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**‘UNCERTAIN DESTINIES’ STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND
RETENTION ON GNVQ INTERMEDIATE PROGRAMMES**

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Editor's Foreword

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Abstract

This paper discusses the rationale for conducting research into the issue of learning to write in the workplace. The paper argues that although managers in a wide range of workplaces acknowledge the important role that writing plays in their activities, there is little evidence of systematic support in helping new workers to learn how to write in ways that are appropriate to the needs and requirements of specific organisations. It is argued that we need to learn more about the kind of higher level literacy knowledge that might enable people to transfer and adapt foundation literacy knowledge to new settings, and also about the role of formal education in initiating such higher level knowledge.

‘UNCERTAIN DESTINIES’ STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION ON GNVQ INTERMEDIATE PROGRAMMES

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This working paper reports on a small scale study, funded under the auspices of the ESRC’s SKOPE Research Centre, on recruitment and retention of GNVQ (Intermediate) students in four Midlands colleges of further education (FE). Its focus is on the journeys and experiences of some 140 students, all of whom were following a GNVQ (Intermediate) programme in either business or leisure and tourism. The issues raised by the study are worthy of further investigation in the light of GNVQ (Intermediate) programmes, in particular, and the range and quality of one year post-16 provision in general.

There has been continuing uncertainty about the future of one year post-16 qualifications, many of GNVQ’s precursors have had very limited success. GNVQs themselves have also been subject to a barrage of criticism since their inception in 1992 (Smithers, 1993, Wolf, 1995, Capey 1995). Within recent months GNVQs have had a ‘near death’ experience, with the threatened withdrawal of GNVQ Intermediate and Foundation qualifications and their replacement by applied GCSEs. However, it seems that they have had a stay of execution as post-16 qualifications, pending a review of vocationally related qualifications at post-16, and that the new GCSEs will be predominantly offered to pre-16 students as part of key stage 4 provision. At a time when the Government is reviewing the whole curriculum offering 14-19 (DfES, 2002), the stories of the young people in this study deserve wider consideration.

Background

The starting point for this study arose from concerns expressed both in official documents (Audit Commission, 1993, DfEE, 1997, Martinez and Munday, 1998, FEDA, 1998) and in conversations with college tutors relating to student retention on one year full-time programmes, in particular GNVQ (Intermediate) programmes. The introduction of recruitment, retention and completion targets, as part of the Further

Education Funding Council's (FEFC) funding methodology, for the college sector also focused attention of college senior management teams on the importance of not only attracting students on to programmes, but most importantly, keeping them there.

Payne (1995) suggested that: 'full-time education 16-19 was by far the most effective route to a qualification of some sort and full-time employment yielded the smallest percentage of qualified individuals.' If this was the case, how far did GNVQ programmes provide a route to qualification, how many young people actually achieved such a qualification, and what currency did it have either in the labour market, or for entry to further education or training? In the light of the focus of SKOPE's work, such questions are relevant in that they seek to identify the extent to which qualification offerings are appropriate to, and consistent with, the needs of both the candidates and the organisations in which they eventually seek employment. Put quite bluntly, what did students think they were doing on such programmes, why did they decide to stay, or leave, and more elusively from the research perspective, what were they learning, and where might such learning lead them?

A search of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) database, revealed that for the academic year ending July 1999, for GNVQ (Intermediate) in business and leisure and tourism the following numbers of registrations and passes were achieved:

Business	21844 (registered)	13210 (passed)
Leisure and Tourism	14808 (registered)	8224 (passed)

No data are available for students who completed the course but who failed to gain the qualification.

Clearly, these are substantial attrition rates; the stories behind them are often complex, reflecting a range of factors, both at the individual and institutional level, of why students failed to complete their programmes. Reasons for non-persistence are multi-causal and often inter-related and such reasons may vary from one institution to another.

Another important contextual factor for the study is the profile of students registering on one-year post-16 courses. The introduction of school league tables, with their emphasis on attainment of 5 A*-C as the benchmark of 'success' at 16, has relegated those who do not achieve the benchmark as 'failures'. It has been cogently argued (Clements, 2001) that: *'The evaluation of attainment based upon the grade profiles, in particular 5 A*-Cs at the age of 16, end of Year 11, is arbitrary and inappropriate for half the nation's cohort. That guillotine brought down at one uniform age or moment fails to recognise the differential factors which always characterise all groups of people.'* It is precisely this cohort of young people which forms the majority of students on GNVQ (Intermediate) courses, since the entry level is usually a D/E profile of attainment at Year 11. Since the successful completion of a GNVQ (Intermediate) is supposed to equate with 4 A*-C, from which students may then progress to a level 3 qualification, and possibly, eventually to higher education, it appears that there is a group of students who require six, rather than five, years to achieve national standards. This fact has not yet been sufficiently recognised, nor the data adequately collected, since the statistics are not separated out in this way, to fully support the emerging case that: *'to continue to focus on 5 A*-Cs at the end of Year 11 is both counterproductive and dishonest'*. (Clements, *ibid.*)

This is the backdrop against which this study is set. Its focus is upon the young people, their perceptions of themselves as students, their courses, colleges, and aspirations for the future.

Research methods

The research took place throughout a full academic year (2000/01) and was based in four sites. Each site was a general FE college, of varying size and reflecting both urban and rural catchments. They were comparable in terms of the socio-economic profile of students, and the offering at all colleges was broadly similar in terms of part-time/full-time/short courses, academic/vocational/ professional courses. All colleges had significant experience of running GNVQ (Intermediate) programmes and all were preoccupied with issues around student recruitment and retention.

Access was negotiated at a senior level, usually via the Principal, who in all cases delegated the responsibility to a member of the senior management team. Initial meetings were set up with heads of departments and programme leaders, who provided necessary contextual information about the courses, for example recruitment, retention and outcomes for previous years, course marketing materials, induction booklets, course handbooks. A total of 78 students were enrolled across the 4 business courses, and 62 students on the leisure and tourism courses, one college failed to recruit a viable group for leisure and tourism.

Interviews were conducted with heads of departments, programme leaders and course tutors at three critical stages in the course year, namely, in October, February and June. These intervals were chosen to reflect 'pressure points' during the life of a programme. Specifically, in October numbers have usually 'settled' following the rather volatile period after initial registration, there is often quite a lot of movement in numbers during the first three weeks of term, including late enrolments and early withdrawals. February often marks something of a 'watershed' in the course year, following the Christmas break students sometimes decide not to return to college or, if they do, often experience a loss of motivation and lack of enthusiasm about continuing. By the end of February numbers are usually settled and the majority continue to the end of the programme. This was substantiated by interviews with course tutors. June marks the end of the programme and destination decisions have either been made, or are in the process of being made. Because of the continuous assessment of the course, tutors have a clear view of the likely attainment outcomes for students by this stage.

These interviews were mirrored by a series of structured face-to-face interviews with students at the same time intervals. Each interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis and sought to elicit students' responses over time to questions relating to: course content, timetabling, workload, levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the course and the college, extra-college activities, including part-time work, aspirations for further education, training or employment. Biographical information was collected during the first interview, including profile on entry, previous educational experience and reasons for course choice.

In addition focus group interviews were conducted with whole student groups at the beginning of the programme in order to identify issues to be further explored through the individual interviews. A number of classes and individual tutorials were also observed. Again, this helped to ground the interviews in a shared experience and helped to focus students' attention on particular instances. (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996)

Students' portfolios of work were also examined and the researcher taught three sessions across the seven programmes.

Research findings

Recruitment and retention

College	B	B	B	N	N	N	S	S	S	T	T	T
Course	Oct	Feb	Jun	Oct	Feb	Jun	Oct	Feb	Jun	Oct	Feb	Jun
Business	24	24	18	21	14	9	9	6	5	34	15	12
Leisure and Tourism	39	15	13	15	12	10	8	6	6	Failed to recruit a group		

Table 1. Student participation across sites by programme and time of year

It is clear from the above table that all programmes experienced loss of students as the year progressed, although some to a much greater extent than others. In attempting to identify reasons for drop-out it is important to elicit, as far as possible, the views of those who have left the course. This is far from easy since such respondents are extremely difficult to contact in the first place and, if contacted, are often very reluctant to give a response. The provisions of the Data Protection Act meant that colleges could not pass on ex-student contact details to the researcher and therefore reasons for drop-out had to be inferred from tutors' responses and from the responses of other students still present on the programmes. In all colleges mechanisms were in place to log students' reasons for leaving a course and their intended destination, for example enrolment on another course, employment or other. Such information forms an important component of strategic planning. However, it is recognised that the self-reported reasons, which students give for leaving a programme, may differ from the actual reasons (Martinez and Munday, *ibid.*) In this study tutors' and other students'

perceptions had to be used as proxies for leavers' responses. Another perspective was brought to bear on the responses, to what extent had those students who had expressed dissatisfaction, or difficulty in October, remained on or left the course when the February round of interviews took place? If such students had remained what was their motivation?

Course choice

In attempting to identify reasons for choice of course, a number of factors emerge. Choice may imply a considered decision to take a particular route, with some prior research of options, possibilities and potential outcomes. This, however, should not be assumed in the case of this sample, or in the population as a whole (FEDA, 1998). Many students arrive on courses as a result of failing to meet the entry requirements for their course of first choice, or of doing rather better than anticipated and hence accessing a course at a higher level than originally planned. This is particularly relevant in the case of the GNVQ programmes, where courses were available at three levels: Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced.

When asked about their reasons for course choice, typical students' comments included:

'Because I didn't get the grades for the Advanced Business.'

'I thought I would have a go because my GCSE grades were disappointing.'

'Because I was doing a manager trainee programme and I started an Advanced course, but I could not continue because I did not have qualifications.'

Since starting the research the GNVQ Advanced has been revised, re-specified and re-titled to bring it in line with other A level programmes, as part of the Curriculum 2000 initiative, and is now an Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE). However, the concept of levels and progression is seen as an important part of the post-16 qualification landscape (DfES 2002a).

A change of direction from that originally intended may not just be reflected in the level of course being accessed but in the subject, or programme area. For example, within the sample interviewed a sizeable minority of students on the business courses really wanted to be on IT courses. Where numbers on such courses were strictly limited, students were 'navigated' to business courses with the suggestion that '*course content would be much the same anyway*'. This was significantly more apparent in the leisure and tourism courses where students often had little clear idea about the nature of the programme, or perhaps read into the programme anything they wanted it to be.

'Because I want to be an air hostess.'

'Because it is the only course which is sports based.'

Here students fell broadly into two groups, those wanting to follow a sports programme, usually with plenty of football, and those wanting to pursue a tourism course, focusing on work in a travel agency or holiday company. The result was that few were satisfied with their courses and drop out from these courses was significant in some of the research sites. This is a matter of qualification design and is outside the control of individual colleges since qualifications are the responsibility of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and specifications are drawn up by the Awarding Bodies with whom colleges register their candidates. However, it is important that students have a clear view of what a particular programme of study will entail, both in terms of subject content and level. Clearly there are potential tensions here between a college's pursuit of an 'open access' policy and the need to ensure positive outcomes. Students who are placed on inappropriate courses are more likely to drop out.

This was particularly evident at one of the sites where the researcher was visiting on a regular basis immediately prior to the start of term and during the first few weeks of term. Numbers were extremely fluid during this period; many last minute applicants were being directed to Leisure and Tourism where a newly appointed course leader was keen to build up the programme. At one point it seemed that three groups would

run, although how such groups would be accommodated and staffed was unclear. This was later reduced to two, by February the course was less than half its original size. More rigorous pre-entry guidance might have averted some of the problems.

When asked in what ways the course differed from their expectations, typical student responses included:

'There is hardly any practical, I thought there would be lots of practice.'

'I thought there would be more practical emphasis on Sports. There's a lot of writing.'

'All the leisure stuff, I'm not into that, I wanted to do travel.'

These findings appear to reflect the earlier findings of Martinez and Munday's (ibid) large-scale study that placement on an inappropriate course *'is the best predictor of student drop-out'* (p.106).

Within the climate and culture of targets in which many colleges are operating the needs of students may not be best served, since the reluctance to turn students away can result in students being inappropriately placed on programmes for which they have neither the inclination nor the ability.

Entry profile

The students interviewed during the course of this research were in the age range 17-24. Whilst the overwhelming majority of them had come immediately from school, up to 90% at some sites, following their GCSE programmes in year 11, a very small minority had completed a Foundation GNVQ programme. Two respondents had participated in other training programmes. The grade entry profile of candidates was typically Ds and Es at GCSE, few students had a pass at grade C in either maths or English, although all colleges considered this desirable. Many of them had achieved below grades D/E in some of their GCSE examinations. Course entry requirements

were usually 2 Ds (English and maths). Where students had not achieved a grade C in either maths or English, they were encouraged to re-take these examinations. Some colleges were more insistent than others in ensuring that subjects were retaken. Business studies staff were concerned about students' lack of numeracy skills, particularly since many students were reported as finding the finance modules of the course difficult. Since the Secretary of State's statement concerning the place of key skills within the 16-19 Curriculum (DfES/QCA/LSC, 2002), most of these colleges are now using key skills, rather than GCSE re-sits, to ensure that students achieve a level 2 qualification in either communications, numeracy, or both. One of the colleges is only insisting on key skills ICT.

Since the majority of students in the sample had a similar grade profile, it is not possible to attribute poor grade entry profile to dropout. The 'struggle' appeared equal, in academic terms, for all students. College staff reported that they were more interested in a student's interest in and motivation to succeed on the course than in raw GCSE scores. Nevertheless, tutors on the business programmes expressed the view that some students were *'struggling because of poor mathematical skills, for example, being unable to work out percentages'*.

From the students' perspective the issue of workload was more significant than level of perceived difficulty. The most common dissatisfaction expressed around course content was the amount of coursework expected not the difficulty of the work. The only exception again was the perceived difficulty of the finance modules in business courses. Typical responses included:

'I find the finance parts of the course very difficult.'

'I don't like the finance and the business organisation modules.'

Another group of college tutors summarised the situation thus:

'Colleges are working with young people who come in with low levels of qualifications, often poor self-esteem and bad prior learning experiences.'

Of those small number of students who entered with a very low grade profile, for example Gs and Us, the courses proved too demanding, of the 3 students interviewed in the Autumn, who were representative of this group, all had transferred to another course by the February interview. This raises issues about the appropriateness of the guidance offered to potential students before entry on to a programme, even when a course tutor is anxious about numbers.

‘Portfolio lives’

Whilst the management ‘gurus’ (Handy, 1995) may laud the supposed flexibility which the post-modern worker enjoys being able to juggle a variety of jobs, lifestyles, increasingly globally located, the student in college has a very different experience of a ‘portfolio’ life from that experienced by the upwardly mobile management consultant. Over 80% of the students in this sample had a part-time job; some of them were working at least the equivalent of half a full-time working week. These jobs typically involved un-social hours, for example bar work, catering jobs, work in the wholesale markets, which meant that they experienced difficulty in getting to college on time in the mornings and in completing coursework assignments to deadlines. On days when timetables were unevenly spread some students would arrange hours of work during the middle of the day and return to college for later classes, or not return at all. Indeed, one of the common criticisms of the courses was the way in which timetables were unhelpfully structured with classes at the beginning and end of the day, with large gaps of time in between. Around busy times in the retail year, Christmas and Easter, attendance suffered. In some instances employers persuaded students not to attend college but to come into work instead.

‘The boss said that if I didn’t come in like, he would give the job to someone else and I needed the money so I thought I had better stay off. Now I’m all behind with the assignments.’

'I'm working four nights a week and at weekends in a restaurant, it's hard to get up in the morning to go to college. Also I get training at the restaurant which I don't here (in the college).'

This student withdrew from his course in the second week of May, very close to the end of the programme, and started work full-time in the restaurant.

Interviews with tutors at one college revealed that:

'Employers are extremely unsympathetic about college work, so much so that we have had to write to some employers stressing the importance of college work. Some employers have threatened to withdraw students' jobs.'

Part-time employment is not the only factor impacting upon student persistence. Several students had significant domestic responsibilities as carers or as single parents. As one course tutor remarked: *'Some of these students have seriously dysfunctional lives; I have had students who have been thrown out of home, others with serious social problems. Its no wonder that they cannot get the work in on time.'* Some were living on their own for the first time having left care themselves. For these, and other reasons, they were managing complex lives, often on very low incomes.

'I had to take time off to look after my Mum because she was sick and I had to look after my little sisters and get them to school. It's affected my course and I wish I wasn't in this mess, but it can't be helped.'

For this sample Martinez and Munday's finding that: *'time management and conflicting demands on their time were issues for all students'* (Martinez and Munday, *ibid*, p.40) holds true. Some tutors, from a college in a more affluent catchment area, were of the opinion that part-time employment was required to support a particular lifestyle, one which included 'clubbing', financing driving lessons and foreign trips. However, this was the reality for a very small number of students.

The extent to which these experiences of part-time employment were used to inform the teaching appeared limited. Students were asked how much they were invited to contribute to classes by drawing on their own experiences of work, in most cases the answer was *'not much'*. Given the current policy pre-occupation with 'employability' and 'enterprise' (Davies, 2002) it is surprising that so little attention is given to the ways in which tutors might draw upon students' experiences of work-based learning through part-time employment to inform their teaching. It is in these situations that students often show the enterprise skills in which young people are deemed to be so deficient (Davies, *ibid.*). The difficulty of such transfer has been illustrated in another paper in this series (Hayward, 2000). Where examples were perhaps more concrete, here financial aspects of business were cited as useful, then students were more able to make the connections. A number of students remarked how learning about financial documents has helped them in the family businesses in which they worked part-time. In some instances developing business skills, in order to benefit the family business, was given as a reason for continuing to an advanced course, including eventually progress to a degree programme.

Course design and delivery

Students were asked to reflect upon their experiences of the course in terms of course content, the level of difficulty encountered, tutor support and assessment issues. Clearly, these issues are often inter-related, for example a student may experience difficulty with an assignment and be unable to find a tutor to help. This is often a problem if tutors are part-time members of staff. Most of the students' comments about course design and delivery reflected concerns about the amount of work rather than its level of difficulty; approximately 60% of respondents said *'there is too much work'*, the other 40% finding the amount of work *'about right'*. Not surprisingly no one felt that there was *'not enough work'*.

In college B tutors reported that the amount of tutorial time available to students had been reduced to such an extent that it was difficult for staff always to give the level of support required. This had to be resolved by using the key skills sessions to support other work, for example help with compiling portfolios. In college N tutors were of the opinion that student absence was sometimes related to their not having completed

work due to be handed in. Tutors were persistent in chasing overdue work, mainly because they were aware that this would have a significant impact on completion rates, if not retention.

Students also reported sequencing of assignments as a difficulty. It was generally felt that the workload was too unevenly spread, with too many assignments being expected at the same time.

'There's just too much work piling up, it should be scheduled better. I'd like more teaching and less assignments.'

'It was interesting at first but now it's just boring with too many assignments.'

'The worst thing about this college is that there have been too many assignments at once.'

There were particular pressure points when demands of part-time work, or family commitments, made assignment completion very difficult. Research by FEDA (1998, *ibid.*) and Davies (1998) has pointed to the inherent difficulties in GNVQ programmes in terms of workload, the number of assignments demanded and the compilation of portfolios. Whilst workload in itself may not be a retention issue, it is often a contributory factor when found in combination with other factors, for example part-time work or sustained absence.

Students at college B reported difficulties with accessing appropriate resources for completing assignments, in particular computers. Here too facilities for the practical aspects of the leisure and tourism programme were described as poor, for example no gym or football pitch. It is surprising, given the lack of facilities, that the college sought to expand its leisure and tourism provision so extensively, and not surprising that students withdrew.

In contrast at college N the sports facilities were a significant motivator for students. Despite dissatisfaction with the content of the leisure and tourism programme these

students persisted, again mainly because the programme was seen as a stepping stone to something else.

The majority of students would have preferred more contact time with staff, in other words more teaching and less self-directed study. This is interesting given the nature of GNVQ programmes, which are heavily weighted towards coursework and dependent upon students managing their own learning. These may be the very students who find this way of working the most challenging. Many students were reported as requiring a lot of support and had difficulty in working on their own to complete assignments. The FE funding methodology operating at the time of the study had resulted in the reduction of staff contact hours, this clearly had a bearing on student satisfaction.

'The problem is you can't get hold of them when you need them, I keep going to the staff room and she's never there.'

'She's only here on Mondays and Thursdays, and I don't come in on Thursdays.'

(The tutor referred to by these students was a part-time member of staff working across three sites and teaching on four different courses)

Timetabling

Students were particularly critical of the timetabling arrangements across all the sites. The main area of dissatisfaction was the gaps during the day, when sessions might be timetabled at the beginning and end of the day with several hours 'free' time in between. This led to student absence since many would simply not return for later sessions, or would go to their part-time jobs. Once persistent absence becomes established, it is difficult to remedy and students fall behind with their work and with the submission of assignments. Many students at this level do not have the study skills to use 'free' time effectively.

Support mechanisms

Students were asked about the extent to which they felt that they were supported by the teaching and other college staff during their course. The overwhelming majority felt that staff were very helpful and particularly welcomed the way in which they were treated as adults, a very different experience from that which they had encountered at school.

'I like the lecturers they are very helpful particularly the tutor.'

'The teachers here treat you like adults, better than school.'

'I really enjoy the company and my new friends. I enjoy getting up in the morning and coming to college. I get respect. The teachers are polite.'

These were not isolated examples and conversations with staff confirmed the view that a great deal of time was spent supporting students, not just with academic work but in helping them to resolve personal difficulties, or referring them to specialist help. All course tutors reported that they had retention targets and were keen to keep students on programmes. In college T for example, the course tutor was under considerable pressure from college senior management because so many students withdrew during the course of the programme.

Tutors spent a considerable amount of time chasing students who had failed to turn up, for example telephoning absentees each morning, or writing letters home. From staff room observations it appeared that staff would almost be prepared to collect students from home if they would agree to come in. Student persistence was, to some extent, the result of tutor persistence. However, it does raise important questions about the role of support and guidance for this group of young people both at induction and during the programme.

Reasons for persistence

The reasons why some students decide to stay on their courses whilst others decide to leave are often complex and multi-causal, they may also vary from one college to another. Reasons for withdrawing from a course may result from factors which can be both positive and negative. For example, within this sample the most frequently recorded reasons were: to change to another course; to take up full-time employment; to join a training scheme. Clearly, if students are moving to another course they are not lost from the overall participation picture, but they will be lost from individual tutors' retention targets, or from a college's retention targets. There was evidence of students moving between colleges in one large conurbation. There was even evidence of a school trying to poach back ex-pupils who had left and enrolled at the local college instead of joining the school's sixth form.

Finding full-time employment, particularly a job with training, is not necessarily a negative outcome for the student. However, it can be for the college. What is rarely reflected in the literature is the recognition that students have access to local labour market information through their part-time jobs and through contact with peers about other jobs. Informal networks are extremely important here and conversations with students during the course of this research revealed that they were pretty knowledgeable about local rates of pay and conditions, where the 'good' jobs were and which employers to avoid. They were also able to make a clear distinction between the sort of job, which was acceptable as a part-time arrangement and the type of job that they would eventually seek. In other words students were acting rationally. As one student remarked:

'A life in retail, I would never do that, it's a dead end, same thing every day. It's OK for the time being, though.'

Another spoke of his job in a restaurant:

'It's just clearing and washing up, but the tips are good and the boss always gives us something to eat at the end of the evening.'

Students were asked both during the mid-point interviews and at the end of their programmes if they had ever considered leaving their courses. If they had, they were asked why they then decided to stay. Again, students appeared to be acting rationally that is, the overwhelming majority saw the programme as a step to something else, usually to a programme at a higher level. Of the 73 students in total remaining on the 2 programmes at the end of the year, 65 were planning to continue to another programme at a higher level, usually an Advanced GNVQ, or AVCE as it later became, the rest were undecided but thought that they would probably continue on to another course. In summary, once students had re-engaged with the education process and had some success they could begin to see the value of continuing.

'It has helped me to aim for HE, it is good to have something to aim for.'

'This course has helped me to keep my options open, I think I will definitely do the Advanced next year.'

'This has given me more education, without it, it is very difficult to get a decent job.'

Those who at the mid-point said they had thought about leaving but decided to stay did so because in the main they felt that: *'I have got this far, I might as well finish.'*

'Because there is no point giving up halfway through the course. It is important to get a result.'

'I used to think I was stupid, but I have advanced a lot now and can go on.'

(This student eventually progressed to a National Diploma course and now hopes to apply to an undergraduate programme)

'I don't want to be a quitter. I want to stick to it. Because my Dad couldn't go to college, I'm doing it for him.'

Of those students who withdrew, the majority was male, although males were over-represented in the sample as a whole, particularly in the business courses. In college

B the huge attrition rates on the leisure and tourism programme may in part be explained by the significant numbers of late registrations and the lack of understanding of what the programme was about. This led to high levels of dissatisfaction.

Conclusions

For some time there has been concern *'about the numbers of 16-19 years olds who continue in full-time education and training, but by 19 do not appear to have gained either the level 2 qualifications threshold of the National Learning Targets, or the experience, skills and qualifications that would ensure their progression in learning and successful participation as employees and citizens.'* (Forrest, 2001 p.4)

This group of young people is currently the focus of policy attention (DfES 2002a) and the Government is exploring ways in which greater coherence can be built into the curriculum 14-19. For this to happen there will need to be a fundamental review of the ways in which both the structure of such an entitlement and the infrastructure to deliver it are designed, delivered and funded (DfES 2002b). This small-scale research project has highlighted some of the challenges in undertaking such a fundamental reform. It has been particularly concerned with the learner's voice, with those young people who are looking for a way to re-engage with education and to get something out of it for themselves, either by way of further education or training, but eventually employment. They are trying to make sense of a confusing and confused landscape at a key transition point in their learning journeys.

The students who joined these programmes had done so for a variety of reasons, often with very little notion of what they might entail and where they might lead. However, all those interviewed were looking for a new start, or something different from their school experience. For many it was an experience which they wished to put behind them. College was as much about moving on and moving into a more adult world as about committing to a particular vocational pathway. A substantial number across this sample decided that this was not the route for them. They may have withdrawn for rational reasons, for example to join another course or to take up employment;

others were simply lost to the system. Whilst such withdrawals are a matter of concern for colleges, perhaps we should not be surprised by them.

The challenge for one year post-16 programmes has always been to balance the personal needs of individual students, who have often had a record of poor performance, with a curriculum which is engaging, relevant and appropriate, and which provides an opportunity for progression. Working with the students and their tutors at the sample sites throughout the year led me to the view that this one year programme provided students, for those who stayed the course, with an important opportunity to re-engage with education. The courses were more about re-motivation and re-orientation in a general sense than about vocational training. These were young people who might otherwise be lost to further education or training and who, with a further year's study, had been able to achieve a foundation for further progression. The fact that this had been achieved one year after the 'benchmark' 5 A*-C GCSEs by age 16 should not be a matter for hand wringing, particularly in the so-called age of lifelong learning.

For those who did stay the course their planned destinations were to further education or training:

'This course counts as 4 GCSEs and that means that I can do A levels next year.'

'Beforehand I wanted to go out and get a full-time job. Now I want to stay at college.'

The question as to how far these expectations are realistic and can be met requires further research since some tutors expressed concerns about the ability of some of the students to cope with advanced courses. In the current drive for increased participation, with a target of 50% for higher education, it is important that those who decide to stay in education post-16, often against all the odds, and are motivated by the experience, are not then disappointed when opportunities turn out to be illusory.

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