prospects
- ♦ To improve qualifications
- ♦ To improve long term financial situation
- ♦ To get a particular job
- ♦ To escape unemployment
- ♦ Because it is necessary for my job/required by my employer

Cognitive interest (CI):

- ♦ Interest in the subject
- ♦ To develop my talents and creative abilities

Social stimulation:

- ♦ To change the direction of my life
- ♦ Lack of other alternatives
- ♦ To relieve boredom
- ♦ To improve my self esteem
- ♦ To have time away from other responsibilities

Community service (CS):

- ♦ To become a more effective citizen

External expectations (EE):

- ♦ Expectations of family or friends
- ♦ Financial support from employer
- ♦ To escape an unhappy relationship

Opportunity (O):

- ♦ Availability of credit for previous academic or related work
- ♦ Availability of child care (outside of the institution)
- ♦ To do something Iíve always wanted to do but never had the chance
- ♦ I saw an advertisement/read an article which made me think it was possible

Figure 2

Classification of barriers/disincentives

Situational factors

- Cost (books, fees, travel etc)

- Need to work to earn money

- Home responsibilities

- Job responsibilities

- Lack of time

- Did not meet entry requirements

- Lack of childcare

- Family/friends against it

- Lacked place to study

- Lack of transport

Dispositional factors

- Lacked the confidence

- Did not want debt

- Did not want to return to full-time education

- Did not know what to do/what to study

- Tired of education

- Afraid too old

- Not necessary/not worth it

- Lacked the energy

- Didn't want to seem too ambitious

Institutional factors

- Courses not available

- Lack of info about what available

- No way to get APL

- Attendance requirements not suitable

- Enrolment too complicated

- Courses took too long